

“Celebrating churches in the Pacific” a sermon for World Communion Sunday preached at Knox Presbyterian Church, Dunedin, New Zealand by Kerry Enright on 4 October 2020.

In 1933 the minister of Shadyside Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh initiated World Communion Sunday that came to be celebrated around the world on the first Sunday in October. Celebrating the world church in the local congregation spread and became part of the Knox tradition. So today, I want this morning to concentrate on our nearest neighbours, churches in the Pacific. I will speak generally and then I want to focus on the Methodist Church in Fiji and Rotuma.

The Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand is a Pacific church. We belong to the Pacific Conference of Churches. A large percentage of Presbyterians identify with the Pacific Presbytery or Pacific congregations in other presbyteries. Many congregations include Pacific peoples. So we stand alongside Pacific churches facing major challenges.

In Tonga, the Mormons, a church we respect, have significant American financial backing. For many years churches have often been built on the land of Tongan nobles and no rent has been sought. The Mormons have offered to pay rent, so the nobles are saying to the other churches, we want you to pay rent. But these churches aren't wealthy and they cannot afford to pay rent. So they are facing their churches, used for generations, now being used by Mormons. Nor can these churches give scholarships for young people to study overseas. So there are shifts in religious affiliation affected by money coming from outside.

Vanuatu has been amid a significant struggle for national values. For many years, Australia and New Zealand governments have been trying to persuade Pacific nations to adopt their economic approaches, such as privatising land and making private health care available. It has happened through the negotiations for a Pacific wide economic relationship called PACERPLUS. Many Pacific nations, Vanuatu included, have been resisting because although they want to build healthy economies, they don't want to lose their cultures and their communal values. It has been a real tussle, in which they churches have also been involved.

In Tuvalu, Fiji, Kiribati, Tokelau and other Pacific nations, climate change is already having a major impact. In Fiji, for example, some communities have already relocated to higher ground. Cemeteries are being inundated by sea water with terrible violation of graves. In countries where there is no higher ground, like Tuvalu, Kiribati and Tokelau, king tides are eating away shorelines, sea water is being pushed under the islands to bubble up in the middle of them, crops are suffering the effects of salt water and at certain times, the sea washes across the whole island. These nations are becoming increasingly uninhabitable and church leaders are becoming increasingly vocal but without having the impact they hope for.

In the Solomon Islands, extractive industries have decimated beautiful islands. Flying over the Solomon Islands, you see these magnificent lagoons and beaches and forests, but you also see many islands where there is a ring of trees around the outside, and the interior of the island is empty of trees. Foreign forestry companies have entered into exploitative agreements with local leaders, built make-shift wharves, landed large machinery, cleared the forests, taken the logs, and left. The local people are paid a pittance. Just some of the challenges.

Nations in the Pacific include a high proportion of Christians. Over 90% of the people in Tuvalu belong to the Congregational Christian Church of Tuvalu. And some of these churches are large. The United Church of Papua New Guinea, for example, has about 900,000 members.

Increasingly Pacific churches are expressing their Pacific identity, moving from what was left by the missionaries. Tonga is one nation where the transition is needed. The Wesleyan churches in Tonga, for example, are trying to work together to overcome more than a century of division. The division arose because of a major falling out between a leading missionary and the Methodist Church in Australia and New Zealand in the late 1800s. The history is more complex than I can tell now, but the division is very evident when Tupou College plays Tonga College at rugby, Tonga College having been established by the dissident missionary and Tupou College by a missionary supported by the Methodist Church.

With nations having such a high proportion of Christians, it's inevitable that the relationship between church and state has become more blurred than in the west. Often for good. The Governors General of both Vanuatu and Tuvalu are former church leaders, as happened here with Paul Reeves. When Vanuatu became independent, the first Prime Minister was an Anglican priest and the deputy a Presbyterian minister.

Nowhere has the relationship between church and state been more contentious than in Fiji. The churches in Fiji have had to come to terms with ethnic diversity and therefore religious diversity. While about 2/3rds of Indigenous Fijians or Taukei are Methodist, the large Indian population is mainly Muslim and Hindu. Some are Christian. There was often a close relationship between governments led by Taukei and the Methodist Church of Fiji and Rotuma, a Church which often had nationalist leaders. That led to major difficulties, including three and a half coups over the last 30 years. The earlier coups were aimed at ensuring that indigenous Fijian values and faith prevailed. The 1987 coup was accompanied by a church coup. The nationalist General Secretary, Manasa Lasaro, locked the moderate President, Josateki Koroi, out of his office. Lasaro was then elected President of the Church and worked with the regime to impose strict sabbath rules. The Police put up road blocks to stop people travelling on Sundays which had terrible consequences for people needing urgent attention in hospital for example.

At the end of 2006, Commodore Bainimarama mounted another coup aimed to make Fiji more inclusive. He sought to curtail the nationalist influence of the Methodist Church. He put its President and Lasaro in prison briefly and banned its annual conference. He bugged church offices. He intimidated its leaders. Army trucks were parked outside the homes of Methodist ministers through the night. And then in 2009, when the Court ruled his regime illegal, he banned church meetings except for worship. I happened to be there at a Pacific wide meeting at that time, and we met, but with a policeman monitoring and recording everything that was said.

Remarkably, the church's new leadership saw this as an opportunity to regroup. The church began to turn from its nationalist past and to step back from partisan political involvement. It was a remarkable and renewing change for such a large and influential church but provided some hope for a more stable future for Fiji. The church helped the nation come to terms with its multi-ethnic and multi-faith composition. It reached out to other faiths and other churches. However, Fijians are still not enjoying the kind of freedom and judicial neutrality we would expect here.

A small number of faithful, thoughtful and courageous leaders enabled this large church, entwined in the nation's institutions, to make a major transition in how it understood itself and how it participated in society.

There is more to be said. These are our close neighbours. They are some of the most interesting churches in the world, facing some of the biggest challenges churches face today. I pray we keep finding ways to keep learning about them and from them, that we can act in solidarity with them, and praying with them as part of the same family of churches.