

SINGING THE SONG OF THE LORD IN A NEW UNFAMILIAR LAND

In Search for a Sustainable Form of Ecumenism in Oceania

(A Paper presented by Rev. Dr. Ilaitia S. Tuwere at a Conference on “Regional Migration and the Challenges to the Churches in the Pacific” on Tuesday 10th of August, 9.30 am, 2010 at Hotel Grand Chancellor, Auckland Airport, New Zealand).

Introduction

I have been asked to address the question of *“Theological and Identity-Issues in being a Migrant Church and the challenges to Ecumenical Relations in the Region.”* I hope to address the issues this question raises in this presentation. The title before you requires some explanation. First, about *Oceania*. The mental image of the Pacific as a place, a home, is no longer strictly confined to geographical reality. It has become in some sense an ideological term for political, economic and military interests of some bigger and richer nations. The term *Oceania* is increasingly being used by island scholars especially the late Professor Epeli Hauofa to include the area from PNG in the west, Kiribati in the north, New Caledonia in the south and Tahiti to the east. It is used to characterize not only physical features but more importantly a growing sense of regional identity, a shared concern for the world’s largest ocean and a common vision for the future wellbeing of its people.

Secondly, when pressed to sing a song of the Lord in Babylon, the early Israelites with uncertainty and nervousness asked the question: “How could we sing the song of the Lord in a strange land?” (Psalm 137: 4). By asking this question, the early Hebrews were in fact asking themselves. It was an identity-question, a question about identity, of who they were and are. *How can we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?* How can we name Him, name God ...call upon his name... witness to and for Him? For them, the Lord’s song was more than just another ordinary matter-of-fact song. The song of the Lord was the heartbeat of their religious life. “The Lord is my strength and my song and he has become my salvation” (Exodus 15:2).

The song of the Lord was the staying-power of their political and national life. Now they had to sing it in a different situation, in many ways strange. The Lord’s song was their identity, Christian identity if you like - as a land; as a people, or as a region of the world. They have to sort out who they are in this situation, as a religious and worshipping community. As a people in a situation or particular habitable earth under the control of God, maker of heaven and earth. I would like to think that this same question raised by the early Hebrews in those ancient days is the same question we are asking as a people of a region of the world at this point of time in our history.

The sub-title – *“In Search for a Sustainable Form of Ecumenism in Oceania”* is quite huge and demanding. But we cannot avoid it or run away from it. It is a search to which we are all invited to take part in as a people and member-churches of the PCC. This gathering today and in throughout this week is a sure indication that we are ready to move together in this

direction. And I'm grateful that the General Secretary of PCC has already begun to address this in his concept paper bearing the title "Re-Thinking the Pacific" given at Natadola, Fiji to Pacific Island Leaders some days ago. I see this as all part of the urgent need for a new re-arrangement or configuration of the ecumenical movement world-wide that began some years back. Two of the three principal aims of this search for the future shape of the ecumenical movement was to:

- Analyze the main challenges presented by the changing world situation and their implications for the configuration of the ecumenical movement.
- Identify the key areas of change and renewal necessary for a re-arrangement of the ecumenical movement.

One important question that faces us in this region is migration or the continuing movement of our people from the islands to places such as New Zealand. How do we sing the song of the Lord in this new and unfamiliar territory? I will return to this shortly. Now I want to quickly say something about where we have come from as an ecumenical body such as the PCC.

An Overview of Where We Have Come so Far.

It is difficult to move into the future without recalling some memory about the past. Ecumenical memory is important. We have been together as a family of churches in this region of the world for quite sometime. We begin with the Formation Period (1961-1965). Beginning from Malua, Western Samoa, 22nd April – 4th May 1961, Mission Boards from overseas and churches in the islands met and began to move, reflect and act together. The Report of the 1961 meeting in Malua carried the title – *Beyond the Reef*. It was an expression of the churches' intention to move together into the uncharted seas of the future, beyond the reefs of their immediate localities.

- April 1961 – Suva Theological Education Consultation.
- December 1961 – Pacific Journal of Theology (PJT) launched.
- 1963 – Pacific Islands Christian Education Curriculum Consultation in Suva leading to the formation of PICEC with the task of producing materials for churches.
- Important roles of future leaders like Amanaki Havea, Setareki Tuilovoni, Vavae Toma, Masiofo Fetaui Mataafa and Lorine Tevi.
- South Pacific Association of Theological Schools (SPATS) was formed in 1969. Its main objective is "*the strengthening of theological education of the churches in the region by developing and maintaining high standards and the promotion of co-operation and mutual consultation among the schools for theological research relating to the ministry and mission of churches in the region.*"
- Lifou, New Caledonia – 25th May – 7th June 1966, First Assembly of the PCC. It also marked the birth of the PCC. It sealed the relationship of the churches in the Pacific and their common journey into visible unity by voting unanimously confirming the draft Constitution on May 27th. It was a historical event. A Roman Catholic Observer was present. Discussions mainly focussed on the following:
 1. Pacific cultures and how the churches related to them.

2. Education.
 3. Reaching out to those who were still non-Christians and those who drifted away from the faith.
 4. Stewardship and faith.
 5. Marriage and Family life.
- Second Assembly – Davuilevu, Fiji 1971. Theme: *“God’s Purpose for His People.”* Title of Report *“The Fourth World Meets.”* New Emphasis on *“Development”*.
 - Third Assembly – Port Moresby, PNG. 1976. Theme: *“God’s Mission in a Changing Pacific Society”*.
 - Fourth Assembly – Nukualofa, Tonga 1981. Theme: *“The Challenges of the Eighties and the Mission of the church”*.
 - Fifth Assembly – Apia, W.Samoa 1986. Theme: *“Confessing Jesus Christ in the Pacific”*.
 - Sixth Assembly – Mele, Vanuatu 1991. Theme: *“Proclaiming the Living Hope”*.
 - Seventh Assembly – Arue, Tahiti 1997. Theme: *“Proclaiming the Living Hope of the Fenua”*. Coincided with the 200 Anniversary of the arrival of the LOTU in the Pacific on 5th March 1797. Churches also met to reassert their opposition against French nuclear testing on Moruroa in the last 30 years.
 - Eighth Assembly – Rarotonga, Cook Islands 2002. Theme: *“Holy Spirit Weave us Together in Your Peace”*. Launching of the Decade to Overcome Violence (DOV) in the Pacific. Sectional Working Group included:
 1. Secretariat and Personnel Management
 2. Finance and Property
 3. Peace and Reconciliation
 4. Mission and Church Ministry
 5. Creation, Environment and Globalization
 6. Human Rights – Children, Youths etc.
 - Ninth Assembly – Pagopago, American Samoa, September 7th – 14th 2007. Theme: *“Atua, Empower Us to be Liberating Communities.”*

Over this period of its existence, the PCC has been a visible sign of Christian unity amongst the churches in the Pacific. As an ecumenical body the PCC with limited resources has been in a true sense faithful to its mandate as stated in the Constitution:

1. To promote and encourage the spirit of ecumenism among the churches in the Pacific.
2. To encourage and support member churches to seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit in studying and working towards the full visible unity of the one undivided Church.
3. To help members evaluate their work in mission and to help them co-ordinate and plan together so that wherever possible their personnel, finance and material resources can be effectively utilized in joint action for mission.
4. To encourage and promote among members a greater awareness of justice, peace, integrity of creation and human development among the people and nations of the Pacific region.

5. To facilitate mutual consultation on issues affecting church relationship and other issues of common concern among the churches.
6. To be a means whereby the churches of the Pacific can help each other and help churches and other organizations in other parts of the world in times of natural disaster and special need, or to secure help from the churches in other parts of the world in times of similar natural disaster or need.
7. To encourage and promote programmes and information for the preaching and spreading of the Word of God.
8. To undertake such cooperative activities and programmes on behalf of members as the Assembly may from time to time approve.
9. To encourage and promote inter-faith dialogue.

Beyond the Walls of Inter-Confessional Ecumenism

From 1961 in Malua to the ninth assembly in 2007 in Pagopago, the form and shape on which we have been operating as churches has been the inter-confessional ecumenism. Or the close working together of member-churches. The primary aim here is to promote and encourage the visible unity of churches. Now, Oceania has changed so much. New challenges have entered the scene and new players on the stage. And one of these challenges is definitely the question of migration.

I'm not an expert on migration but all I can say is that migration is inextricably linked with other important global issues, including development, poverty, human rights etc. There are more international migrants today than ever before, and their number is certain to increase for the foreseeable future (Khalid Koser 2007: 1). Here in NZ according to *Statistics NZ* (22nd April 2010) the NZ's Pacific population is projected to reach 480,000 by 2026, an increase of 180,000 (2.4 percent a year) over the 2006 estimate of 300,000. In comparison with other ethnic groups the Pacific population increase is second to the Asian population increase of 3.4 percent a year. Third place are the NZ Maori with 1.3 percent a year and fourth place are the NZ European or Other population with 0.4 percent a year.

With this population increase projection before us, we as an ecumenical body need to move beyond the walls of our existing *oikoumene* or *oikos* (house) to be able to address and accommodate the attendant challenges and problems brought about by migration. We have achieved many great things in these past years as an *Inter-confessional* body of PCC where the focus has been on church unity. I'm not suggesting now that we abandon it but simply to say that inter-confessional ecumenism does not exhaust the meaning of being *ecumenical*.

Trans-Confessional Ecumenism

We need a second dimension and that is *trans-confessional* dimension of ecumenism. Or the joint response to challenges of the present-day world. That side of our common ecumenical venture is sorely needed today. Here, the term assumes a missionary and

socially-engaged meaning. People do not meet simply because they choose to, but in response to the Lord's command and promise: *"That they may be one, so that the world may believe"* (John 17: 21).

I have been here in Auckland since July 2000 on the invitation of the Anglican Diocese of Polynesia to teach in their Theological College at St. Johns, a member college of the School of Theology at Auckland university. I retired from full time teaching in the university last December and now doing part-time teaching at Trinity Methodist Theological College and part-time pastor of the Fiji Methodist circuit, Auckland. I have found the wish on the part of our people from the islands to maintain their links with their language and culture in general, their *lotu* and the lands of their birth. This is evident especially among older folks. For this, they get much valued support from both the church and the NZ government. For the younger generation, a growing number of them face difficulties in terms of identity, of who they are as they find themselves torn between two cultures, two worlds in cross-cultural circles.

All around, there are great forces operating in the waters of Oceania today. Great powers that churches here in NZ, Australia and the Pacific must name, expose and challenge. The well-known social critic Alvin Toffler in his book *"Power Shift"* says that there are three closely related forces operating and influencing the world today: *Force, Wealth and Knowledge*. Or Violence, Money and Education. They are the primary tools for power. They work themselves out in different ways and exhibit themselves in different fashions. And they can be seen in the different circles of life – political, social, economic and religious. Almost invariably, they come as wolves in sheep's clothing. This is perhaps why Jesus tells his disciples when sending them out on their mission *"to be wise as serpents."*

Leadership at all levels in our communities both here in NZ and in the islands must be sufficiently equipped to be able to name rebellious powers that are at work in our communities. For this to happen, they must be well-informed with what is happening out there. And I couldn't agree more with Fei Tevi, the General Secretary when he cites governance and leadership in his paper as pivotal to the cultivation and maintenance of a sustainable ecumenism in the Pacific right now. The fact of our situation today is the reality of fragmentation. This is the breaking up of the old and the absence of the right **word** and the right **people** to organise the new, for meaningful direction and action. I personally find little help from our politicians. Our traditional leaders become spectators in the game – on the throne but unable to effectively rule and give direction. The "centre" that was once there is slowly but surely giving way to new forces and power, most of which deny and ruin life.

Singing the Song of the Lord in a New Unfamiliar Land

So in the crucible of this fragmentation, brokenness, conflict and disunity, God is calling us to sing his song, to name him again in the changed political and historical situation here in Oceania. Now, I want to suggest few things that should make up the way we sing this song

of the Lord now in our changed situation. First, we should remind ourselves that Jesus the Lord is Lord already before we go out and say to the people that he is Lord. This means that his Lordship does not depend on our preaching or witnessing. As if to suggest that if we preach or witness poorly, the Lordship of Jesus is going to be adversely affected. No, that is not correct. It is wrong. He is Lord already before we go out on our mission. And he is there already before we arrive. We do not take him there but we take the good news about him. It is important that we hold before us this clear thinking and humility before we set out on this mission. He says, "I will be with you always to the end of the age."

There is another dimension to this Lordship that must be pointed out. Jesus is not telling us that we are the only people in the world that he will use in this mission. That also is not correct. Because he is Lord already of church and world, he will choose anybody to work with him in this mission. He says, "You did not choose me but I chose you to go out and bear fruit."

What does this imply? It means that our primary missionary task as a church is to help build up the human community in our midst. And the church is part of that human community. We are called *to help make and keep human life human*. That is sorely lacking right now in this our region of the world. It is the loss of the image of God in our dealing with one another. Everybody is created in that image irrespective of race, colour or creed. The restoration of that image in every human being is the primary task of the Church in any given situation at any given time. Remember I am not saying, the Christian community and the human community. What I am saying is the Christian community **within** the human community. This in some way is pointing us to the importance of engaging 'others' like other faiths in future for tackling common problems such as 'Climate Change' or 'Globalization' that affect us all.

Remember what the prophet Jeremiah tells the Israelites in captivity in Babylon when they asked the question, How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land? This is Jeremiah's answer in his letter to them. (Jeremiah 29: 4-7).

"Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare".

So let us build up the human community in our midst. For in its welfare we may also find our welfare. In a world being torn apart by different forces of fragmentation – identity politics, ethnic rivalries and violence in various forms, the Christian church is called to witness to God's call for the unifying, reconciling hope of the gospel. Mission or ecumenical

engagement in this new situation is nothing short of a well informed social engagement and community building. Individuals and church groups – men & women fellowships, young people should be empowered to find in the very midst of the evil and darkness of personal and social life a **power** that awakes in them hope and resourcefulness to determine their future. This power is nothing less than the power of the resurrected Lord who says: ***“You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth”*** (Acts 1:8).

In the parable of Jesus about the father and his two sons. One son said “yes” and wouldn’t go. The other son said “no” and would go. The world is made up of these two kinds of people. There are those who say “yes” and don’t go. There are those who say “no” and do. And there are people who say “yes” and do. Now it is essential that there should be people who say the right thing. But it is equally essential that there should be people who do the right thing. Now the world is full of people, some of whom only say the right thing and some of whom only do the right thing. **Jesus can use both.** The important thing is to be sure that as many people as possible say and do the right thing. But don’t write off the people who only say the right things, they are also important.

So sing the Lord’s song we must and keep naming him as Lord we should, in modern day Oceania. I believe the Lord God will not allow us to agonize over every problem or difficulty we might face. He is encouraging us to sing along. To celebrate the fact that he is sovereign Lord of all. To rejoice. To keep holiday in the midst of our working day. For the changed historical situation in whatever form or whatever time is a process whereby God is using his servants - men and women of his own choosing to carry out his purpose for mankind.

Jurgen Moltmann, the well-known German theologian opens his large book on the Church with the sentence: “This book is intended to help the church find its bearings the fundamental questions have to be answered afresh: Where do you come from? Where are you going? Who are you?”

The question asked by the early Hebrew slaves in Babylon is sending us back to those three fundamental questions. Where do you come from? From the hand of the living God who engaged with men in a new way through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the outpouring of his Spirit. Where are you going? To make disciples of all nations: to fulfil the commission with which we have been charged. Who are you? A people with whom that same Christ has promised that he will be present, to the close of the ages.

The Need for New Visions

Dr. Konrad Raiser former General Secretary of the World Council of Churches (WCC) concludes his little book *To Be the Church* with five renewed visions for the ecumenical movement. I consider these five visions as important and useful for our use.

- The ecumenical vision is a vision of *wholeness* and of fullness of life, not only for human beings, but also for all creation (Isa. 65: 17-25; John 10:10; Eph. 1:10; Rev. 21: 1-4; 22: 1-5).

This vision challenges all structures which produce exclusion and treat nature as an expendable resource. It is committed to fostering a “culture of life” which rejects the inevitability of war, violence, and destruction. The central dynamic of this vision is the conviction that the possibilities of life are enhanced for all when it is shared.

- The ecumenical vision is a conviction of *shalom* and of right relationships in a sustainable human community (Lev. 25; Pss. 72; 85: 8-13; Matt. 25: 31-46; Luke 4: 18ff.; Eph. 2: 11-22). This vision transcends understandings of peace as security, of justice as quantitative equality and of sustainability as maintaining the equilibrium of the social and environmental system. Justice, peace and sustainability refer to qualities of relationships, and the ecumenical vision seeks to strengthen processes which heal broken relationships and enhance the viability of human communities. It therefore challenges all notions of human rights and human freedom which disregard the common good and the rights, dignity and freedom of others.
- The ecumenical vision is a vision of *reconciliation* (Gen. 33: 1-16; Matt. 5: 23-25; 2 Cor. 5: 18-21; Eph. 2: 14-18). This vision is based on the belief in the liberating power of forgiveness, which break the spiral of violence and transform enmity into friendship. Trusting in God’s offer of forgiveness and reconciliation in Christ, it supports all efforts which encourage individuals or communities in conflict to turn to each other, to recall together grievances and admit failings, and through acts of forgiveness to accept one another again in community.
- The ecumenical vision is a vision of *sufficiency* (Micah 4:4f.; Matt. 6: 9ff.; 6:25ff.; Luke 12: 15ff.; 2 Cor. 9: 6ff.). It challenges the assumption that only continuous growth will overcome the conditions of scarcity, but lives in the certainty that enough is provided for everyone’s need as long as all are prepared to share with each other. It therefore supports whatever enhances the capacity of human communities to become self-reliant, to care for their own needs, to be stewards of their own resources.
- The ecumenical vision is a vision of the *catholicity* of the church as the world-wide community of those who live by the promise of God’s kingdom and celebrate the signs of its presence already now (Matt. 26: 26-29; Luke 13: 29; 1 Cor. 10: 16f.; 12: 4-31; 15: 20-28; Gal. 3:26ff.). This vision transcends the idea that ecumenism is aimed only at convergence and agreement between churches as organized bodies, affirming that a real communion exists among all who confess Jesus Christ and have been made members of his body through baptism. They are not strangers to one another, but members of God’s household. As they give shape to their bonds of fellowship, they share with each other as those who remain different but are enriched by the diversity of gifts, traditions and forms of life and witness. Called to one hope, they remain a pilgrim people on the way, anticipating in their life together and in community with their neighbours the fullness of communion in God’s kingdom.
