



# Pacific Conference of Churches

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## **The Story of our Pacific Household in the ‘New Normal’**

*We cannot be where we wish to be unless we reframe and script a story about ourselves, who we are and our journey as people of the Pacific in the ‘new normal’*

The year 2020 will mark a turning point in the history of our islands; from how we understand ecumenism, ecology and politics to development. This is our story, as Pacific churches leaders, to our members, and to our political and traditional leaders in the ‘Household of God in the Pacific’.

But first we wish to acknowledge with deep respect the many, here in our Pacific region and around the world, who are risking their lives to attend to those who are infected by the coronavirus. In this regard, we pay tribute to our doctors and nurses, volunteers, and counsellors. To those who lost their loved ones, we offer our sincere condolences and our prayer is that you will find peace, comfort and fortitude in God’s love and care. To those who are fearful, we offer to you our vision of a region that if we work together even with our fears and uncertainties, we will be offering to our children a much better story for them to share with their children in the journey ahead. We also acknowledge the tremendous work of the governments, churches, civil society organisations and countless volunteers who attend to the needs of our people in the aftermath of cyclone Harold in the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji and Tonga.

The impact of the coronavirus, while deeply tragic on the one hand, offers us a unique opportunity to envision life anew. The Easter events this year made this envisioning highly significant. The social statics worldwide reveal a world of senseless tragedies – extreme hunger and poverty, war and violence, and irreversible environmental damages and Ocean pollution. All of these amidst a world of execrable and unimaginable plenty, tremendous strides in education and knowledge, and growth in democracy, development and freedoms. Never before is our world is so blessed with creativity and ingenuity, yet so vexed by our foolishness in believing that there are no limits to our powers and to what we can do. The coronavirus or COVID-19, in a most striking and startling way, revealed this folly. It lays bare and shatters the poignant illusion of this ‘normal’ and its ‘inevitability’ that the world and we in the region have taken for granted.

The Easter events – the death and resurrection of our Lord - shows that neither death nor fate has the final say on our human condition; we are and have the final say. Let us then begin to craft our vision of the ‘new normal’ with the words of the late Bernard Narokobi, an elder in our ecumenical movement and a founding father of Papua New Guinea.

Our history did not begin with contact with the Western explorers. Our civilisation did not start with the coming of the Christian missionaries. Because we have an ancient civilisation, it is important for us to give proper dignity and place to our history. We can only be ourselves if we accept who we are rather than denying our autonomy... Now that we are finally connected with the world, we suddenly see ourselves through the world mirror. Will we see our own true size images, or will we see ourselves in the images and the shadows of others? Will we see ourselves in the long shadows of the dwindling light and the advanced darkness of the evening dusk, or will we see ourselves in the long and radiant rays of the rising sun? We can choose, if we will.<sup>1</sup>

These words are taken from his seminal work, *The Melanesian Way*, published in 1980 (revised edition in 1983). These are most truthful words and although these were about Melanesian history and the need for them to reframe and claim ownership of it, they have highly significant relevance to the rest of us today and to our story as Pacific people of the ‘new normal’ – the post-coronavirus. Knowing who we are and our distinctive histories, valuing and celebrating our diversity, and what is common to us must be fundamental to our story of the ‘new normal’. Let us map out a new way of living and relating with each other. Let us draw from the wealth of resources in our cultural and faith traditions, and our hermeneutical experiences about God and what He is saying to us.

In the following paragraphs, we as church leaders propose the trajectory of our journey.

**Ecumenism:** Back in 2013 in Honiara, Solomon Islands, we undertook a journey of ecumenical renewal, and the questions that have been asked in the journey were: **who are we, as an ecumenical family, in this new century? To whom and to what should we owe the reservoir of our Christian compassion, our resources on justice, the burden of our identity as cultured Christians and our moral responsibility?** The ecumenical relations of our fathers and mothers in the 1960s to the 80s was marked by the strength of their solidarity and action for justice, freedom and the development of our people. That is the example we must follow, and our discernment and actions must be inspired by the Spirit of the Lord. This task is urgent because if we fail to genuinely make the effort to understand the root causes of injustice, aggression, forms of conflict and climate change, and what makes people despair and renders them vulnerable to the cruel forces of nature, violence will, in the midst of great advances, characterize this decade for our people. We need such a vision to chart our story of the ‘new normal’, even if it on familiar waters.<sup>2</sup>

In the 90s, there was the illusion that a new ecumenical identity would simply be constructed on a foreign model. And so it was. Regional and local ecumenical institutions were built on a borrowed model that is driven by a certain cultural and

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Zorn, *In Memory of Bernard Norokobi*, eJournal of the Australian Association for the Advancement of Pacific Studies Issues 1.2 and 2.1, April 2010. [http://intersections.anu.edu.au/pacificcurrents/zorn\\_memorial.htm](http://intersections.anu.edu.au/pacificcurrents/zorn_memorial.htm).

<sup>2</sup> S. Wesley Ariarajah (*Axis of Peace Christian Faith in Times of Violence and War*, Risk Books, WCC publications, Geneva, 2004, pp111-37) proposes three guiding principles: justice, reconciliation and non-violence, and adds that these have global significance because they are intrinsic to the world’s great religions. Basing on the Bible and theology, he further discusses in detail the meaning of these principles and their implications on social, political and economic relationships.

theological framing of John 17:21. It served a purpose then. But it was a mistake to think that it ought to remain so. Practices since the turn of the century has shown that a new ecumenical identity did not and will not simply appear, nor will it develop according to what it is been prescribed by models and rules designed somewhere else, nor mechanically copying other regions' ecumenical models, will work in perpetuity. The time when ready-made ecumenical models could be installed in other regions like a computer programme has passed.

Our forefathers and mothers read the stars back then and came up with structures, albeit borrowed from the 'western' world, to govern our ecumenical life and relations. Today, it is our turn to read the stars and gift to the future our version of this aspect of our story of the 'new normal'. But our reading must be conditioned by our experiences, our cultures and traditions, our worldviews, and our hermeneutics of the biblical story. Only then will our identity be based on a solid foundation, be directed towards the future and not the past. This endeavour started with the church leaders at their various meetings in 2017 in Auckland and Nadi, and in Goroka Papua New Guinea (in 2016 and 2017) with the PNG churches. These conversations enabled the emergence of the shift of understanding ecumenism from 'unity of the body of Christ' to the 'Household of God'. The deepening through education and practice of this understanding bears much relevance today.

We have left behind an old prescribed model of ecumenism, and we should not return to it. Ecumenism as the 'Household of God in the Pacific' is our story of ecumenism in the 'new normal'. We must and seek new ways of doing and teaching theology that will give meaning to our Pacific household.

**Ecology:** A politician, a philosopher, a theologian and above all a faithful servant of his people and God, Rev. Leslie Boseto once said "As Christians we are obliged to be good stewards of God's creations and today more than ever, we... must make informed decisions about how to conserve and sustainably develop our natural environment to ensure our children enjoy the cultural, social and economic treasures that have defined our people for a millennium.<sup>3</sup> While his words relate to the care of our natural environment in our region, these are highlighted for two reasons: (a) our stewardship responsibility as a household is towards the goal of sustaining our region's ecological wellbeing; and, (b) it implies on us a new way of structuring our political cooperation and relations at the local and regional levels so that this responsibility can be nurtured. Rev. Boseto's words, while wise, are unmistakably a warning for us in light of global and regional trends that are set in motion centuries ago with the secularisation process but only now that we are seeing their impacts on our islands and people, and is now laid bear with the impact of the coronavirus.

Our ecological future will need to need to include how we understand and define ecology. Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Taisi Efi, another of our ecumenical elders from Samoa described this concept of the 'household' poignantly well. "I am not an individual; I am an integral part of the cosmos. I share divinity with my ancestors, the land, the seas and the skies. I am not an individual, because I share a *tofi* (inheritance)

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<sup>3</sup> Leslie Boseto, *Ridges to Reefs Conservation Plan for Choiseul Province, Solomon Islands*, The Nature Conservancy, 2010.

<https://www.conservationgateway.org/Documents/Choiseul%20Ridges%20to%20Reefs%20Conservation%20Plan%202015%20Apr%202010.pdf>

with my family, my village and my nation. I belong to my family and my family belongs to me. I belong to my village and my village belongs to me. I belong to my nation and my nation belongs to me. This is the essence of my sense of belonging”<sup>4</sup>.

Development, politics and theology in our story of the ‘new normal’ will depend on how well we understand ecology as the fundamental framework of our region as ‘God’s household’. And will depend on how we are prepared to draw from and base our policies – church, development, political, environment and economics – on the values and wisdom of our traditions, cultures, and spiritualities. We will need to factor into the measures of our national and regional progress, our ecological assets which includes the losses and damages to our environment, aspects of our cultures and traditions, and our relationships. And conversely, factor in the benefits of emerging ecological relationships with our environment, ocean and in our political relations. In addition, we will need to develop, both at the regional and national levels, our own specific and distinct indicators of development.

- **Politics:** Our people are as ancient as our Islands, with distinct cultures, traditions and worldviews. Yet as indigenous people, we all struggle to express who we are and our perspectives on what life expects from us. For decades, since the arrival of the missionaries and traders to today, we are domesticated by the idea that there is only one-story for all of us – the good life is as prescribed by the head offices in New York, London and Beijing, or closer to home, in Sydney, Canberra, and Wellington. But there is a new emerging political story our young people which is ‘we need a new story but one that is premised on who we are, our cultures, traditions and faith’<sup>5</sup>. And so is the need for such a premise to anchor this aspect of our story in the ‘new normal’. We must give ourselves the permission to state our views on the question ‘**who are we as Pacific people in this story?**’

We must work together to create common political goals with indicators to measure the health of our political life. We need to break the habit of only listening to like-minded people, or people from the same sub-region – Polynesia, Micronesia or Melanesia. This means that we must learn to talk across the artificial political boundaries of colonial division, and to shared beliefs, our relational mandates, and our traditional links that trace us back to thousands of years of existence in the Pacific. The differences in our political views, stance on issues and debates about beliefs and identity, and about our political future are not tragic. But unless we participate with deep passion and commitment to writing this aspect of our story for the ‘new normal’, it will be impossible to imagine a world of exciting possibilities for our political life together in our Pacific household. We must be proud of our respective histories to script this aspect of our story for the ‘new normal’. A story about who we are and our islands, and about what we believe our politics and its indicators are and ought to be for us in our national contexts and our Pacific household. Our entire, uncensored histories must be a part of our identities in our story of the ‘new normal’. Political education on these things is all the more important because in order to educate our people, we must restore into our

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<sup>4</sup> Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Taisi Efi, *Samoan Jurisprudence and the Samoan Lands and Titles Court: the perspective of a litigant*, Official Speeches, 2007. [http://www.head-of-state-samoa.ws/pages/speech\\_jurisprudence.html](http://www.head-of-state-samoa.ws/pages/speech_jurisprudence.html)

<sup>5</sup> The views of the youth are well captured in the Manfred Ernst and Lydia Johnson (eds). *Navigating Troubled Waters: The Ecumenical Movement in the Pacific Since the 1990s*. Pacific Theological College: Suva, Fiji, 2017.

consciousness the role of our respective cultures and literature, and the life-giving values of our respective faith and political traditions.

Our people must be confident of who they are, where they stand and on whose behalf. These must serve as the foundation for our people's personal and collective identity, the source of their uniqueness and their basis for understanding who they are in their engagement with the design of the story of 'new normal'. Here, a great deal depends on the content of our political education at our higher learning institutions at the local and the region levels, and how and who should and ought to be teaching our political histories. Supporting this endeavour is one of the most important steps on the path toward a strong, flourishing political journey in our region. Most often we ask our children: 'what do you expect from life' which is the wrong question to ask. The question ought to be 'what does life expects from you?' This latter places the onus on us to make life more just, compassionate and caring. To ask the opposite is to be passive to what life gives us – injustices, greed and violence. And so is our political life. We must ask 'what does our political life expects from us' rather than 'what do we expect from politics'. This is another reason why we as leaders of today need to write this aspect of story for the 'new normal'.

**Development:** Today our regional and local identity as members of God's household in the Pacific, is experiencing not only objective pressures stemming from the increasing consumption, commercialization, and secularisation in our societies – which is part and parcel of the globalisation process - but also the consequences of non-attendance to the need to renew, reframe and script our regional and local stories of what development and its journey ought to be for us in the Pacific. The result was the decline in self-belief on who we are as uniquely people of the Pacific and, hence, the decline in development cooperation and relations. We were faced with the demoralization of our region and our respective societies, with a deficit of trust in our political systems, in our political and church leadership, and our accountability, and our people's responsibility towards each other.

Our diversity is our strength. Each island country has strength of beliefs, philosophies, moral resources, and distinctive cultural and Christian basis. The main thing that will determine or indicate that this aspect of our story – development - is successful is our people's quality of life, the quality of their faith experiences, and the quality of our distinctive Pacific island societies and their intellectual, spiritual and moral strength. Development is not just about the material wellbeing of our people. After all, economic growth, prosperity and geopolitical influence in our islands are derived from such societal conditions. But this aspect of our story will depend on: (a) our decisive action to believe that it is possible to conceive of another way of measuring our development and progress; (b) our leaders – church, political and traditional - are united by common developmental goals and duties to each other. In this sense, the question of finding and strengthening a Pacific ecological development framework, indicated above, is fundamental to us.

It is evident that it is impossible to move forward without scripting this aspect of the story of the 'new normal' as we see, and anchoring it on our traditions, philosophies, cultures and faith traditions, and the wisdom therein. Unless we do this, development and its measures current continue to favour the few and disadvantage the many among us, and the 'normal' that was will be the story of the 'new normal'. We as leaders -

church, political and traditional - must script this aspect of our story together; it cannot be otherwise. This is our task, not someone else's. Our mission resources ought to focus on reframing today's dominant single story of the 'good life' which says that our sole purpose in life is economic productivity and consumption, and that personal convenience is the end goal of human development. We must write a story of a development as a story of health and wellbeing.

As churches, we need to align ourselves more and more with the decisive biblical view about who we are: created in the image of God, and because of it, possess the power to choose, act and take responsibility for our destiny (Gen 2-3). That is what is so revolutionary, yet extraordinary about the Genesis narrative and the Exodus experience. We must reclaim the belief that the source of action and responsibility lies within ourselves. The prophets and Jesus our Lord were amongst the first to think globally, to conceive of a God transcending place and national boundaries and to think of humanity as a single moral community linked by a covenant of mutual responsibility. They conceived of society as a place where justice rolls down like water and righteousness like a never-ending stream (Amos 5:21-24) and of the future in which war had been abolished and peoples lived together in peace (Micah 4.1-5). These insights and aspirations have lost none of their power today. This then should be the basis of our renewed thirst to craft a story for the 'new normal'.

As church leaders - Presidents, Chairmen, Moderators, Archbishops, Bishops and Elders – and with our people, have lived through some of the most turbulent, dramatic and life changing periods in our region, some of which are still happening such as the effects of climate change and natural disasters, and now the coronavirus. But amidst all these, we are discovering a new way of looking at our world and the realities of our people. We are returning to ourselves, to our own histories, just as we did at other points in the respective political developments of our island countries.

We will together carve a future not of our own but one that will be written in graciousness because we will script something about which we cared and loved much – our Pacific household. We have now the gift of the written word which, as Bernard Narokobi said, we can utilise to "...reflect on our ancient past and the modern life. We can have a responsibility to ourselves and to the world to bring to the world the treasures of our civilization."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Jean Zorn, *In Memory of Bernard Norokobi*.