

Short Summary

Navigating Troubled Waters:

The Ecumenical Movement in the Pacific Islands since the 1980s

Manfred Ernst, Lydia Johnson (Editors)

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Chapter 4: Casimira, Aisake: Neither hot nor cold in a changing climate: Ecumenism in Kiribati

The independent nation of Kiribati in the central Pacific is home to roughly 100 000 inhabitants, mainly indigenous I-Kiribati (96% in 2015). The small land area of 811 sq km is surpassed by far by the huge extend of its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of 3.5 million sq km. The first settlers to arrive in Kiribati are assumed to have been Southeast Asians approximately 4000 years ago, followed by Polynesians around 3000 years later. Within a few decades of the second half of the 19th centuries, missionaries from several denominations arrived on the many atolls and by their fierce competition made for a very quick and overarching Christianisation in Kiribati. The modern history of Kiribati is characterized by repetitive occurrence of political, economic, and ecological exploitation in form of atrocities during World War II, extraction and devastation of natural goods, and the colonisation and forced bearing of nuclear testing through the British. Despite its formal independence in 1979, the country remains largely dependent on both its limited resources for export and financial aid from overseas. It is struggling with a huge trade deficit and tremendous lack of opportunities to develop their economy. Additionally, bureaucratic problems inhibit economic growth and development. Even though the state of Kiribati was established after the model of a western republic, the former colonial power failed to prepare the population thoroughly for democracy, which leaves the influence of traditional leaders on governance processes with “enduring relevance”. The chapter nevertheless also states that this system still works in accordance to democratic values and processes, naming the establishment of democracy generally a success. Education is provided predominantly by private schools owned by several churches. The chapter indicates that unequal access to even basic education, declining numbers in adequately educated students, and often

insufficient equipment inhibit the government's capacities to face the challenges lying ahead.

The chapter names several key developmental trends since the 1980s. It can be evaluated that the population of Kiribati suffers under various forms of vulnerability. These become clear through following social issues deeply concerning human rights: Among these, the approximately most important issues are climate change and respectively rising sea levels with its various consequences on health, nutrition, and particularly possible resettlement. Additionally, the chapter emphasizes the dramatic increase in poverty in Kiribati. This indicates a high vulnerability of both the already poor and those slightly above poverty with respect to even small changes. More importantly, Kiribati is one of the regions that are most threatened by actual and complete crossover within the next decades.

Furthermore, the chapter indicates that Kiribati is struggling severely with "an alarming prevalence of gender-based violence", with a vast majority of women and girls being affected by either emotional, physical or sexual violence. Additionally, the country's limited resources do not only negatively impact inequality and therefore development in terms of health and education in the country, but they also exacerbate possible efforts to help people challenge these vulnerabilities, creating a dangerous struggle for an answer on the question which problems to approach first. Author of this chapter Aisake Casimira therefore strongly argues for "active and dynamic cooperation between the churches and governments" in order to respond most effectively to these literally existential threats. He also indicates that this requires a reconsideration of the main guidelines in both denominations and ecumenism. He definitely advocates a "thorough review of [the churches'] life and action", as has already been demanded by Manfred Ernst and Anna Anisi in reference to the Pacific churches as a whole in 2016.

The chapter also treats with the development of ecumenism since the 1980s. Kiribati's society is shaped by an overwhelmingly Christian population, with the Kiribati Uniting Church (KUC) and the Catholic Church dominating, but being supplemented by a handful of non-mainstream churches. Especially the Mormon Church has grown to a percentage of over 5% in recent decades, whereas the KUC's membership numbers are on decline.

The ecumenical movement in Kiribati has experienced some very propitious approaches in the time between the late 1960s and the 1980s. Mainly initiated by Catholic Church leaders in the context of Vatican II, but also with support from the KUC, these two churches made up for the vast majority of ecumenical cooperation in Kiribati. The chapter highlights the short period of lively and productive ecumenical cooperation on the island of Nanouti as well as the involvement of the two churches in a National Council of Churches (founded in 1979) and the regional bodies PCC and PTCC in the late 1960s. The chapter furthermore emphasizes the remarkable "enthusiasm, vision and creativity of the churches' leadership". But this strong spirit did not result in an actually substantial improvement of ecumenical cooperation. Today, the state of ecumenism is described as one of "mediocrity", caused by both several failures to address problems inhibiting ecumenism and external circumstances that clearly tended to result in these very failures: Concretely, the foundation of the KNCC

did not lead to greater efforts to diminish differences and overcome animosities between these two major denominations. Instead, both the Catholic Church, who struggled to find an appropriate balance between its historical belief in superiority, and the generally less progressive KUC turned out to focus on the belief that “truth can only be found in one’s own church”. This competition was further increased by the surpassing of KUC by the Catholic Church in terms of membership numbers. The author of this chapter argues that these factors inhibited an urgently necessary process of reconciliation between these two denominations and thus the development of stronger ecumenical cooperation intrinsically. The not yet overcome animosities of the past still limit KNCC’s potential for effective action and should have already been addressed some decades ago.

The analysis of field research results from 11 interviews with most key church leaders, women, and youth. They have shown three different understandings of ecumenism. The first perspective focuses on mutual understanding, dialogue and participation. Ecumenism is to be understood as a focus on similarities while still being able to believe individually, whereas a second perspective emphasizes the need to “collectively address [...] the needs of the people” and therefore promote development in Kiribati’s society. This perspective also stresses that ecumenism means belonging to a local as well as a universal Christian family. The third perspective combines the other two. Here, interviewees argue that dialogue on neither “matters of faith” nor on “developmental issues” should be neglected.

Regarding the present state of ecumenism, the field research reveals a rather negative picture, even though there have also been successes. There is a decline in animosities between denominations, but they still persist. The chapter names several annual events that are conducted in the name of ecumenism, especially the Gospel Day that was induced to “commemorate the arrival of Christianity in Kiribati”. These annual events do promote ecumenical learning and understanding, yet critics state that they should be conducted more frequently in order to develop their purpose to the fullest. Furthermore, there is a range of institutional ecumenical programs. Both KUC itself and its theological school have incorporated ecumenism as “indispensable part of its mission department” or respectively included it in the theological education. The Catholic Church, however, still lacks an institutionalized program on ecumenism. The chapter also positively mentions the cooperation between churches and the government.

Despite these successes, the chapter indicates that there are deep-lying problems in ecumenical cooperation in Kiribati. The most important of these problems is an apparent “lack of vision” among church leaders. The interviewees mention this lack of commitment to the ecumenical idea as an impediment for the spread of such visions to their communities, for the further development of dialogue on doctrinal matters, and for a common and more effective approach on social issues.

This minimalist engagement can be seen at two examples in particular:

Firstly, the Gospel Day, “only visible sign of ecumenism in Kiribati” and organized by the churches, is nevertheless not attached with any particular meaning, which is however

considered to potentially help further increase its effectiveness or demonstrate a kind of leadership in the ecumenical movement by the churches.

Secondly, approaches on social issues still depend largely on governmental initiatives. There seems to be no genuine interest in taking responsibility for ecumenical activities. The chapter states that there has not been actual progress in the ecumenical movement since the 1980s.

This ineffective leadership is therefore named one of the main challenges for ecumenism in Kiribati. Despite of sufficient willingness to promote ecumenism on the grassroots level, this lack of visions impediments the further spread of ecumenical relations, particularly in regards to the youth. This is supplemented by certain structures in the KNCC that work diametrical against an effective promotion of ecumenism. The chapter is here referring to the position of general secretary which is often taken by an already retired person who can not give this job full priority. It also criticizes that by including basically only the two main churches, people tend to prioritize their denomination instead of fully promoting the ecumenical idea, and that by excluding youth and women, who make up a vast majority of the population, KNCC is wasting a huge amount of potential contribution to further progress. Additionally, the current financing does not meet the requirements of an effective promotion of ecumenism.

The chapter also criticizes that the KNCC fails to create sufficient awareness for ecumenical visions and values. It indicates that the promotion of ecumenism has been deliberately neglected. In order to spread these ideals more effectively, some interviewees suggest to not only support people in need, but also to question the deeper lying reasons for injustice, thus giving a voice to the neglected. Harsh critics even state that the availability of welfare tends to be connected to a person's denomination, and that there is an atmosphere of competition between denominations within KNCC. This indicates a strong lack of commitment to ecumenism within ecclesiastical work.

The chapter furthermore defines several social problems that challenge Kiribati. The most important ones are climate change, gender-based violence and youth problems. Whereas the first two have already been treated and explained at a previous stage, the chapter specifies problems facing youth. 54% of Kiribati's population is under the age of 24, making the youth undeniably the future of the country. Yet at the same time, youth are disproportionally affected by problems of violence and social instabilities. The author of the chapter states that "the churches seem to be immune to these developments" and fails to create appropriate opportunities for youth to unfold their potential. The chapter furthermore states that the rise of new religious groups reflects failures of the "mainstream churches" to address people's needs in their daily lives, which might require the KNCC to include more churches since the Mormons in particular are growing rapidly and might even become the second largest church in Kiribati by the time of the next census.

In regards to regional ecumenical issues, the chapter states that PTC in particular, but also PRS have "contributed greatly to the ecumenical formation of pastors and priests". However,

PCC is considered to have grown slightly detached from “the needs of its member churches”, and it sometimes remains unclear which tasks are allocated to PTC and which to PCC.

Even though these huge challenges might lead an observer to a rather negative conclusion about ecumenism in Kiribati, long term prospects are considered to be more hopeful. There is “much ecumenical goodwill” that can evolve into prosperous ecumenical cooperation if some of the most pressing impediments are addressed purposefully. The combined voices of many interviewees indicate that if passionate leaders use the existing and much promising structures and relations among each other, if they reflect on social and ecclesiastical patterns, strengthen the bonds between congregations and institutions and promote ecumenism to the public, then a healthier ecumenism can evolve.

The chapter concludes that modern Kiribati’s exposure to “dramatic changes” has brought along a very uncertain future for the country. The author of the chapter calls for more tolerance for differences and urges the churches to create a greater distance to both their current culture and their history, which would allow them to critically reflect on them and thus open up a dialogue for reconciliation and renewal. He again emphasizes the need for stronger and more effective leadership while simultaneously stressing the importance of the KNCC’s work and mission. Despite of the urgency of the social issues mentioned before, the author also considers it essential to form a theological base on which the necessary approach on these issues can be built on. The chapter recommends the churches in Kiribati to strengthen a dialogue of reconciliation and reflection that questions the happenings of the past and the current actions regarding ecumenism. He furthermore recommends the KNCC to “create spaces” for all those who are willing to promote the ecumenical idea, in order to enable them to effectively contribute to ecumenism with the outstanding talents given to them. Youth and women are mentioned in particular. The chapter finally recommends to rethink both the different structures within and the roles that are exercised by the Kiribati National Council of Churches.

Vincent Gewert, Volunteer at the Institute for Mission and Research, PTC