

Short Summary

Navigating Troubled Waters:

The Ecumenical Movement in the Pacific Islands since the 1980s

Manfred Ernst, Lydia Johnson (Editors)

2017

550 pages

Copyright © The Pacific Theological College

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the author or the Pacific Theological College.

Chapter 5: Garbe, Eckart: Ecumenism in Papua New Guinea: Overwhelmed by Challenges

The eastern half of the island Guinea is today known as the independent state of Papua New Guinea (PNG). The first Melanesians to settle in PNG arrived approximately 45 000 years ago and developed a prosperous and sustainable agricultural system to survive. The first Europeans to discover the island came in 1526, but it took until the late 19th century that PNG was colonized by the Empires of Germany and Britain. After World War II, Australia administrated PNG until the country's independence in 1975. PNG is ethnically very diverse, with almost 850 languages spoken around the country. This went very well during the pre-colonial time but evolved into a problem when colonial administrators and Christian missionaries developed a modern infrastructure that allowed citizens to move around more easily and therefore live together in closer connections. Today, the language *Tok Pisin* is spoken throughout PNG to facilitate understanding. Despite of rich resources which are exported and thus extremely high economic growth rates, the majority of the population remains marginalized in regards to all kinds of social indicators. These observations are backed by United Nations research. All governments promote this concept of resource extraction despite apparent failures to adapt to local contexts. The governments furthermore show little capacity to approach the population's needs, one of the reasons being the still dominant loyalty of decision makers to "kinship ties and clanship obligations". These traditional loyalties also impede the election process on grassroots level, despite of a rather complex system of representative democratic bodies. Author of the chapter Eckart Garbe concludes that "the situation in Papua New Guinea has shifted from a rather static and predictable life to one in which everything has been shifted upside down."

Diverse religious beliefs have existed in PNG ever since humans inhabited the island. Christianity, however, arrived in PNG in the late 19th century and was introduced in three waves. The first wave, lasting until WWI in 1914, brought the classical mainline churches to PNG, predominantly Catholic and Lutheran missionaries. "More fundamental and evangelical missions" reached PNG before WWII, and in the years before independence, also Pentecostal churches arrived.

After PNG had gained independency, the religious landscape became more complex. Data confirms that the mainline churches are in decline, even though the Catholic Church (25%) and the Lutheran Church (almost 20%) still make up for the biggest religious groups. Contrarily, especially the SDA has risen remarkably, and there is a huge variety of small and independent churches.

Due to the introduction of Christianity to PNG in a climate of rivalry and competition between the churches, ecumenism developed less from an internal movement but was rather brought to the country from outside. Yet still, when an ecumenical movement evolved in the Pacific, also PNG developed their first ecumenical institutions. The most important one is the Melanesian Council of Churches (MCC), today known as PNG Council of Churches (PNGCC).

The mainline churches, who were the driving force behind the ecumenical movement, put special emphasize on the establishment of several ecumenical schools and colleges in order to promote theological education in PNG.

But there were and are also many obstacles. Since ecumenism was initiated mainly by expatriate missionaries and depended heavily on funds from overseas, the withdrawal of many missionaries since the 1980s posed severe challenges on ecumenism in PNG. Due to a lack of both personal and financial support, many institutions began to struggle with their work, and ecumenism began to decline. Even PNGCC "found itself at the point of crashing" in 2006 when oversea funds were being cut due to "management flaws". Efforts to revitalize it exist and can't be evaluated yet. Encouraging example from the positive side is the establishment of the Divine World University (DWU) which provides, among four other faculties, theological education, is open to students from all regions and denominations and has gained considerable international reputation.

The analysis of field research provides data from over 45 interview partners and talanoa participants.

The understanding of ecumenism points to the fact that ecumenism is understood on a very pragmatic and earthly level, without many deliberations regarding doctrinal or theological issues. Most interview partners focus on cooperation and understanding between churches, that derives from a common faith in Jesus Christ and can help the churches address people's needs. However, the chapter also hints that, in sight of PNG's mission history and ethnical diversity, a common approach to ecumenism might be helpful.

The interviewees perceive several challenges for ecumenism in PNG. First of all, as Father Gibbs states in one of the interviews, "there is a diminishment of interest in ecumenical relations". Closely related to this is the uprising of various small churches which are less

committed to ecumenism. For the mainline churches, this poses the questions of how to find ways of cooperating with them. Such new forms of cooperation also emerge on a level of approaches to social problems. PNG suffers under a serious damage of social cohesion, with multiple forms of violence emerging out of it. Whereas there is vast agreement that these issues are urgent, churches disagree on their own ability to approach them apart from cooperation with the government. However, this cooperation is also becoming increasingly difficult and especially a threat for ecumenism since the uprising of the small churches has triggered greater competition for governmental funds. This competition impedes a healthy ecumenical cooperation between churches. Additionally, the PNGCC, as mentioned previously, lacks several functioning boards and therefore capacities to become active. It nevertheless still cooperates with the government and local actors. Despite of all of these obstacles, several interviewees emphasize the urgent need to collectively address these very concerning issues.

Another section of the chapter treats the topic of church and politics in PNG.

According to the chapter, this discussion was triggered by the attempt of Speaker of Parliament Hon. Theodore Zurenuoc to create a feeling of unity among PNG's. This national unity would then help transform PNG "into a God-fearing and prosperous nation". The huge discussion about this attempt indicates how discordant PNG church leaders are in regards to the relationship between church and state. Yet still, church leaders are closely connected to politics and likewise. The chapter also states that the uprising of Pentecostal churches has brought up a movement that seeks to officially connect Church and state very closely in the manner of Zionist ideas. For example, speaker Zurenuoc sparked a serious discussion again when he decided to bring the contentious King James Version Bible to PNG. This dispute went far enough for most mainline churches to openly reject this political action. The section concludes that these two attempts illustrate the huge potential religious ideas have to influence the public in PNG.

One of the successes of the PNG churches has been their historic contribution to society. The capacity of churches "to make their collective voice heard" gives them an important role, for example as peacemakers. A more complex topic is the churches' cooperation with the government as "providers of social services". While the churches' historical success in the provision of health and education remains undisputed, the state – church partnership that was launched in 2004 is criticized in some regards. The most important points of criticism are the involvement of Australian aid, which makes the movement one that is driven from outside, a lack of critical attitudes towards the government among church leaders, and the danger of an decreasing commitment to social involvement because the churches might rely on the governments to solve problems for them. Despite these minor concerns, the chapter states that this Church Partnership Programme (CPP) is "generally seen as a success", experiences support by most interviewees and has gained "good reputation in PNG". From an ecumenical perspective on education, a "mixed picture" arises. Most educational institutions are run separately by the several churches without much cooperation. Yet in

tertiary education, most institutions certainly strive to be multi-denominational, even though the chapter states that this is only accomplished with “certain limits” and “inbuilt reservations”.

But there are also impediments to ecumenical cooperation. First of all, many churches are divided within themselves which makes it difficult to form unity with other churches. Second, the complicated social situation in PNG, for example the differences between rural and urban areas or the slow fading of “communal relations”, makes it difficult for churches to elaborate the appropriate direction in which they should aim. Third, doctrinal, historic, theological, and biblical barriers and obstacles, which are not really discussed, and competition between churches inherently impede ecumenical cooperation. And fourth, the chapter states that PNG lacks support by the regional bodies PCC, PTC, and SPATS. Several interviewees wish for more involvement in terms of visits, guidelines and invitations to conferences that are not provided by PCC, especially since PNGCC has lost many of its capacities.

Looking ahead, the chapter repeatedly emphasizes the urgent social issues that need to be addressed in none but a collective way. Competition between and within churches, on an institutional as well as a congregational level, is considered to strongly inhibit ecumenical progress. The chapter stresses the huge potential of the churches to influence public opinion as well as governmental decisions. It has a positive perspective on cooperation between different denominations and the participation of women and youth in church activities, but it also criticizes that these important groups are not being given sufficient say in decision making processes. A trend that gives hope for the future is the willingness of “next – generation activists” to “accept fresh ideas” and thereby contribute to social change. Yet at the same time, a “turnaround” is not being expected soon – no matter how urgently needed.

In his concluding section, the author of this chapter gives several recommendations regarding ecumenism in PNG. They could be summed up as the following:

To strengthen education in regards to theological education, ecumenical education, education of women and youth, and life-long learning.

To strengthen dialogue on both ecumenism and the churches’ role in social development.

To “reshape PNGCC” into a supportive and active organisation.

To actively seek for support by regional organisations.

To discuss the exact role of churches in state-church cooperation.

And finally, to discuss these initiatives collectively.

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