

Short Summary

Navigating Troubled Waters:

The Ecumenical Movement in the Pacific Islands since the 1980s

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Chapter 6: Nokise, Feleterika: Ecumenism in the Navigators' Archipelago – an elusive Reality: Samoa and American Samoa

The chapter treats both Samoa and American Samoa in one report, since there is a shared historical, ecclesiastical, and cultural background. It begins with an introduction to historical, religious, and cultural backgrounds.

The Polynesian islands of Samoa made first contact with Europeans and Christianity during the 18th and beginning 19th century. Before the following “religious upheaval”, a traditional and strongly locally rooted religion already existed. The introduction of Christianity, however, has not only changed the religious affiliation of Samoans, but has also included several elements of “Western civilization”, for example literacy, that have shaped the development of Samoa remarkably.

The chapter assesses that despite of the universal success of Christianisation in mere terms of conversion, the early competition between the different denominations has created a spirit of disunity that inhibits ecumenism until today. It furthermore indicates that the claim of the missionaries on universal societal transformation has undermined the original Samoan culture.

The imperial ambitions of the European powers also sparked a race for the domination over Samoa that ended in the partition of the islands into two parts: A Western Part under German occupation, today known as the independent state of Samoa (since 1962), and an Eastern part that is under the ultimate authority of the United States (American Samoa). Whereas the Germans, until the end of their occupation in 1914, and the Americans until today are considered to have made a remarkable effort to “understand the principles and values that defined and shaped the political life” of Samoans, the time of New Zealand’s rule was characterized by “resentment” and “arrogance”. In both Samoa and American Samoa,

the attempt to balance their traditional culture with Western influences remains a key struggle in Samoans' public and private life.

Each country is given an independent part on the Churches and Ecumenism since the 1980s. The first of the two parts deals with the history of Samoa.

Regarding the understanding of ecumenism, the chapter states that opinions vary, depending on involvement and position in ecumenism and the church. It indicates that a first group, Samoa's women, tend to have a practical and grounded understanding of ecumenism which is expressed, for example, in shared prayer and worship. Samoa's men, a second group, often hold more abstract views on ecumenism. Their diverse opinions might be summed up in a way that they emphasize the universal oneness of God that is to be sought. A third group, which is largely confined to church leaders, sees ecumenism more as a desirable goal that can be reached by cooperation, which will lead to the ultimate unity of churches. The chapter also indicates that this understanding does not include the grassroots-level but is limited to negotiations and exchange between high church officials.

The National Council of Churches is by far considered the most important contributor to ecumenism in Samoa. Despite of a general acknowledgment for the importance of ecumenism and a certain level of expectation towards the NCC, both its effectiveness in promoting ecumenical cooperation and its representative status are contested. Critics state that the NCC fails to address issues regarding the youth as well as other social issues that are currently not on top of the NCC's agenda. Furthermore, the chapter strongly indicates that there is neither sufficient dialogue on theological differences within KCC nor willingness to start a dialogue with other churches who are not yet a member of KCC. Additionally, the KCC is struggling with a lack of financial funding.

There is considerable cooperation with other ecumenical organisations in regards to theological education. CCCS and MCS have not only supported the foundation of both PCC and PTC, but still value the opportunities given by these ecumenical organisations, PTC in particular. There is also cooperation with different theological colleges and churches outside of Samoa. Ecumenism on village level exists only when initiated by higher institutions. However, author of the chapter Feleterika Nokise concludes that neither CCCS nor MCS can be called ecumenical churches due to a lack of "ecumenical theology".

The chapter names several issues and challenges facing ecumenism in Samoa. The first one to be mentioned in the chapter is financial constraints. The chapter indicates that there is a kind of vicious circle that includes poverty and financial dependency, which leads to insufficient financial support for first the churches and then the KCC, which ultimately prohibits the KCC from its task to address social issues - such as poverty. In combination with the previously mentioned lack of effectiveness in promoting ecumenical cooperation, the KCC is threatened by a growing loss of credibility. This includes a lack of faith in the leaders' ability to initiate and cooperate. Despite of willingness to strengthen cooperation with regional ecumenical bodies, there seem to be certain misunderstandings and disagreements

regarding financing and communication, especially between KCC and PCC. On grassroots level, the chapter assesses an overall lack of ecumenical spirit but positively highlights the example of women's fellowships' cooperation among each other, as well as their approaches on social issues, as a "model for what ecumenism can and should be in Samoa".

Regarding the appropriate ways to address these issues and challenges, however, author Feleterika Nokise assesses that there are hardly any efforts that work towards broader and more effective cooperation. Instead, he indicates that the churches are rather focusing on their doctrinal differences because this helps them to maintain their current position in society. However, it is also added that there is faith among interview partners in the potential of ecumenism to flourish if the churches were to promote it.

There seems to be "broad agreement" that the communication between NCC and PCC, respectively its member churches, and therefore in the end the communication between PCC and the member churches of NCC, currently suffers. However, it is not agreed on whether it is structural measures or different leaders that are needed if the communication is to be improved.

In regards to perspectives on ecumenism's future, the chapter concludes what it has already indicated in the previous sections: There is insufficient participation in ecumenical activities in Samoa, and even though there are some small successes, namely the cooperation with PCC and PTC as well as approaches to strengthen cooperation in theological education within Samoa itself, a remarkably new way of treating ecumenism is needed if this situation is to be reversed.

The chapter provides the same overview on churches and ecumenism since the 1980s about American Samoa in part two.

Whereas some interview partners refer to linguistic, biblical or cultural origins and backgrounds of the term when asked for their understanding of ecumenism, a broad majority highlights the universal relationships, particularly between churches, that are needed to actually live ecumenism and therefore fulfill the vision of a "Christian unity" that is "practiced in all spheres of society".

The state of ecumenism is mainly regarded in comparison to ecumenical cooperation in the 1980s. From this perspective, interview partners state that there is a decline in ecumenical cooperation. However, there is still not only a National Council of Churches (NCC), but also a basic commitment to ecumenism by various churches. Possible reasons, given by various interview partners, for the decline of ecumenism range from diverse changes in cultural and social environments to manifested doctrinal differences. The chapter emphasizes the need to "assess all of these factors" if ecumenism is to be revived.

Some of the issues and challenges for ecumenism in American Samoa are indicated quite precisely by the respective subheadings which author Feleterika Nokise has given to them: There is a lack of understanding of ecumenism, mainly because the existing one is often an egocentric one, there is a need to confront social ills, such as alcoholism and several forms of violence, and there is a lack of cooperation among church leaders, which tends to also stifle

ecumenism on lower levels. Ecumenism also needs to address prevailing identity crisis, caused by increased influence of previously foreign cultures, naturally American elements in particular. A decrease in church membership, which includes Youths “migrating [...] to the Pentecostal churches”, and insufficient support for educational and development programs exacerbate approaches on these challenges additionally.

The (regular) ecumenical cooperation on grassroots, national, and regional level is generally seen as a success for ecumenism in American Samoa. Especially the cooperation with and support for PCC and PTC is highlighted throughout this section. However, the chapter names various failures as well. Among a “lack of commitment [to the ecumenical idea] from member churches”, structural deficiencies in CCCAS’ missionary department, and certain failures of PCC that have been treated in greater detail in the Fiji country report, the chapter emphasizes that denominationalism and thus the inability of denominations to focus on commons rather than differences is often a severe obstacle to ecumenical cooperation.

In regards to perspectives on ecumenism’s future, the chapter states that there is not only an apparent lack of communication between the different levels of authority within churches, but also between regional and national bodies. Thus, the churches’ basis sometimes stays as misinformed about national activities as national leaders are about regional structures. A point that has been mentioned repeatedly throughout the chapter is taken up again, namely the fact that cooperation with partners overseas often stays limited to receiving financial funds instead of extending it to an equitable relationship of dialogue and exchange. It is also “common view” that these, respectively all, funds are intrinsically important if the ecumenical movement is to foster in the future. The dependency on funds from overseas should mitigate if possible. It is expressed that not only all churches should continue their work in NCC, but also that this body should try to include non-mainline denominations as well.

The chapter’s conclusion begins by referring to its heading: “Ecumenism is an elusive reality in the life and work of the churches”. There are regular ecumenical activities in both countries, but what misses is an overall comprehensive spirit of ecumenism that really calls for common expression of faith and change in its various dimensions.

The chapter recommends to conduct workshops that will strengthen every churches’ consciousness for ecumenism, to incorporate ecumenism in the churches’ structures, and to open up ecumenical dialogue with churches currently not involved in NCC.

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