

## Short Summary

### Navigating Troubled Waters:

### The Ecumenical Movement in the Pacific Islands since the 1980s

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## Chapter 7: Hamlyn, Glenine: Strongest in Crisis? Ecumenism in Solomon Islands

The Solomon Islands, a group of about 1000 islands which is located between PNG and Vanuatu, have gained independence on July 7, 1978. The economy is mainly dependent on subsistence agriculture, and the demography shows a large proportion of the population to be youths.

95% of the population are Christians, with five churches dominating the religious landscape: The Anglican Church of Melanesia (ACOM, 31,9%), the Roman Catholic Church (19,6%), the South Sea Evangelical Church (SSEC, 17,1%), the Seventh-day Adventist Church (SDA, 11,7%), and the United Church in Solomon Islands (UCSI, 10,1%). These churches are supplemented by several smaller, mainly Pentecostal churches.

The current situation in Solomon Islands has been largely influenced by the years between 1998 and 2003, the time of “the tension”. “The tension” was an ethnical conflict, including a political coup and a civil war, which has had lasting impact on the population in terms of violence, displacement and insecurity. The chapter states that the causes of “the tension” have not been “satisfactorily addressed” after the conflict had ended officially in 2003.

The chapter indicates that ecumenical cooperation, at least on institutional level, began with the foundation of the Solomon Islands Christian Association (SICA) in 1967, even though the organization included only the five mainline churches, and only the ACOM, the Catholic Church, and what is today the UCSI were full members. SICA had an instrumental role in giving both moral and material support for those who were most severely affected by “the tension”. Nowadays, SICA also includes a Federation of Women (SICAFOW) which allows women to address the currently most pressing matters via workshops, days of prayer or

other activities.

The chapter states that today, SICA suffers a serious crisis: Its facilities in the country's capital, Honiara, are not equipped sufficiently, there is a lack of financing, and people on both leadership and congregational level seem to have lost confidence in SICA's vision and work. There is willingness to maintain SICA in general, but those (few) ideas that are proposed by interviewees can apparently not be agreed on by all churches. In fact, the only way to solve the financial problem would be to raise the churches' contribution, which they currently can not afford. A proposal to include government funding has also been made but could so far not win sufficient support.

The most important role of SICA, as highlighted by interview partners, is to be a "prophetic voice" that strengthens the churches role and influence in Solomon Islands. However, SICA is not the only ecumenical organization in Solomon Islands: The Solomon Islands Full Gospel Association (SIFGA) gives all those churches which are not included in SICA, which are mainly Pentecostal Churches, an opportunity to express their own opinion. Unfortunately, cooperation between these two organizations is limited and there are complaints that SIFGA is not appropriately included in regional ecumenical processes and activities.

The different ways in which ecumenism is understood include not only the focus on a united Christian family, but also on its interconnection with issues happening outside of the churches, e.g. social issues. Reconciliation is named repeatedly as a matter of great importance for ecumenism.

The regional ecumenical bodies PTC, PCC and SPATS are all acknowledged in their importance. However, whereas PTC is particularly highlighted in sight of its huge contribution to culturally ecumenical learning, there are complains about a lack of communication and governance by PCC, and SPATS is often not really known to interview partners. As in many other pacific countries, many interview partners consider the structure of regional bodies and their respective responsibilities to be confusing, with some of them favoring a "joint governance body".

The churches' "peacemaking role" during "the tension", the cooperation with PTC and several ecumenical meetings or events of exchange are considered the biggest successes of ecumenism by interview partners. However, especially the "dysfunctional state of SICA" is largely considered a major failure. This includes failures to improve the situation of people on grassroots level, an insufficient connection to it, and a lack of genuine attempts to "speak up" against social wrongs in Solomon Islands.

The chapter names several challenges for ecumenism in Solomon Islands.

First of all, the proliferation of New Religious Groups (NRGs) has made the religious landscape in Solomon Islands more complex. The chapter indicates that the structure of the mainline churches does not respond to people's needs according to the changes brought by current developments. For example, in services they focus on men rather than women despite of the fact that it is women who tend to go to church more frequently, and they seem to fail at giving people a comforting structure in times of changing social pattern and

rules.

Second, churches seem to prefer members of their own church as staff which inhibits their progress in terms of both skills and ecumenical learning.

Third, the chapter indicates that church leaders are not able to approach social and environmental issues sufficiently, and the fact that only few women are being ordained deprives the churches of enormous potential for better leadership.

Fourth, the Solomon Islands churches are challenged by their relationships with overseas partners, more precisely by the task of how to maintain their cultural independency in the light of the following inner conflict: The churches see themselves threatened by the growing financial influence from overseas because it might undermine their own culture, since donors understandably have an interest in knowing what the money is used for and could therefore end up imposing their own structural processes on SI cultures. Yet at the same time, the SI churches do not want to merely make use of the money but are willing to embrace the donors as equal partners in a relationship of mutual sharing and learning which unavoidably involves cooperating with them on more than just financial level.

Additionally, ecumenism in Solomon Islands is confronted with several political, economic, and environmental challenges.

Regarding the phenomenon of corruption, one of the interview partners argues that it is not the individual politician alone whose moral imperfection causes him to be corrupt, but rather the interplay with cultural expectancies that causes so many cases of corruption. Globalization has impacts on Solomon Islands as well, particularly through multinational logging and mining respectively the unequal distribution of profits. Land disputes are an additional issue, being one of the main reasons for people to move – not only in terms of physical relocation, but also in terms of a reconsideration of their belonging to a certain church. In a nutshell, people can change their religious affiliation due to these land disputes. A proposal that has already been made to the public suggests that tracing back land ownership could help solve this problem.

Climate change affects low-lying areas in Solomon Islands as it does in any other Pacific country, and there is awareness for the upcoming issue of climate refugees from other Pacific states.

The chapter indicates that violence against women is a particularly serious problem. Despite of slow changes in attitudes and behavior, the idea of a patriarchal society is rooted deeply in Solomon Island culture and thus requires “fundamental attitudinal change”. The fact that this problem applies to almost every Solomon Island context, while a vast majority of Solomon Islanders is Christian, makes this issue in particular one that calls for an ecumenical response by all churches.

Youth also faces several problems, ranging from unemployment over alcoholism to early pregnancy. Additionally, there is a cultural conflict between youths and older generation that derives from changes rapid enough to break traditional norms and customs, which clearly creates a serious distance between the two groups.

Last but not least, the Solomon Island churches are also challenged by the various issues

“impacting on the pacific region as a whole”, which includes diverse effects of post-colonialism as well as all forms of inequality and violence.

Interview partners express a general optimism that ecumenical cooperation will not cease in near future, neither on grassroots, nor on interchurch level. A lot of it might depend on how future church leaders include women in particular and generally manage to maintain their church’s connection and cooperation with SICA and regional organizations.

The chapter concludes that , despite of an existing willingness to get into dialogue and simultaneously getting active in combined strength, the main body to channel these attempts, SICA, does not experience sufficient support and additionally fails to cast forth the spirit needed to promote cooperation and progress. There is lack of communication, a lack of financing, and women in general are largely excluded from the ecumenical movement in male-dominated churches. The chapter phrases the need to raise a shared voice to both government and people, regarding the challenges named in the previous section, and the need to support women and youth in their efforts to get involved ecumenically. There is also a need for dialogue between SICA and SIFGA. The chapter calls upon the churches to listen and respond to the voices of the people at the congregational level. The chapter recommends some very detailed suggestions concerning the structure of SICA that can be extracted from the original book.

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