

## Short Summary

### Navigating Troubled Waters:

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

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### Chapter 9: Glenine, Hamlyn: Ecumenical Relations in Vanuatu: How to bridge the divides

The around 80 islands of Vanuatu are located between the Solomon Islands and Fiji. Due to several geographic features, the country is challenged in terms of infrastructure and environmental catastrophes. Additionally, social, economic and cultural spaces are changing so swiftly that the churches are considered to be existentially threatened by the challenge to face these changes.

Vanuatu, then known as the New Hebrides, has been a British-French colonial condominium from 1906 to 1960. After gaining independence, it became a parliamentary democracy. However, traditional customs are still reflected in the advisory role of the National Council of Chiefbrings as well as the pressure of parliamentary representatives to not only respond to the needs of the whole people, but the electors in their constituents in particular.

The economy depends mainly on agricultural exports, but China and other Asian countries are “investing heavily” in the country. This poses the risk of growing dependence on powers from overseas. The religious landscape is dominated by the Presbyterian Church of Vanuatu (27,9%), the Anglican Church of Melanesia (15%), the Seventh-day Adventist Church (12,5%), the Roman Catholic Church (12,3%), and several minor (less than 5%) churches.

The chapter gives an overview about churches and ecumenism since the 1980s. It states that the ecumenical movement has been particularly strong in advocacy of Vanuatu’s independence from colonial rule but began to decline in the decade after independence. However, there is a Vanuatu Council of Churches (VCC) and an ecumenical college, Talua Ministry Training College.

Recently, there has been growing influence by civil society organizations (CSO’s) who seek

partnerships with churches to tackle social issues. However, critics state that these relationships are unequal, and they also warn that growing influence of the government in these partnerships tends to undermine the churches independence.

Most interview partners express their understanding of ecumenism as one that focuses on the importance to build a “visible unity”, a unity in the things that are done together. These things all share that they promote dialogue and relationships between denominations. They can include conversations, sharing of faith, approaches on social issues, and sharing resources.

The previously mentioned VCC is considered to be the “predominant structural expression of ecumenical relations in Vanuatu”. It experiences support in full membership or observer status by all relevant churches of Vanuatu, but not all churches are fully committed to its work. This inhibits its potential for the promotion of change intrinsically: Interviewees state that the government will only pay attention to a claim that has been raised by all churches, not only one. Additionally, many member churches seem to be struggling financially themselves which naturally affects the finances of VCC directly.

At grassroots level, most churches are engaged in local councils that are able to hold weekly meetings and seem to cooperate well. However, this is still contrasted by most churches’ fears to lose members to other churches which creates distrust and inhibits this cooperation. On regional level, VCC is part of PCC. The role of PTC is generally acknowledged and even valued very highly in terms of the difference which can be made by PTC graduates. However, the chapter strongly indicates that VCC is not always reached by all information send by PCC. The contribution of PTC’s sub-bodies IRSA and GPP, now merged together into IMR, are also held in very high esteem among interview partners.

Regarded as successes in the ecumenical movement are all forms of practical cooperation, the different occasions in which the churches raised a shared voice (e.g. independence and nuclear testing) and various forms of formal or informal education received through local or regional schools and initiatives. Perceived failures on local level, however, include those occasions in which the churches did not raise their “prophetic voice”, a lack of purposefully created spaces for youths and women, and insufficient understanding of ecumenism beyond leadership level.

The chapter assesses four main challenges for ecumenism in Vanuatu.

First, youth unemployment and related problems. Youths are struggling to gain sufficient education and thus compete fiercely for jobs. However, they are additionally exposed to a growing dissolution of their traditional environment, being reflected for example in technology abuse and early pregnancies. Many youths try to “escape” unemployment by taking drugs, and serious alternatives to these vicious circles seldom prove to be effective.

Second, the particularly dominant problem of violence against women and related issues. Violence within families is very high (60% of women in a life-long relationship have

experienced physical and/or sexual violence by their partner), but these cases are mostly not being talked about. Most women and men think that these matters should be settled within a family, which leads to the obvious exclusion of help from outside, e.g. the churches. There is support for commitment to gender equality, but it is also confronted with resistance by both opposing individuals and the difficulty of structurally changing society. There is widespread belief that currently existing and future efforts need coordination by VCC. Third, there is a weakness of leadership. According to Rev. Rakau, the underlying reason for this is that the best qualified leaders mainly decide to accept offers from the government instead of going to the churches. Especially youths wish for strong leadership which guides them in their own efforts. Additionally, some of the interviewed women state that the current church leaders sometimes fail to relate to social realities on grassroots levels. Women in leadership positions are almost non-existing, even though they might contribute to rising awareness for the rights of minorities. Fourth, new religious groups and church divisions pose a serious challenge on social cohesion.

The chapter regards the current advent of “new churches, para-churches and other religious groups” in Vanuatu very critically. There is evidence that the growing fragmentation of religious affiliation causes divisions within communities or even families because the church activities which are attended by different members are not the same anymore. Strategies to address this situation include VCC’s cooperation with the government, attempts to include the new churches, and paying more attention to a church’s own youth (it is youths who are mainly attracted to the new churches). Another contributing factor are divisions arising within the VCC churches themselves: This appears to be mainly due to a small number of people who do not follow their churches advice to avoid doctrinal differences in their preaching as well as arguments over non-church related issues within a church.

Further challenges to ecumenism are mainly social issues that need to be addressed by the churches. They include many collectively organized communities’ increasing perpetuation by capitalist economic strategies, environmental issues like climate change and deep sea-bed mining, and foreign investors who in long term view threaten to undermine the traditional system of land owning and using. The chapter furthermore assesses that VCC tends to be “reluctant to criticize the government” due to their close collaboration in certain areas.

The chapter concludes that there are sufficient ideas on the favored ecumenical structure. Purpose of Vanuatu’s ecumenical structure is to provide spaces for churches to get into dialogue, unfold their potential according to all of their resources, and to form a collaborative unit that is capable to address both the government and social issues with a shared and “prophetic” voice.

However, there are no concrete suggestions on how to finance VCC accordingly.

At grassroots level, ecumenical relations are generally seen to be healthy, but understanding of ecumenism is very limited. Since church leaders also stress the importance of ecumenism, this indicates that there “is a gap” between leadership and grassroots level in the extend of

their understanding of ecumenism, and the chapter suggests that this gap also includes a lack of understanding on leadership level for the needs (of women and youths in particular) at local level. This in turn obviously indicates a general lack of communication between the different levels.

The concluding chapter also sets up the question for the appropriate extend of agreeing on a common identity. It assesses that the diversity of denominations within VCC are highly ambiguous, due to the fact that it has yet to be answered whether this still reflects a model of unity in diversity, or has already gone beyond that and rather shows a lack of common identity.

The chapter furthermore concludes that prevailing violence against women imposes a restriction to the churches' capacities because it prevents valuable resources from unfolding.

The issue should be addressed in a common approach with respect to current culture. Despite of a common view that PCC "is suffering from a lack of vision and direction", the need for "regional ecumenical presence" is generally acknowledged. A key role of this presence, currently reflected in the regional institutions SPATS as well as particularly PCC and PTC, is considered to be the provision of resources for the different pacific islands.

The chapter recommends to strengthen youths and women by increased attempts to develop more understanding of their situations as well as provision of leadership programs. VCC is encouraged to take action on land issues by initiating "measures of conflict prevention", and it is also encouraged to support research programs which are seeking for alternative biblical interpretations in regards to equality between men and women. Rev. Cliff Bird studies are highlighted as possible resource for this.

It is suggested to evaluate possible measures on a successful coexistence of doctrinally very diverse denominations.

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