



# Pacific Conference of Churches

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## Peace in the Pacific

### **The Much Maligned Tracks: the Keys to Solve the Ecological Crisis**

### **Genesis 1 – 2**

Rev. Francois Pihaatae

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### **Psalm 85, 10 – 11:**

*<sup>10</sup> Love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other.*

*<sup>11</sup> Truth springs forth from the earth, and righteousness looks down from heaven.'*

## **Introduction**

Thank you to Christian World Service for this opportunity to share with you some thoughts on issues of peace in our region of the Pacific. I hope that what will be shared will contribute to the purpose of this conference or to the analysis of peace issues in our Pacific region.

Peace, quite aside from its spiritual or theological meaning, simply means a state of right relationship, where the following are in existence in our societies: distributive and retributive forms of justice; compassion and care for the weak and the powerless in society; a high sense of responsibility for one another and to ensure leadership accountability; and equally important, good stewardship of the natural environment. What I have briefly described may seem the ideal. In fact, and this is a very important point, the state of peace that I have described is really premised on an ecological framework, that for most part of our history as Pacific communities and until at least the last 150 years, governs our development and relationships. The point is that if we discard that sort of ecological framework as totally irrelevant today, especially in addressing the ecological and developmental crisis that we are now facing, our solutions and remedies may become obstacles and may be problems themselves in the future.

The general idea of this presentation, therefore, is that peace and its sustainability depend largely on our understanding of what the 'ecology' is, its framework and ecological well-being.

## **Definitions**

It is proper, before venturing further into this presentation, to briefly describe what 'ecology' means to most Pacific Island communities. 'Ecology' as understood by most Pacific indigenous communities and the Biblical narrative is both the relationship among the people in a community, and their relationship with their natural environment.<sup>1</sup> The well-being and wholeness of these myriad relationships are

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<sup>1</sup> The word *ecology* is derived from root word "oikos" meaning home, dwelling, inhabited house. It is made up of two Greek words: Eco (oikos) and logy (logos). Hence, ecology means 'the word of the home' or 'the study of the way things relate and are integrated to make the home work'. Cliff Bird, in his researched paper titled *Economics, Ecology and Poverty: Some Thoughts from Oceania* in 2009, highlighted clearly the link between what he calls the 'brown agenda' (poverty) and the

therefore, dependent on the ethics, values and practices that govern them. So if there is bad political and community governance, and lack of justice, the consequences are likely to be seen in how the community treats their natural environment, and the stewardship of their land and sea resources. Conversely, if there is a lack of appreciation of the natural environment and its vital role in and contribution to the well-being and wholeness of the community, then the costs are reflected somehow in how the community governs itself, treatment of its people, sharing of its resources and its dispense of justice.

For most Pacific societies, particularly the indigenous and religious communities, 'ecology' means much more than the natural environment. Like the term '*vanua*' in Fijian 'fonua' or 'fenua' in other Pacific terms which means land, people and the sea, and the myriad relationships and the norms that govern and link them into a web of sustaining life and meaning. Ecology is also about their existing ecological frameworks that guide their relationship among themselves, and with their environment. Much of this framework relates to how the community is to relate with their natural environment, i.e., how they are to observe the governing norms on the use of the land, forest and marine resources.

These frameworks also provide guidelines on the development projects of the community, the care of the poor among them and community governance, and also on the use and conservation of food sources and types of food, some of which are culturally sanctioned through ceremonial means, such as the type of food that should be presented in formal occasions, for example, yams and pigs in some countries in Melanesia and Polynesia or the Turtle in some parts of Fiji. The point is that in most Pacific indigenous communities, there is always in existence an interdependent view of the human person's place in creation and their reliance on the natural environment to provide sustenance and conversely their responsibility to protect and conserve.

## **Peaceful issues and implications**

Much has been discussed, researched and reported on the impacts of climate change and the ecological crisis, and their links to development theories and practices which are driven by economic theories and models that in essence, says that development means '*more and more*', and on the ethic that says that the '*good life*' means '*more is better*'. Consequently, Pacific societies are becoming more and more consumer oriented. But this is no less than other countries and regions of the world. However, what is peculiarly sad in the Pacific is the progressive abandonment of our ecological frameworks (knowledge, ethics and practices) that for so long helped our people to survive through centuries, as legitimate ways to deal with the fissures in the ecological framework today. To put it simply, our social context today is basically a crisis of our ecological frameworks. Some of the key ecological (and development) issues are as follow.

- *Nuclear impacts and militarisation of the Pacific.* Since the late 1940s and early 60s until 1996, the Pacific region, especially the islands in the Marshall Islands (Bikini), Maohi Nui (Moruroa and Fagataufa) and Kiribati (Christmas Island) were used for nuclear testing by the US, France and Great Britain. This involved the evacuation and the displacement of people from these islands to other islands within these countries. While nuclear testing has stopped, the nuclear fallout continues to haunt many of our people from these countries to this day, including our seas and marine life. Getting compensation for these impacts has been a most difficult process. However, since then, the militarisation of the Pacific intensified and to this day, it has not abated. The presence of RAMSI in the Solomon Islands, the militarisation of the Fiji civil service and diplomatic postings, the continual atrocities in West Papua, the rise in security services for mining companies in PNG and Bougainville, and lately the removal of a community of people in the islands of Tinian and Pagan (the former has a population of 3,000 people) for US military

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'green agenda' (environment). What is also notable in his presentation is that the words 'economics' and 'ecology' are intimately linked because they are from the same Greek root word 'oikos' which means home or household.

exercise<sup>2</sup>. Guam is set to receive close to 5,000 US military service men and women once their base in Okinawa in Japan is closed.<sup>3</sup>

- *Resource extraction and its impact on the environment and the communities has been a growing concern among Pacific countries especially land mining (and lately seabed mining), depleting fish stocks, and deforestation:* Land mining is not new in some Pacific island countries, especially in Melanesia: Fiji with its gold and copper mines, and more recently bauxite and black sand mining; the Solomon Islands with its gold mining; Bougainville and PNG with their gold and copper mining, Nauru with phosphate mining that collapsed in 2000, and Kanaky (New Caledonia) with its nickel mines. The latest is sea-bed exploration and mining<sup>4</sup>. Associated with these developments, is the subsequent damage to the natural environment, the loss of topsoil, clearing of bush land, and ecosystems. Consequently, what we can say at this point is that extractive industries and ecological degradation are somehow related and seem to reinforce each other in a vicious cycle of impoverishment (both social and ecological). Such ecological and social changes, in the main, are driven by the notion that growth means more and more. Hence, one of the moral challenges of today is the view that the environment or nature is nothing more than a resource at the disposal of human needs and wants. This is one of the fundamental potential conflicts between current development theory and practice, and our Pacific ecological frameworks.
- *Poverty is an on-going concern in the social context of the Pacific island countries where figures range from 31% of the population in Fiji, 30% in Samoa and 28% in Papua New Guinea, to 13% in Vanuatu<sup>5</sup>.* Numerous studies (by various financial institutions, governmental aid agencies and NGOs) have been done and much money and skills are being invested in research and more research and strategies and projects to address poverty. While these are necessary for government policy on poverty and development, most studies, strategies and projects, in the main, are fundamentally to affirm the worsening poverty situations in the Pacific, and that the remedies, in the main, are more and more development projects such as resource extraction (land mining and lately seabed mining), agriculture, housing, forestry and fisheries, and income generation projects and small business schemes. Unless the fundamentals of development are critiqued and changed, the solutions may turn out to be problems themselves.
- *The health (or unhealthy) situation in most island countries is a grave concern. In 2010, it was reported 8 out of 10 deaths were caused by non-communicable diseases (NCDs).* Recently in Fiji, for example, it has been reported that 8 out of every 10 people have NCDs. In fact, it is regarded today in the Pacific as the highest cause of death and the biggest drain on national budgets. The World Health Organisation (WHO) noted that “about 40% of the Pacific island region’s population of 9.7 million has been diagnosed with a non-communicable disease, notably cardiovascular disease, diabetes and hypertension”<sup>6</sup>. At their 2011 meeting in Auckland, the Pacific Islands Forum leaders acknowledged that the NCD situation was a crisis, saying that an

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<sup>2</sup> RT, *Guam, Marianas brace for massive US military redeployment*, <https://www.rt.com/usa/323189-guam-marine-base-secret/> Accessed 25.10.2016

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> A recent research report titled *Resource Roulette – How Deep Sea Mining and Inadequate Regulatory Frameworks Imperils the Pacific and its People* was produced and launched by Blue Ocean Law and the Pacific Network on Globalisation in June 2016. It is an analysis of the policy frameworks that govern sea bed mining in the Pacific and provided substantial critique of the frameworks produced by the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC). The report also highlighted the absence of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) of local communities, and conversely the obligatory need to do so, and the compromised stances of the European Union on climate change on the one hand and its pursuit of neo-liberal economic development options on the other.

<sup>5</sup> *Poverty in the Pacific*. Oxfam New Zealand. <https://www.oxfam.org.nz/what-we-do/where-we-work/poverty-in-the-pacific> Accessed 26.7.2016

<sup>6</sup> *Pacific islanders pay heavy price for abandoning traditional diet*. World Health Organisation. <http://www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/88/7/10-010710/en/> Accessed 2 August 2016.

epidemic of chronic lifestyle diseases such as diabetes, heart failure and cancer is undermining economic development and has placed the region in an NCD crisis<sup>7</sup>. In part, this situation stems from the dramatic change in the diets and eating habits of Pacific people, and the changing nature of work. In part, the change in the eating habits and nature of work are consequential impacts of current developmental policy and practice, driven largely by neo-liberal capitalism and its view of human life.

- *Environmental degradation is in part a consequence of choice in the form of development theory and practices that the Pacific countries adopted. In part, it is also attributed to the growing consumerism in the Pacific and to what Pope Francis calls our ‘throw away’ culture today.* It is estimated that Samoa, for example, generates around 0.4kg waste per person every day and with a population of 195,000, around 90,000kg of waste is generated every day<sup>8</sup>. In Honiara, Solomon Islands, it is estimated that the total solid waste generated per person per day is between 0.75–1.0 kilogram (kg) and with a population of about around 80,000 and a waste generation rate of 1.0 kg/person/day, the Honiara urban area is estimated to generate 80 tons per day or 29,000 tons per year.<sup>9</sup> In varying degrees, similar scenarios exist across the Pacific. Plastics are proffered as the biggest polluter of the Pacific Ocean, which is estimated to be about 7 million tons of weight (twice the size of PNG) and up to 9 feet deep.<sup>10</sup> The real challenge, however, and as Charles Moore puts it, “... is to combat an economic model that thrives on wasteful products and packaging, and leaves the associated problem of clean-up costs.”<sup>11</sup>
- *It is projected that the impacts of climate change will drastically affect local sources of livelihoods such as food and water, and their security.* In particular, key future impacts are related to extended periods of drought and, on the other hand, loss of soil fertility and degradation as a result of increased precipitation, both of which will negatively impact on agriculture and food security. Scientific studies state that in the absence of adaptation, a high island such as Fiji could experience damage of USD 23 million to 52 million per year by 2050.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, fisheries contribute significantly to GDP (Gross Domestic Product) and rural poor livelihood on many of the Pacific Islands; consequently the socio-economic implications of the impact of climate change on fisheries are likely to be important and would exacerbate other anthropogenic stresses such as over-fishing. For example, more intense tropical cyclones and rise in sea surface will negatively impact inshore fisheries and food supply, especially in rural areas. Added to the above, a consequence of rising sea levels and frequency and severity of cyclones is resettlement of populations. It is estimated that by 2050, in the worst-case scenario, 0.6 million people in the Pacific will face resettlement associated with climate change across the region<sup>13</sup>.
- *The level of violence against women in the Pacific is among the highest in the world, according to a Fiji Times report.* The UNIFEM statistics cited in the Fiji Times article noted that there were as high as 85% in some countries with regional studies showing that in Fiji, 80% of women went

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<sup>7</sup> *Pacific NCD Crisis.* Secretariat of the Pacific Community. <http://www.spc.int/library/774-pacific-ncd-crisis.html> Accessed 22 July 2016.

<sup>8</sup> *Samoa, Japan Work Together To Minimize Waste.* Samoa Observer. <http://www.pireport.org/articles/2016/05/18/samoa-japan-work-together-minimize-waste> Accessed 26 July 2016.

<sup>9</sup> *Solid Waste Management in the Pacific, Solomon Islands Country Snapshot.* Asian Development Bank Publication Stock No. ARM146614-2 June 2014.

<sup>10</sup> *Garbage Patch – The Great Pacific Garbage Patch and other pollution issues.* Garbagepatch.net. <http://garbagepatch.net/greatpacificoceanpatchfacts/> Accessed 28 July 2016

<sup>11</sup> *Choking the Oceans with Plastics.* New York Times. [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/26/opinion/choking-the-oceans-with-plastic.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/26/opinion/choking-the-oceans-with-plastic.html?_r=0) Accessed 27 July 2016.

<sup>12</sup> *Climate Change Impacts – Pacific Islands.* The Global Mechanism (United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification) and IFAD. <https://www.ifad.org/documents/10180/9054c140-a03c-4c6e-ae9e-ab9d7972dd19> Accessed 26 July 2016.

<sup>13</sup> *On the Front Line of Climate Change and displacement - Learning from and with Pacific Island Countries.* The Brookings Institute – London School of Economics. [http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/reports/2011/9/idp-climate-change/09\\_idp\\_climate\\_change.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/reports/2011/9/idp-climate-change/09_idp_climate_change.pdf) Accessed 28 July 2016

through some form of violence in the home. In the Solomon Islands, 55% of women in the country reported experiencing sexual partner violence and 37% of women reported sexual abuse before the age of 15.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, 68% of i-Kiribati women reported experiencing at least one act of physical or sexual violence, or both, by an intimate partner, and in Samoa, 46% of women who have ever been in a relationship have experienced one or more kinds of partner abuse. Gender based violence reflects systemic power inequities in social relations.<sup>15</sup> These power inequities are further exacerbated by deteriorating social relations linked to poverty, economic exploitation, poor education and drug and alcohol abuse.

- *The struggle for self-determination continues in some Pacific Island nations, with Kanaky (New Caledonia), Maohi Nui (French Polynesia) and West Papua still living under colonial rule.* In 2013 the UN Committee on Decolonisation (C24) approved a resolution reinforcing the inalienable right to self-determination of the people of Maohi Nui. In 2015, West Papua was accepted as an Observer with the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG), while Indonesia was accepted as an associate member. The Pacific Islands Forum Countries (PIFCs), the political inter-government body of most Island states, at its latest meeting agreed to keep it on its agenda but preferred that it be an issue for dialogue with Indonesia.<sup>16</sup> Subsequently, Vanuatu, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Tuvalu, Tonga, Kiribati and the Solomon Islands took the issue of Indonesia's human rights abuses to the recent UN Assembly, urging the UN to take an active role in it.<sup>17</sup> In 2018, Kanaky will be holding its referendum on whether to remain with France or move into a self-governing, autonomous state. Stable and accountable forms of political governance is necessary to the health of small island countries and their people, and good leadership is needed to ensure justice, human rights, a fair distribution of resources, and ensuring the participation of women and youth.

The above brief analysis makes the point that the ecological and developmental crisis is not simply about the environment, global warming and climate change. It is fundamentally about the whole of life and the linkages between the human community, development and the environment. It points out the uncomfortable scenario that the crisis the world and in particular, the Pacific, is facing today cannot be solved by scientific and technical knowledge, and more and more money, alone; it urgently needs the contribution of our Pacific ecological frameworks (knowledge, ethics, and good practices) to finding sustainable solutions to our developmental issues. It is not simply about global warming and climate change as such but our unchecked intrusion, often driven by greed for wealth and power, into the delicate balance of the natural environment; from indiscriminate logging and mining to over, unhealthy and wasteful-consumption. The disturbing, yet challenging lesson is that the Pacific and more so for the Christian churches, cannot afford to deny the gravity of the emerging ecological (and developmental) crisis. In religious language, as Ed Ayers writes, "*God has given us an offer: to see the consequences of our actions and assume moral responsibility for them, or to be consumed by them.*"<sup>18</sup> This is an offer that the faith-based communities in the Pacific cannot afford to ignore.

## The much maligned tracks

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<sup>14</sup> *Level of Violence against Women in Pacific among Highest in the World.* Fiji Times.

<http://www.fijitimes.com.fj/story.aspx?id=141618> Accessed 8 March, 2010. See also the UN Women report published in 2010 titled *Ending Violence Against Women and Girls*. Evidence, Data & Knowledge in Pacific Island Countries. Literature Review and Annotated Bibliography, August 2010

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> *Pacific Leaders Vow To Take Up West Papua Cause At UN.* Pacific Islands Report.

<http://www.pireport.org/articles/2016/09/15/pacific-leaders-vow-take-west-papua-cause-un> Accessed 1 October 2016.

<sup>17</sup> *Solomon Islands, Vanuatu Condemn Human Rights Abuses In West Papua.* Pacific Islands Report.

<http://www.pireport.org/articles/2016/06/23/solomon-islands-vanuatu-condemn-human-rights-abuses-west-papua> Accessed 1 October 2016. There been other Pacific Islands countries that spoke as well in support.

<sup>18</sup> Cf., Leonardo Boff's *Calling In Multiple Ecological Debts* in *Sacred Earth, Sacred Community: Jubilee, Ecology & Aboriginal Peoples*, Toronto: Canadian Ecumenical Jubilee Initiative, 2000, pg147

Yet, despite the scenario sketched above, there is still a certain unwillingness to commit to change, a change of lifestyle and development policy and practice. Part of the problem is our inability to trust the validity of our own Pacific ecological frameworks to guide our current discourses on what we are to do with the ecological and developmental crisis that is now at hand, mainly because they lack relevance to economic development and lack technical applications. Moreover, past and recent history of conflicts has not been kind to Christianity's involvement in politics. While this is so, especially where forms of Christian interpretations have given legitimacy to political led conflicts and wars, brutal oppression, colonial enterprises, the exploitation of resources, racial divisiveness and hatred, and the continual subjugation of women, there is also much, yet not often tried, that their ecological frameworks may very well enable the changes that we desperately need to address the ecological crisis.

The Pacific is not lacking in such ecological frameworks. In fact, these may very well be the recourse the Pacific people need at this time to address the devastating impacts of global warming and the dire consequences of the current development model. It is what Pope Francis calls 'integral ecology'; to search out the deeper interconnections between environmental destruction and development theories<sup>19</sup> and the political forces and interests that drive it. We need to take the view that the ecological and developmental problems mentioned above can be arrested or worked through intelligently but it will need a fundamental review of our own understanding of what we mean by ecology.

One of the key concepts, while religious in origin but has much alignment with indigenous understanding of 'custodianship', is **stewardship**. This is crucial to understand. In its broad meaning, stewardship is about the care of people and the care of the environment. This concept is based on an understanding that 'ecology' is the way things relate and are integrated to make the 'home' work. It is the proper and prudent management of the home. In the Pacific, the home means and includes the natural environment, and the norms that govern a community's relationship with it, as stated above. Therefore, addressing the ecological and developmental issues, by implication, also means addressing the ecological frameworks of Pacific island communities, and their leadership and governance issues. Creation is God's gift to humanity and as such, we are not absolute owners but custodians of God's gift. The task is to articulate and advocate habits of prudent stewardship and ecological well-being, which is mandatory in ensuring the ecological well-being and wholeness of our people.

Great responsibility, then, lies with the religious and the indigenous communities in the Pacific. This will require great courage, and perhaps something more than courage: a candid admission that, more than at any time in the past, we need to search – each indigenous community and each religious faith community in their own way – for a way of living with, and acknowledging the integrity of the natural environment. When indigenous and religious beliefs are invoked as justifications for ecological degradation, they must also raise their voices in protest. They must withhold the robe of sanctity when indigenous and religious beliefs are sought as cloaks for violence, degradation and destruction of our ecological well-being and wholeness.

I believe we have entered this new century whose trajectory is radically unpredictable. And the very freedoms we value make it so. However, I would argue that we have intellectual and moral resources in our ecological frameworks that should enable us to cope with the ecological (and developmental) crisis. The most important is a moral vision and we need such a moral template today. What a moral vision restores to our society is the idea of responsibility – that what we do, individually and collectively, makes a difference, and that the future lies in our hands.

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<sup>19</sup> Cliff Bird, in his presentation, titled *Economics, Ecology and Poverty: Some Thoughts from Oceania* in 2009, highlighted clearly the link between what he calls the 'brown agenda' (poverty) and the 'green agenda' (environment). What is also notable in his presentation is that the words 'economics' and 'ecology' are from the same Greek root word 'oikos' which means home or household.

Every era has produced its own cosmic view to show that what has happened could not have been otherwise; that it is useless to believe that we can fight against fate. All that can be done is to align ourselves to its flow, exploit it when we can, and render ourselves indifferent to our fate when we cannot. It is what Thomas Friedman calls the “golden straitjacket”.<sup>20</sup> There is no choice but to join and live or stand aloof and perish. This way of thinking is a regression to a view of the universe that is very ancient, yet still prevalent today in economics and development theories and practices, but which we don’t need when our ecological well-being and wholeness is at stake.

Our indigenous and religious leaders can no longer assume that nothing has changed in the condition of our people, nor governments, aid donors and CSOs continue to ignore the significant and relevancy of indigenous and religious frameworks. Something has changed; our power for good and evil, and the sheer reach and consequences of our interventions. We have come face to face with the ‘ecological crisis’, and it makes all the difference whether we find this threatening or enriching. What this means is that each of us who belong to an indigenous community, a religious faith or none must wrestle with our own ecological frameworks.

## Conclusion

The crux of what I am trying to say is that indigenous and religious ecological frameworks, the much maligned tracks, can actually be the resources we need to address the ecological developmental crisis in the Pacific. This is a challenge that it will require fundamental changes to our developmental and lifestyle ethics. Peace, therefore, is predicated on this!

Thank you all for listening!

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Rev. Francois Pihaatae  
General Secretary

### *A Future Not Our Own*

*It helps now and then to step back and take a long view. The Kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is beyond our vision.*

*We accomplish in our lifetime only a fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us.*

*No statement says all that could be said. No prayer fully expresses our faith. No confession brings perfection, no pastoral visit brings wholeness. No program accomplishes the Church's mission. No set of goals and objectives include everything.*

*This is what we are about. We plant the seeds that one day will grow. We water the seeds already planted knowing that they hold future promise. We lay foundations that will need further development. We provide yeast that produces effects far beyond our capabilities.*

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<sup>20</sup> *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, London: HarperCollins, 2000, pp101-11

*We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing this. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.*

*We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.*

*We are workers, not master builders, ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own. Amen.*