

Writing A New Chapter In Our Ecumenical Journey's Story

Moderator's to the Pacific Conference of Churches 11th General Assembly

Tuingapapai-Auckland, New Zealand

October, 2018

Acknowledgements and Introduction

I pay my respects, first and foremost to God for his love and presence; and to the custodians of the soil on which I stand – the indigenous people of this land. I deeply acknowledge the graciousness of the people of this land, its customs and traditions, with the firm belief that nothing is more spiritual than one's ancestral home as the dwelling place of God since ancient times to today and will be forever.

I also warmly greet you the Presidents, Moderators, Archbishops and Bishops, and the delegates and representatives of your churches to the 11th General Assembly of the Pacific Conference of Churches in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Warm greetings and welcome to our assembly's invited guests, representatives of the partners and civil society organizations, and to those who come to attend out of interest and concern.

I acknowledge the various churches congregations here in Auckland: (Our main hosts: the Methodist family in Auckland; *Faafetai tele and Vinaka Vakalevu, Malo 'Aupito*), and to the rest of our family here and your contributions to making this meeting possible: the Ekalesia Kelisiano Tuvalu, the Cook Islands Christian Church, the Etaritia Poretetani Maohi, the Kiribati Uniting Church, the Congregational Church of Samoa, the Presbyterian Church in Aotearoa, and the Anglican Diocese of Polynesia. On behalf of the PCC member churches, I wish to extend to your congregations and your leaders our profound gratitude for opening your doors and sharing your wealth in hosting the assembly delegates. May God bless your congregations and your leaders most abundantly.

This 11th General Assembly marks a turning point in the history and journey of our regional ecumenical movement. This is the second assembly since we celebrated the 50th birthday of Pacific ecumenism at Malua, Samoa in 2011, and after the Honiara one in 2013. Much of this report is my own reflections on ecumenism since we took office in 2014. Ecumenism in our region peaked in the late 1970s to early 1990s. Fifty years of our ecumenical journey and it is about time we write a new chapter in our ecumenical story

and journey. In the next few pages I wish to insist on this. We owed much to our forefathers and mothers in setting us off with a vision of Christian unity, which gave us the three regional ecumenical institutions we currently have – PCC, PTC and SPATS. Many of us benefitted much from their enterprises – trained pastors, academics and ecumenical learning. But that chapter has been read and we all know the twists and turns.

The mandate for Christian unity will, no doubt, remain for as long as there are churches and Christians around because Jesus Christ frees, liberates and unites us all the time. So why is there a need for a new chapter in our ecumenism, one may ask? The proliferation of social media and the ever-changing models of mobile phones brought home to me a simple truth about our ecumenical endeavor today. Notwithstanding its benefits, communication technology today more than ever *personalises persons*, and in the process, undercuts our sense of community and relationships, and our obligations to one another. Our ecumenical family has become as such. And unless, we as churches do something about the disjointed experience of ecumenism today among our people, we may live to its demise. Much of the new chapter depends on knowing who we are as an ecumenical family, our reading of the stars today and how we wish to script the new chapter in our ecumenical journey.

A Lesson on Christian Stewardship - from an ecumenical elder

But I want to begin, not with the last five years of work as Moderator but with a story of a man, a politician, a philosopher, a theologian and above all a faithful servant of his people and God. His name is Rev. Leslie Boseto, one of our few remaining ecumenical elders. He was the Moderator of PCC from 1986-1991 and one of the Presidents of the World Council of Churches (WCC) from 1991-1998. Although retired from church ministry, he is still active in the development of his people and island; he lives in the Choiseul Province in the Solomon Islands. He founded the Lauru Land Conference of Tribal Community in 1981 and continues to be active in its work.

My purpose is not to do a eulogy for obvious reasons; he is still alive. It is rather to highlight an important aspect of Christian stewardship - a goal, an obligation and a challenge. He said:

As Christians, we are obliged to be good stewards of God's creations and today more than ever, we... must make informed decisions about how to conserve and sustainably develop our natural environment to ensure our children enjoy the

cultural, social and economic treasures that have defined our people for a millennium.¹

While his words relate to the care of our natural environment in our region, I highlight this for two reasons: (a) our stewardship responsibility as an ecumenical family towards the goal of sustaining our region's ecological wellbeing; and, (b) it implies on us a new way of structuring our ecumenical cooperation and relations at the local and regional levels so that this responsibility can be nurtured. Rev. Boseto's words, while wise are unmistakably, a warning for us in light of global and regional trends that are set in motion centuries ago with the secularisation process but only now that we are seeing their impacts on our islands and people.

In the past five years, since 2013 in Honiara, Solomon Islands, we undertook a journey of ecumenical renewal. It involved our member churches in Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, Maohi Nui, Cook Islands, Pohnpei, West Papua and Kiribati. The General Secretary, I am sure will elucidate these in his report, especially the impact of the renewal initiative with the churches in these countries. The questions that have been asked in the journey were: **who are we, as an ecumenical family, in this new century? To whom and to what should we owe the reservoir of our Christian compassion, our resources on justice, the burden of our identity as cultured Christians and our moral responsibility?** This new century calls for a renewed ecumenical vision, leadership and structure, and a new way of imagining what is and could be.

Scripting a new chapter in our ecumenical journey's story

But let me begin with this fundamental premise: **we cannot be where we wish to be unless we reframe and script a new story about ourselves, who we are and our ecumenical journey.** The late Bernard Narokobi had these most truthful words and although these were about Melanesian history and the need for them to reframe and claim ownership of it, they have significant relevance to the rest of us, and the new ecumenical chapter we need to write together.

Our history did not begin with contact with the Western explorers. Our civilisation did not start with the coming of the Christian missionaries. Because we have an

¹ Leslie Boseto, *Ridges to Reefs Conservation Plan for Choiseul Province, Solomon Islands*, The Nature Conservancy, 2010.
<https://www.conservationgateway.org/Documents/Choiseul%20Ridges%20to%20Reefs%20Conservation%20Plan%2015%20Apr%202010.pdf>

ancient civilisation, it is important for us to give proper dignity and place to our history. We can only be ourselves if we accept who we are rather than denying our autonomy... Now that we are finally connected with the world, we suddenly see ourselves through the world mirror. Will we see our own true size images, or will we see ourselves in the images and the shadows of others? Will we see ourselves in the long shadows of the dwindling light and the advanced darkness of the evening dusk, or will we see ourselves in the long and radiant rays of the rising sun? We can choose, if we will.²

These words are taken from his seminal work, *The Melanesian Way*, published in 1980 (revised edition in 1983). He was one of the founding fathers of the independent state of Papua New Guinea. But above all, he was a deeply religious and an ecumenical man who also believed dearly in the self-determination of his people. He participated at the 3rd PCC assembly in Port Moresby in 1976 as a delegate of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, the year that the Catholic Bishops' Conference in PNG and the Solomon Islands was accepted as a member of our PCC family. He participated also in many PCC seminars and workshops from there until the mid 1980s (Pacifique, in Honiara '77, Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific in Ponapei '79, and Integral Human Development in Fiji, '80). So let us begin to script this new chapter of our ecumenical journey by knowing who we are and our distinctive histories, by valuing and celebrating our diversity, and what is common to us. Let us map out a new way of living and relating ecumenically with each other. Let us draw from the wealth of resources in our cultural and faith traditions, and our hermeneutical experiences about God and what He is saying to us.

We meet here in the home of the indigenous people of Aotearoa, whose people are as ancient, as our own in the Islands, with distinct cultures, traditions and worldviews. Yet as indigenous people, we all struggle to express who we are and our perspectives on what life expects from us. For decades, since the arrival of the missionaries, we are domesticated by the idea that there is only one-story for all of us – the good life is as prescribed by the head offices in New York, London and Beijing, or closer to home, in Sydney, Canberra, and Wellington. Our ecumenical dream and what it is about also followed suit, not that we knew any better to ask what it is ought to be for us. A young Samoa lady by the name of Lauren in her critique of the Walt Disney movie *Moana* in 2016 shared the following unapologetic reflections which we need to heed.

² Jean Zorn, *In Memory of Bernard Norokobi*, eJournal of the Australian Association for the Advancement of Pacific Studies Issues 1.2 and 2.1, April 2010. http://intersections.anu.edu.au/pacificcurrents/zorn_memorial.htm.

My identity has been shaped by the experiences I've had, positive and negative. I can't divorce who I am as a person from how I've been treated as woman, as a Brown woman, as a Samoan woman. I think it's wholly unfair to ask someone to separate themselves for their experiences... I am not only my culture, I am not only my skin color, but they are part of me. I shouldn't be defined by these things, but I find it flippant and dismissive to tell me that you "don't see color, you see humans" when your experience so drastically differs from mine and what I've endured. You will acknowledge it. You will watch me be unapologetically brown, and Samoan, and a woman. Because how long do the marginalized have to be the ones to bite their tongues? Why must we continuously take the higher road and spend our energy educating others on our history and oppression?³

Further on in her reflections she said this about our ties to the land and sea and why we do not deserve, especially our member churches and their people in the low lying islands and the coastal areas of other islands, to be 'forced' out, simply because of one dominant view of who we are.

[The] Olympic Kiribati athlete David Katoatau doesn't have to imagine. A weightlifter in more than one way, he took his 5 minutes in the 2016 Rio Summer Olympics spotlight to plead the case for his homeland and the very real threat global warming presents to his home, his family, his people. The Pacific feels the increasing side effects of climate change like no other. Our people have such strong ties to our land and we don't deserve to be chased out. We don't deserve to be displaced.⁴

I highlight the above because the gist of what has been said captures the emerging narrative among our young people which is 'we need a new story but one that is premised on who we are, our cultures, traditions and faith'. And so is the need for such a premise to anchor the new chapter in our ecumenical story. During the week, we will share stories, and I wish not to bore you with this. Nevertheless, I will allow myself to state my views on the premise that I had briefly outlined above with this two-fold concerns: **'who are we as an ecumenical family in this new century?'** In answering this question let us be reminded of Sir Allison Pogo, the former Archbishop of Melanesia, who challenged us at the end of the Pangopango Assembly that we must discover our

³ Lauren, *Moana and me: how much is my culture worth to you?* Clementine Zine, October 10 2016. <https://www.clementinezine.com/post/moana-and-me>.

⁴ Ibid.

ecumenical spirituality to fuel our ecumenical journey if we want it to have a future. Our new chapter must therefore identify who we are as an ecumenical family in this new century and also seek to discern our ecumenical spirituality to guide us in our journey forward. Ecumenical sisters and brothers, Ecumenism is a spiritual movement firmly rooted in a Trinitarian God who loves us all and commands us to love each other and all of creation. Once it weakens its spiritual momentum, it becomes weak, ineffective and unproductive.

First and foremost, I am thinking of *talanoa* about the future and about the values and story line that ought to underpin the new chapter in our ecumenical story, and what kind of a 21st century region we want to see, and what can we contribute to this vision together in order for the church to be the church in the Pacific and in the world today.

Today we need new strategies to preserve our identity in a rapidly changing region, a region that has become more public yet increasingly exclusive and elitist, exhilarating yet daunting, exciting yet deeply lonely for many of our people. The social data on the various issues reflect this paradox. This fact confronts virtually all our people in one form or another. For us (and I am talking here about Pacific Islanders and the Pacific region), questions about who we are and who we want to be are increasingly prominent and poignant in our region and in our local settings.

We have left behind an old prescribed model of ecumenism, and we should not return to it. Recently, our church leaders have decisively mapped out a new structure for our regional ecumenical institutions. The proposals on this will come before you for deliberation and decision. But it is evident that it is impossible to move forward with scripting the new chapter of our ecumenical story without its spiritual, cultural and self-determination foundations. Without this we will not be able to withstand internal and external challenges, nor will we succeed in our discernment for adequate responses to regional and local challenges. We must script the new chapter in our ecumenical story together; it cannot be otherwise. This is our task, not someone else's. Today, our mission resources ought to focus on reframing today's dominant single story of the 'good life' which says that our sole purpose in life is economic productivity and consumption, and that personal convenience is the end goal of human development.

Our diversity and our vulnerability are our strength. Our diversity means we need one another because we are vulnerable. Being vulnerable invites the involvement and guidance of the spirit in our ecumenical journey. The spirit moves within and with us

when we realise our vulnerability. This is what I believe and what I see as the Pacific Ecumenical Spirituality, a spirituality of vulnerability. Ecumenism as a spiritual movement our vulnerability as small island states is our foundation. When we are vulnerable with each other, we trust, being honest and sincere with each other. Sharing and caring the realities, agonies and needs of our communities in our ministry. We are also vulnerable to God with humble spirit we seek and wait upon God's inspiration and leadership. Out "from the depth of my despair call to you Lord. Hear my cry, Lord O Lord: listen to my call for help (Psalm 130.1-2). God's spirit inspires and impels us to move together. to act together, to witness Christ together in the region. Thus to be the Church in the Pacific today.

Every church in this assembly has strength of beliefs, moral resources, and distinctive cultural and Christian basis. Nevertheless, the main thing that will determine or indicate that our new ecumenical journey is successful is our people's quality of life, the quality of their faith experiences, and the quality of our distinctive Pacific island societies and their intellectual, spiritual and moral strength. After all, economic growth, prosperity and geopolitical influence in our islands are derived from such societal conditions. The new chapter in our ecumenical story will depend on: (a) whether our people consider themselves as people of and from the Pacific (including those who came and live among us) with many distinct and diverse stories and voices yet share a common journey of faith, (b) to what extent our people are able to identify with their own respective histories, values and traditions, and (c) whether they are united by common goals and responsibilities to each other. In this sense, the question of finding and strengthening ecumenical identity is really fundamental to us.

Today our regional and local identity as an ecumenical family is experiencing not only objective pressures stemming from the increasing consumption, commercialization, and secularisation in our societies – which is part and parcel of the globalisation process - but also the consequences of non-attendance to the need to renew, reframe and script our regional and local stories of what ecumenism and its journey ought to be for us in the Pacific. The result was the decline in self-belief on who we are as an ecumenical family and, hence, the decline in ecumenical cooperation and relations. We were faced with the demoralisation of our region and our respective societies, with a deficit of trust in us as church leaders and our accountability, and our people's responsibility towards each other. We chastise the small churches when they do not give to ecumenical activities or default on their contributions to our regional institutions just as much as we walk past a

neighbour in the village who is building his family home. These are the root causes of many pressing problems our people and churches face today.

Back in the 1970s and 90s, there was the illusion that a new ecumenical identity would simply be constructed on a foreign model. And so it was. Regional and local ecumenical institutions were built on a borrowed model that is driven by a certain cultural and theological framing of John 17:21. It served a purpose then as it was the starting point to the ecumenical journey in our region. But it was a mistake to think that it ought to remain so. Ecumenism, in the succeeding years since the early 1960s, reached a peak in the late 1970s to early 1990s and then started to decline. This partly because of our regional ecumenical institutions, its leaders and academics did not think that ecumenism as an idea (at least framed by the first world churches) needed to be questioned as to its relevance to us in the Pacific since the independence of many of our countries. Practice since the turn of the century has shown that a new ecumenical identity did not and will not simply appear, nor does it develop according to what it is been prescribed by models and rules designed somewhere else. A constructed model of ecumenical structure, governance and relations, based on a culturally framed foundation did not and will not work, and neither does mechanically copying other regions' ecumenical models. The time when ready-made ecumenical models could be installed in other regions like a computer programme has passed.

I also understand that a new ecumenical journey and identity cannot be imposed from above, nor can it be established on an ideological monopoly by one church tradition. Such a construction is very unstable and vulnerable; we know this from personal experience. It has no future today and very little relevance to our people's struggles today. We need historical creativity, a synthesis of the best local practices and ideas, an understanding of our cultural, spiritual and political traditions from different points of view, and to understand that this new ecumenical identity is not a rigid thing that will last forever, but rather a transformative living organism. Church leaders of the future may very well reframe and change the story, and that is not tragic for they read the stars in a different way. Yet the dream for unity, build on our diversity, will remain deep in the hearts of our churches and our mission task for as long as God desires cooperation among His people. It is the gospel imperative, "Jesus Christ frees and unites."

Our forefathers and mothers read the stars back then and came up with structures, albeit borrowed from the 'western' world, to govern our ecumenical life and relations. Today, it is our turn to read the stars and gift to the future our version. But our reading must be

conditioned on our experiences, our cultural and traditions, our worldviews, and our hermeneutics of the biblical story. Only then will our identity be based on a solid foundation, be directed towards the future and not the past. This endeavour started with the church leaders at their meeting in April 2017 here in Auckland. Later this week, the proposals on the way forward will be presented for your deliberation and decision as indicated earlier. This is to demonstrate the principle that our new ecumenical journey and identity must be discussed by our churches and their people, who may hold different views and have different opinions about how and what to do to give the new ecumenical story meaning and relevance. That is why the church leaders' proposals on the new ecumenical structure for our regional ecumenical institutions need to be presented and discussed, not only in this assembly but also later when your mandates on the proposals are implemented. Let us be mindful, that the clearer and relevant our identity becomes the stronger and enjoyable our solidarity in witnessing Christ together in the region will be. Thus, the church becomes the church in the Pacific Today.

All of us here in this assembly must work together to create common ecumenical goals. We need to break the habit of only listening to like-minded people, or people from the same sub-region – Polynesia, Micronesia or Melanesia. This means that we must learn to talk across the artificial political boundaries of colonial division. Churches that are staunchly nationalistic in nature must remember that by calling into question the ecumenically diverse character of our family, and exploiting our differences in beliefs, wealth, status and quality of personnel and or degrading small churches, means that we are starting to destroy our shared Christian belief, our ecumenical mandate and genetic code, and our traditional links that trace us back to thousands of years of existence in the Pacific. In effect, we will continue to destroy ourselves. These ought to be unconditional and non-negotiable; the red lines we are not allowed to cross. The differences in our respective church views, stance on issues and debates about beliefs and identity, and about our ecumenical future are not tragic. But unless we in this assembly participate with deep passion and commitment to writing this new chapter in our ecumenical story, it will be impossible to imagine a world of exciting possibilities for our churches and our people.

We must be proud of our respective histories and yet be angry enough with God's passion and justice to script new stories about who we are and our islands, and about what we believe ecumenism is and ought to be for us in the Pacific. Our entire, uncensored histories must be a part of our regional and local ecumenical identities. Without recognising this it is impossible to establish mutual trust among ourselves

whether at the regional or at the local levels, and allow our people to move forward. The role of ecumenical education is all the more important because in order to educate our people, we must restore into our consciousness the role of our respective cultures and literature, and the life-giving values of our respective faith traditions.

Ecumenical learning and education is the building blocks of ecumenism. It is to be implemented from early childhood to adulthood, from the primary to tertiary levels of education. It has to be continuous from generation to generation. The Pangopango PCC 9th Assembly also resolved that PCC to prepare Christian Education Ecumenical Curriculum for member churches. This has not been done. It must be done if PCC wishes to restore the ecumenical consciousness, action and continuity in our churches. For PCC to maintain its ecumenical identity and to be a transformative agent in society then it must take ecumenical learning/education as its priority. Do not forget that the need for an Ecumenical Curriculum for Christian Education was one of the mandates from the founders of PCC at the very beginning in 1961.

Our people must be confident of who they are, where they stand and on whose behalf. These must serve as the foundation for our people's personal and collective identity, the source of their uniqueness and their basis for understanding who they are in their engagement with foreign ideas. Here, a great deal depends on those who teach in our regional ecumenical institution and our local ones, which has been and remains a highly important guardian of our ecumenical values, ideas and philosophies. Supporting this endeavour is one of the most important steps on the path toward a strong, flourishing ecumenical journey. Hence, the church leaders' proposal with regards to the new structure of our ecumenical cooperation and relations is all the more relevant. Most often we ask our children: 'what do you expect from life' which I think it is the wrong question to ask. The question should and ought to be 'what does life expects from you?' The latter places the onus on us to make life more just, compassionate and caring. To ask the opposite is to be passive to what life gives us – injustices, greed and violence. This is another reason why we as leaders of today need to write the new chapter of our ecumenical story.

Why do we, at times, feel a sense of inadequacy when it comes to making momentous decisions about the future? The future is always uncertain and that it is never clear is certain. But at least among the biblical prophets we can find a common thread: a passionate drive to change the world, combined with a deep sense of personal inadequacy. Moses says, "Who am I . . . that I should lead the Israelites out of Egypt?"

(Ex 3:11). Jeremiah says: “I cannot speak: I am only a child” (Jer1:6). Jonah tries to flee from his mission. Jesus felt God’s absence on the cross. The very sense of responsibility that leads a prophet to heed the call of God can lead him to blame himself when the people around him do not heed the same call. Yet it is that same inner voice that ultimately holds the cure. The prophet does not believe in himself: he believes in God. His greatness lies not within himself but beyond himself: in his sense of being summoned to a task that must be done however inadequate he knows himself to be. So let us take our cue from this.

Let our Pacific Ecumenical Spirituality of vulnerability breaths all that we plan to do. Let us be vulnerable to God and to one another and expects redemptive events to take place. Let us plan with God, it will be successful. "All this wisdom comes from the Lord Almighty. The plans God makes are wise and they always succeed." (Isaiah 28.29 GNB).

Further, we need to heal the wounds of our ecumenical shortcomings since the late 1980s, and repair the tissues of our historic fabric. We can no longer engage in self-deception, striking out unsightly or the ideologically uncomfortable pages of our ecumenical history, breaking links between generations, rushing to extremes, creating or debunking idols. It is time to stop taking note of the unsavoury moments or chapters in our ecumenical story, and berating ourselves and others more than even our opponents would do to us as churches. Self-criticism is necessary because self-confidence is built on recognising our frailty. But without a sense of self-worth, or love for our ecumenical journey, such criticism becomes humiliating and counterproductive. This is our time, and with the counsel of history and the benefit of our traditions, cultures, worldviews and our take on the biblical narrative, we can and must script this new chapter.

I want to stress again that without focusing our efforts on our people’s ecumenical learning and education, creating mutual responsibility between our churches and leaders and each individual, and establishing trust within our respective societies, we will be losers in the history of ecumenism in our region. Our people, being inspired and impelled with a Pacific Ecumenical Spirituality of vulnerability must feel that they are the responsible owners of their regional and local ecumenical institutions, our ecumenical movement and their lives.

Conclusion

Presidents, Moderators, Archbishops and delegates, I wish to end with the following brief message. The years after ecumenism peaked in the early 1980s, we, as an ecumenical family, have lived through some of the most turbulent, dramatic and life changing periods in our region, some of which are still happening such as the affects of climate change and natural disasters, and we are still grappling with the effects of social change. But amidst all these, we are discovering a new way of looking at our world and the realities of our people. We are returning to ourselves, to our own histories, to our roots, just as we did at other points in the respective political developments of our island countries. Our church leaders in Auckland and in Nadi in 2017 and again in Auckland early this year have paved the way for us to return. Let us honour their courageous leadership and together with them, face the future, not with less fear but with hope, determination and confidence.

We will together carve a future not of our own but one that will be written in graciousness because we will script something about which we cared and loved much – our ecumenical family. Leaders who will come after may wish to change it, but it will because they will want a relevant script that will speak to the hearts of their people with reverence and grace. We have now the gift of the written word which, as Bernard Narokobi said, we can utilise to “...reflect on our ancient past and the modern life. We can have a responsibility to ourselves and to the world to bring to the world the treasures of our civilization.”⁵

Thank you all for listening! May God richly bless us in our deliberations and decision-making during this week!

malo 'aupito

Rev'd Tevita K. Havea

⁵ Jean Zorn, *In Memory of Bernard Norokobi*.