

Our Neighbours In Distress

A Discussion Paper for the Public Affairs Commission of the General Synod of the Anglican Church of Australia

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This discussion paper has been prepared for the Public Affairs Commission of the General Synod of the Anglican Church of Australia by Mr Rowan Callick a Commission member from the Diocese of Melbourne. The Commission is grateful for Rowan's passion and commitment to our neighbours.

Comments

The Commission commends the paper to the Church for discussion and welcomes comments on the paper. These can be sent to the Commission's Convenor, the Revd Canon Chris Jones c.jones@anglicare-tas.org.au or GPO Box 1620 Hobart TAS 7001.

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1. The challenge:

a. The tragedy: an overview

The Anglican Archbishop of Papua New Guinea, James Ayong, issued an Easter message in 2002, in which he noted that the gospel writer John was living “*among a people already beginning to experience persecution.*” The Archbishop wrote: “*John knew that God moves most powerfully in the human situations that seem most hopeless... we know that the moment of danger is a holy moment, a moment over which the Spirit hovers lovingly... If we do not share the pain of worldly failure when it comes to one part of our nation, if we abandon one another, we lose the gift of paradox, which is God’s primary way of interacting with the human condition. We cannot know the risen Christ if we shrink from the crucified Christ.*”

What if we in Australia effectively abandon not a part of our nation, but our neighbourhood, in which the crucified Christ is so manifest?

We belatedly and properly opened our hearts to the people of East Timor, but appear to have turned aside from the grave human tragedy that is overwhelming the people of Melanesia to our north, like a slow, inexorable tsunami. Almost all of the island countries, whose people like those everywhere aspire to improved living standards, are instead witnessing the reverse: population growth outstripping economic growth, rainforests and fish stocks being plundered by outsiders, and living standards in decline - unlike even the poorest nations in neighbouring Asia.

The name Asia-Pacific is on the whole a furphy. In almost every circumstance it really means ‘Asia’. The Pacific islands are culturally, economically and politically distinct, cut adrift from that greater region. There are 14 independent nations in the Pacific, of which only Papua New Guinea (with 5.1 million people) has a population of more than a million. They are linked through the Pacific Islands Forum of which Australia and New Zealand are also members.

The Australian churches have properly made series of statements on the September 11 and Bali events and their continuing aftermath. Considerable efforts, again commendably, go into fund raising for the catastrophes that bedevil life in Africa, Latin America and South Asia. But Australia’s Christian community remains for the most part silent on tragedies unfolding – perhaps in slower motion – much closer to home, in places where Australia’s voice carries considerable weight, and where the churches are playing courageous, crucial and lonely roles in defending people from corruption, exploitation and worse. The major churches in Melanesia work together in an exemplary manner, in a wide range of practical projects, in policy development and in campaigning to improve governance.

Fiji has suffered two coups, each overthrowing an elected government. Solomon Islands had a coup in mid 2000. Vanuatu’s government narrowly survived a revolt in late 2002 by its senior police officers. Papua New Guinea has only just settled its 12-year civil war on Bougainville Island, which caused thousands of deaths. The 7 million people living in the Melanesian countries have seen their once bright aspirations dissolve, and their economies dislocated from global growth. The causes

are complex and many. They include massive corruption – betrayal by their elites. Aid funds and national assets have been hijacked and commonly converted to opulent property in Australia by members of those elites. PNG and Solomon Islands have entered their fourth years of continual recession. PNG now ranks 164th on the United Nations' Human Development Indicators ranking next to Djibouti and Chad, two of the poorest countries in Africa. The Solomon Islands stands at 147th and Vanuatu at 140th. They are swimming against the tide today, and are sometimes described as “failed nations” – a new phenomenon that is baffling economists and aid donors.

Yet almost the entire populations of the Melanesia countries – PNG, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu (Fiji being the exception, with most of the 40 per cent ethnic Indian population Hindu or Muslim) - are Christian, with a far higher proportion practising their faith than in Australia. In Papua New Guinea, the Anglican community, while modest in size (it is the seventh largest church), exercises significant influence and commands respect. In the Solomon Islands it is the biggest church and in Vanuatu it is the third largest. The Anglican Church in PNG, originally established by Australian missionaries in 1891, is a province with five diocese, and until 1977 was within the province of Queensland. The province called Melanesia covers both Solomon Islands (a former British colony) and Vanuatu (the former British-French condominium of New Hebrides). It has ties to New Zealand, including significant revenues from the historically established Melanesian Trust Board which in 2003 is providing about \$A 5 million, and whose use is entirely decided by the Church of Melanesia.

Australian Governments are committed to annual meetings of senior Ministers with those of PNG. Queensland Premier Peter Beattie was in PNG late in 2002. A substantial number of senior Australian corporative executives participate in related meetings at the same time, and take separate visits. Charles Goode, the ANZ bank chairman, recently travelled to all the major Pacific countries. Some senior Australian church leaders also visit the region, including those through ABM's pilgrimage programme. But it remains rare for Australians to hear their churches' spokespeople voice concern on a sustained basis about our troubled neighbours.

Sir Michael Somare, PNG's Prime Minister at independence, a decade later and again today, used to be viewed as especially well disposed to Australia. More recently, however, he has made some trenchant criticisms of the relationship. He told Parliament about the Pacific Solution for asylum seekers, that he opposed Australia “*taking PNG as a dumping ground for refugees.*” He said: “*We have our own problems*” – problems, like those of the rest of the region, that challenge Australians to participate wholeheartedly in a new and true Pacific Solution.

b. Solomon Islands:

The worst afflicted country is clearly Solomon Islands. The country has steadily disintegrated since the mid 2000 coup that displaced the government of Bart Ulufa'alu. A form of civil war, instigated by opportunistic gangs, has effectively robbed the central government of much of its legitimacy within its own electorate. Its writ scarcely runs. Members of the indigenous Anglican order founded 60 years ago in Solomon Islands, the Melanesian Brotherhood, famously risked their lives in standing between rival armed “militias” engaged in a gunfight near Henderson's Field airport. Anglican sisters and clergy, too, have been praised for tireless efforts to overcome enmities and restore basic services. Despite a ceasefire and then an election

in December 2001, life has not begun to return to normal for most inhabitants. The economy contracted by 18 per cent in 2000 and a further 15 per cent in 2001, and a likely similar amount in 2002. The Government only sporadically pays its own bills, in recent months, when the Taiwanese Government (which Solomons recognise diplomatically rather than the People's Republic of China) provides it with cash. Much of this money has been disbursed as "compensation" to participants in the fighting for control of the capital, Honiara - some of the leaders have become millionaires. Most of the country's revenue earning industries, including gold and palm oil, have ceased operating. Tourism is dying. Only selling rainforest logs, being cut at 2.5 times the sustainable rate and a modest tuna cannery continue.

Honiara based community activist John Roughan, a former Catholic priest, says:

"The reasoning behind the coup was to control the political process more easily and fully access money. Politics once more became the economy" – as in other countries in the "arc of instability" fringing Australia. "We are, as a nation, fast digging our own grave."

Terry Brown (originally from Canada), the Bishop of Malaita in Solomon Islands, wrote in December 2002:

"Australia, very secular-minded, seems incapable of recognising that the churches, as the only really active non-government organisations in the country, are natural aid partners. Instead, they try to develop their own programmes that have no grassroots base and try to recruit church staff to run them. The final successful collection of weapons by the Melanesian Brothers earlier this year suggests that the millions spent on the International Peace Monitoring Team might better have been spent on buying a few trucks and canoes for the Brothers, providing fuel, and feeding them for a few weeks. But Australia seems to shy away from solutions that involve the churches."

c. Papua New Guinea

In mid 2002 the people of Papua New Guinea went through a traumatic election that cost 30 lives, and resulted in 70 per cent of MPs losing their seats. The central bank governor Wilson Kamit, a keen Anglican and long-time parishioner at St Martin's Boroko, courageously warned on the eve of the vote that PNG faced "financial disaster." About 1 million adults live in the country's most populous region, The Highlands, but almost 2 million votes were cast. In the Southern Highlands, the hapless wife of a polling official was shot dead when she opened the door of her home to a gang looking to hijack ballot papers. Most of the elections there were ruled invalid. This is the wealthiest province of Papua New Guinea as it contains the country's oil and gas field- PNG's 'Texas'. Yet control has been disputed by warlords who control armed mercenaries operating machine guns from armour-plated converted utes.

Shortly before the 2002 election, Roman Catholic women of the Southern Highlands met to issue this appeal for peace: *"We live in constant fear. The roads are dangerous to travel, homes have been ransacked, and there are many killings, numerous rapes, break and entries, torturings, threats, kidnappings. Our children are infected by this virus. Our peaceful town and home province has turned into an evil place. It is a cancer that is effectively destroying our province quicker and more devastatingly than the epidemic of Aids" – which is rapidly becoming as deadly a scourge in PNG as in parts of Africa.*

“Mipela i salim bikipela sori” (We offer up our grief) concluded Grace Sui, President of the Catholic Women’s Association. “Mipela i pre bai God i ken givim yumi belisi long dispela taim nogut.” (We pray that God may send us peace and deliver us from this evil time).

By elections were held in the Southern Highlands in late April and early May, and hope to provide an indication as to whether the nine months of disenfranchisement has helped sober up the area and guide it back towards stability. Corruption has been named as the country’s enemy number one by the PNG Media Council, which has been backed by the churches and the National Council of Women. The then Parliamentary Speaker (and prominent Catholic layman) Bernard Narokobi agreed and called on the international community to aid the fight against corruption in PNG. Yet no senior political or corporate figure has yet been convicted or even charged. The loss of half the workers’ savings in the National Provident Fund triggered a judicial inquiry that established massive corruption. The former head of the fund, lawyer Jimmy Maladina, named by the inquiry as a major beneficiary of the corruption, lives prosperously in Brisbane today. Grace Murua, a young Anglican woman from Tufi, is teaching at a government primary school in the Managalas Mountains (in her home province of Oro) with no access via road. She and a male colleague are the only teachers for all 400 children in the school. A brief news item in a PNG newspaper noted that she had visited Port Moresby to try to get paid after two months with no wages. She was concerned about this, and about the capacity of the two teachers to meet the children’s full needs, but added: *“The children are a pleasure to teach because they are so willing to learn. We can grow fresh food. We have plenty of rivers to wash in, and planes come once a week.”*

2. The response:

a. Australia’s role:

By far the biggest role that Australians can play internationally is in the Pacific island region which we dominate. It remains, however, a role that Australia tends to shun – partly because of a concern about the tyranny of size that sometimes appears as crippling as the tyranny of distance. Just as we feel marginalised by our comparatively small population when relating to Asia, so we tend to feel anxious about appearing Big Brother to our island neighbours. However, many in the islands, who despair of the corruption of their own tiny elites, wish that Australians would express an appetite for a bigger role – an appetite being displayed increasingly by New Zealand.

Since the end of the Cold War, the major powers have effectively quit the region - except for France which continues to administer three colonies. Pacific islanders know Australia well. They eat Vegemite, some of them play Aussie Rules, and more play both codes of rugby. They like Australians. And they are overwhelmingly committed churchgoers, though, as anywhere, they are not immune from the hijacking of religion. Bill Skate, today the Speaker of PNG’s Parliament and arguably its worst Prime Minister some time before that, recently made one of his regular emotional appearances on the platform of an itinerant American preacher, some of whom attract huge audiences when they tour PNG. Skate said that night to people who shortly afterwards re-elected him: *“They think I am one of the most corrupt politicians in the South Pacific, but I can tell you that I am not. I have been made righteous by my Lord Jesus.”*

It is Melanesians' membership of a world-wide religion that does most to overcome their sense of remoteness and isolation - a perception underlined by the Rev Walter Lini, an Anglican priest who became Vanuatu's first Prime Minister. The courageous group of Citizens for Democracy who gathered throughout the Fiji coup of 2000 to pray and campaign for peace was led by church people, and met daily at the Anglican cathedral in Suva. The Anglican Churches of PNG and Solomon Islands have been tested severely in these dark days of crime, corruption and the collapse of living standards over the last decade or more. They have come through that challenge, as have the other major churches, which are now viewed by the ordinary people of the region as their last great hope and source of continuing schooling and health care even as the government services have collapsed.

PNG is by far the biggest field of endeavour for AusAID, and for some of Australia's non government aid agencies. Australians respond generously to appeals for help from people suffering catastrophes around the world. But few have yet been made aware of the extent of the disaster slowly unfolding on our own doorstep. The prospect is looming that Australians will only act when their neighbours' plight has become truly catastrophic, and threatened to infect Australia too - only a canoe ride away.

Yet a shift appears on the way in Canberra among policy makers and administrators about how Australia handles the region. The once utterly unthinkable is now being thought and articulated: we should re-engage in a very hands-on manner, sending people into the region not as consultants and short-term advisors but as teachers, doctors, budget drafters, policemen. The new engagement will be long-term, open-ended, and expensive.

This will prompt a frenetic debate both within the region and in Australia, with the words "re-colonising" and "neo-colonialist" hurled around. But "*it's an idea whose time has come,*" says one of Australia's most influential policy thinkers - Hugh White, director of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute. For the simple reason, he says, that the programs put in place since independence have failed Melanesia. The security establishment has been reluctant to make any commitment without a clear exit strategy.

But exit strategies are only relevant to second order problems, says White: "*We can't exit our own neighbourhood. There can be no policy solution without going back to basics. This means abandoning deeply held precepts. But it is an idea that is now less unacceptable to the public, to some bureaucrats and to ministers than two or three years ago - because it resonates with the global debate about how we deal with weak states.*"

This is not, he stresses, a recipe for imposition on unwilling recipients, but for a consensual approach: "*It is a recipe for rebuilding familiarity with PNG. This country is important to us. Let's get to know it again.*"

White's own institute (government funded but providing an independent source of advice) is embarking first on a study of Solomon Islands issues, but is then likely to move on to PNG. An example of such a revised approach may be that of the new Police Commissioner in Solomon Islands, who comes from Britain and is funded by the European Union.

AusAID is already deeply re-examining how its \$350 million a year to PNG might be more effectively spent. The Sydney based Centre for Independent Studies has stirred considerable controversy in PNG through its moves to address the issue, through seminars and papers. The Melbourne based Global Foundation, which includes some of Australia's most influential businesspeople among its members, is also working to focus efforts on the neighbourhood. It organised a meeting in late 2002 to discuss PNG's dilemmas that was hosted and chaired by NSW Governor Marie Bashir.

The Anglican Church does not, of course, need to pursue similar approaches to other organisations, including the Federal Government. But it is helpful for its members, who wish to engage more fully with their developing world neighbours, to become aware of shifts in thinking in such areas.

b. The Anglican response:

The Anglican engagement with the neighbourhood has been held back, in the past, by churchmanship. The regional provinces range, for historical reasons, predominantly on the Catholic wing of the church. This has tended to limit contact with evangelical Australian dioceses in general, and Sydney in particular. The relationship has relied fundamentally on the Anglican Board of Mission.

The time has come for the broader church to transcend such boundaries, and to commit itself to make engagement with its sisters and brothers in Melanesia - a major new priority. Australian Anglican diffidence might be compared with the extent to which needs for people expressed by the PNG church, in particular, appear to be met by the modestly resourced London based PNG Church Partnership agency, and from the Church of England - from which have come two bishops recently chosen by the church (by electoral committees comprised of Papua New Guineans with, in the case of one of the elections, one expatriate), while a married couple from the Scottish Episcopal Church have taken on a new role in strategic planning and development for the province. The Church of Melanesia has closer ties with the churches of Canada, New Zealand and Britain than with Australia. The Anglican Church of Canada has been sending Volunteers in Mission for some years to Solomon Islands and Vanuatu.

The Australian church has a role to play in extending public awareness, and especially that of Anglicans, of the issues challenging our neighbours, in urging the government and the broader opinion leading community to focus more fully on the region, and in initiating a dialogue with Melanesian church leaders in order to respond in the most practical way to their needs, both short and longer term.