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Introduction

The Government of Sāmoa's latest census report in 2001 identified twenty four different religious groups within the country including Bible study groups and those that prefer to be anonymous. From the census figures 72.2 per cent of the total population of Sāmoa are members of the National Council of Churches (NCC). Its membership comprises the three mainline churches - Congregational Christian Church (CCCS), Catholic Church of Sāmoa, and Methodist Church of Sāmoa (MCS). They are called mainline churches because they are the biggest denominations and were the first to arrive in Sāmoa.

THE CHURCH OF THE LATTER DAY SAINTS HAS SHOWN remarkable growth in its numbers making it the fourth largest denomination in the country. Other member churches of the Council in Sāmoa are the Anglican, Baptist, Protestant, Nazarene, Full Gospel, and the Congregational Christian Church of Jesus (CCCJS) in Sāmoa. The Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) Church is a former member of the Council and there has been no explanation for its silence for quite some years.

The term "the church" or "religion" in this chapter refers to whatever confession or denomination Sāmoan people belong to, taking into consideration their unity within diversity. Faith based organizations refer to religious groups that have the same goal, mission and vision like the church, for example, Youth with a Mission (YWAM), Young Men Christian Association (YMCA). In every effort towards the advancement of the human condition, the churches are expected to take a leading role. Moreover, moral commitment dictates that ecumenical communities are part and parcel of such an endeavour. There is no doubt that the road to achieving this goal will indeed be a difficult one. Ideally, therefore, in order to succeed churches must create situations that are conducive to mutual benevolence, flexible approaches, initiative and an accommodating heart to the people's multitude of interests.

Like the government, the church endeavours to develop people. The church in each village is often regarded as the centre of the whole community for it is their sacred site of worship and meeting place to discuss programmes to enhance the capacity of their members every week. Often, the established churches are challenged by members of the community who claim that financial and other material demands of the church are contributing to poverty in Sāmoa. It is a debatable view. The general view of many Sāmoans, however, is that great spirituality means abundant prosperity. The community's view, on the other hand, is that a healthy body and mind are the key essentials of good living. These opposing views should not be perceived in a negative way for they could all contribute to sustainable livelihood in Sāmoa in the future as discussed below.

Religious philosophies contribute enormously to quality of life in Sāmoa. Since independence in 1962, the church and state have worked side by side to develop the Sāmoan people. Government leaders are sometimes church leaders as well, which therefore reinforces the mutual beneficial relationship between these two important sectors of society. Hence, democracy, culture and Christian values have integrated well in a manner that is acceptable to the local community. This state of affairs has been possible because of Sāmoa's abil-



It is time that the church adjusts itself to changes of contemporary times. The late Reverend Sione Pula, an agriculturalist and senior minister of the MCS, once said that "there is no poverty as long as all structural developments in the Church stop and instead concentrate on its mission to save and to love."

ity to maintain peace, prosperity and happy living.

The church's prophetic role involves spiritual vigilance constantly reminding leaders at the top echelons of society to remain true to the teachings of God as from Him the community enjoys multiple blessings. The church to its congregation is the centre of their community in the villages. It is the same situation in the urban areas despite the fact that parish members reside on freehold land and despite structural and economic changes associated with urbanization that differentiate them from rural village communities. As in rural communities, the church plays a significant role in urban communities, working closely with organizations with which they share interests in caring for the community and to which their shared resources are distributed.

Church buildings are among the most costly ones in the village communities. It has been noted that people are slipping away or are no longer going to church because of the huge loans from the National Provident Fund (NPF) or the Development Bank of Samoa (DBS). Church financial and other material demands on church members who are already experiencing economic difficulties are a recipe for church desertion.¹ As expected,

the general church belief is that in the end everyone is accountable to the Creator and Sustainer of life and therefore will be punished accordingly.

Christianity and Other Sectors

For over a century and a half now, Christianity is still the dominant religion in Sāmoa. However, the newly introduced denominations are proving popular. Novelty is one of their main attractions. Other appealing aspects arguably could be that a new religion or denomination provides more leadership opportunities for those who would otherwise not be recognized in the established churches. New leadership opportunities give the church members high self esteem and makes them feel important in that their contribution and talents are appreciated. And of course, a new church often meets most if not all the church-related expenses in contrast to the 'old' practice in established churches which rely solely for their survival on contributions from members.

The issue of 'freedom of religion' provided for in the constitution of the independent state of Sāmoa has caused much tension in the NCC, which comprises some Christian Churches in Sāmoa. Besides the issue of church members leaving the mainline churches for the newly established ones,

there is also the issue of variant theological interpretations. Mainline churches are of the view that most of the newly established churches not only have 'shallow' theological underpinnings but their teachings and methods of delivering their messages are out of context in relation to the Sāmoan culture. Furthermore, they seem to glorify the leaders at the expense of the congregation. Many of these started off as bible study groups then they soon grow in size and eventually established themselves as regular churches under their supposedly bible study leaders. Clearly, the influx of new churches has created an uneasy relationship between them and the mainline churches. It has also created friction within village communities because in some cases village councils have made conscious decisions to be loyal to one of the mainline churches. Village punishments against adherents of denominations other than those approved by the village council have posed a challenge to the freedom of religion provision in the country's constitution. Fortunately, most villages are quite liberal in their choice of church to attend. Given the natural tendency of religions to adhere to their particular brand of theology unreservedly, it is the duty of the state to promote religious tolerance among the people so that religious tolerance can be accepted as part and parcel of their cultural and religious values.

As Sāmoa gradually moves into a multiracial and pluralistic society, an increasing number of new religions enter its shores. It is most unfortunate that globalization is also associated with the birth of some of these religions, which are attracting more Sāmoan people. If new religions keep entering Sāmoan shores in the next two decades, its society will be a complex one and this may not necessarily be a good thing for such a small society like Sāmoa. There is quite a fear that Sāmoan culture and Christian values are being challenged by terrible "religious cyclones" from the North.

Church Offerings

Monetary offerings by the biggest denominations range from SAT5-8 million per annum, according to Reverends Afa Tyrell and Elisaia Kolia, Treasurers of the CCCS and MCS respectively. These enormous amounts of cash come directly from the

pockets of church members, who are mainly those just above the poverty line. How to utilize these funds are at the discretion of the church executives. The amounts could fund a profit making outfit. However, the churches are always mindful that they must always remain a church and not a business exploiting its own employees.

Enhancing the living conditions of people in the local churches is a need expressed in the general meetings of mainline churches every year. A direct response to these concerns is a church loan scheme or To'omaga as in the CCCS, whereby church members apply for assistance at a small interest of 5 per cent per annum to finance local parish youth halls, pastor's residence and so forth. A slight problem associated with the loan scheme is the difficulty in repayments. It seems therefore that the loan scheme intended to help the relatively weaker parishes seems to have added another burden when repayments become due. The bottom line is that the church could become a giant economic power exploiting its own members. This situation should not occur in the church where justice, charity, peace and equal rights are promoted in opposition to the vices of gluttony, covetness and so on.

The fundamental question in relation to church resources is how they could be better utilized for the benefit of future generations. Past experience shows that most of the Church revenue is spent on new buildings, salaries of employees, and reviving certain departments of the church which operate at a loss almost every year. The most recent examples of the latter are some of the churches bookshops, land developments, youth ministries, vocational training and schools' drive for new vehicles. There is no doubt that these developments are good for the church, however, there needs to be a better system of financial control in place to ensure economic efficiency and accountability, thereby reducing some of the debts a church has to deal with every year. Furthermore, it should prevent the church practice of forfeiting debts² once it gets tired of chasing up the borrowers.

It has come to the time when perhaps the church ought to set its priorities right. Is it the welfare of church members or infrastructure development, nursing of spiritual life or pride in the

church's economic power that is more important and the reason for their existence? The church must constantly remind itself of its role in relation to the underprivileged majority in the community, widows and orphans, the elders and those with special needs. Are not they more worthy of consideration than colossal resources going to church buildings and other infrastructural developments, which are matters that could come under long term plans? As long as the church continues to utilize its huge financial resources unwisely, it is to be expected that its membership will continue to decline and some members will opt to detach themselves from the Church completely. In such a scenario, the Church would have failed in its supposed mission. It is time that the church adjusts itself to changes of contemporary times. The late Reverend Sione Pula, an agriculturalist and senior minister of the MCS, once said that "there is no poverty as long as all structural developments in the Church stop and instead concentrate on its mission to save and to love."³

Education

Mission schools were pioneers of formal education systems in Sāmoa. Several state leaders had their education in church schools from primary to college level. These schools still exist with extensive improvements in facilities, and in both teaching staff and academic standards. Today, churches have gone another step forward to establish vocational colleges to accommodate the need of some secondary school leavers who are not able to proceed to university level. This has been a conscious church decision given the reality that the academically better students opt to attend government and private schools. It is worthwhile to note that the high numbers of dropouts from school sometimes involve the culture and the choice of the youth or parents.

Like other providers of schools, the church has at times experienced difficulty trying to keep schools open because of financial constraints⁴. Schools that were forced to close were converted to church facilities. Maintaining schools was a

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Mormon Primary School located on the beautiful village of Sauniatu.

problem. Revenue collected from school fees was not enough to pay teachers' salaries and meet administration costs. Under these conditions the mother church, school alumni, and Parents and Teacher's Associations (PTA) often shoulder the burden in their solid belief that school assets need to be maintained. The church's commitment to education should be a sacred task for without it the maintenance and growth of the church are deliberately ignored. Instead of sinking the revenues collected into building new churches, a greater investment of these funds should be channelled to education.

The MESc has just recently elevated four district high schools to college level. For years, however, the church has been the main provider of secondary schools in the country, a contribution the government noted with great appreciation. To supplement the good work of mission schools and in the spirit of partnership and cooperation the government in recent years has made it a policy to contribute to the running of mission schools and, recently, private schools. The government has been allocating in its annual budget a grant of SAT3.1 million to support church schools.

Although recent developments to establish early childhood education institutions (pre-schools) are to be applauded, the associated practice of setting up those schools only in order to be eligible to apply for government grants is to be discouraged. Also frowned upon in some sections of the community is the situation where the financially better off would establish a school, which because they have the money, would attract the best qualified teachers in the country, leaving other schools without qualified teachers. In spite of these hiccups, however, the church is steadfast in its drive to maintain its school system to cater for all students regardless of their parents' economic status.

The author's personal analysis: Children's school fees in the Catholic church schools currently show that they charge higher fees than the government schools, which is the reverse of the situation in the past. Rising fees in church schools with additional fundraising activities by teachers, alumni and PTAs indicate that church education systems are trying to adjust themselves to changes and developments of modernization. As initiated

by the government under its SDS 2005-2007, the spirit of partnership between the government and the church in providing education for the locals has simultaneously provided the opportunity for the entire community to be involved in such an excellent cause.

Health Care

Health care service is an indispensable element of religion in Sāmoa. Every brand of religion has its own caring system to look after the welfare of its members. Sometimes their support programmes extend to people of other faiths. Registered nurses in villages often provide first aid assistance to patients prior to transference to the closest hospital in their area. Things are even better if the pastor or his wife is a doctor or a qualified nurse. The pastor's residence will turn into a clinic. This kind of service is essential for it is done at no cost and it is right there where the people live.

The Catholic Church in Sāmoa a few years ago built and is still maintaining 'The Home for the Elderly'. A reliable source from the Centre said that the demand for places in the Home is so overwhelming that some requests have been denied due to the lack of facilities. The establishment is popular and it has the support from other churches and their affiliates, the government, NGOs, the business community, women's groups, individuals, youth, schools and so forth. It is a valuable development for which the local community cannot thank the Catholic Church enough for. The late Cardinal Pio Täofinu'u was highly praised for his incredible vision to have a place for the old people on Catholic Church land. More amazing still, there is neither cost to those fortunate enough to get a place in it nor discrimination against adherents of other religions. The beneficiaries of this programme are the elders without care-givers, respite care for some and those who are disadvantaged in several ways.

The Church has also been involved in assisting the destitute in drought relief, victims of natural disasters, psychological counselling, and various water sanitation and nutrition programmes. They are all efforts towards helping to change people's lives for the better. Unstable weather forecasts have encouraged all denominations to be

involved in disaster and management capacity building for the benefit of their members. Action by Churches Together (ACT) plays an important part in these training programmes through the NCC.

The profound challenge to the churches and the Health sector in Sāmoa is the problem of HIV/AIDS, which has already claimed seven lives. Not all the churches are happy with the way the MoH is handling the issue in particular, the vernacular used in the fight against it, as well as the usage of condoms as a means of prevention. The church's view, however, is that the best form of prevention is to practise fidelity in marriage and abstinence outside marriage.

In most village parishes, the well being of the elders and those with special needs are looked after by their relatives, a tradition within the extended family. Church related women organizations also have their own effective health care systems for the poor and the marginalized. Church

youth groups are no stranger to these programmes. They are indeed good stewards of the elders in the village community. The integration of services among the leaders of the community for the welfare of the elders has and will continue to contribute to sustainable livelihood in Sāmoa.

Women and the Church

Women are highly respected in the Church and in politics. They also have a place in the Sāmoan system of respect. Their socialization in the community and in the church have often turned them into trustworthy leaders in the Church. Once they push for things to be done, they really mean business. They have often been in the forefront in fundraising activities for the construction of large multistory buildings in the mainline churches.

Most, if not all, denominations have independent women's conferences to deliberate on both spiritual and material business. However, despite their involvement in church activities a Sāmoan

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PHOTO BY FATU TAUAPIAFI





woman has yet to be ordained a pastor in the mainline Sāmoan churches. This of course is not a serious issue because women and men are considered the same or possess equal rights. But there is a strong consensus among female intellectuals and women in general that it is not yet the time to take that next step.

In 1998, NCC Leaders adopted a resolution to accept women to be trained in theological colleges. So far, a former pastor's wife is currently studying for a Bachelor of Divinity degree at the Pacific Theological College in Suva, Fiji. There are Sāmoan women pastors in New Zealand and other countries overseas. The MCS has lay women preachers. A lot of women attend Bible Training Centres in Apia run by overseas missionary groups. Some are missionaries going around with pamphlets

of the new sects to which they attach themselves. Others are authentic role models in various church communities in Sāmoa.

Women are the backbone of every denomination in Sāmoa. In all church developments, they are at the forefront paving the way forward. They have taken the lead in the teaching of children in programmes associated with Sunday School, special choirs and early childhood. They have also been involved in other activities such as maintaining community cleanliness, being ambassadors for peace, creating a safe environment for the community to name a few. They are frequently the focal point of all church-related activities in the life of the church in Sāmoa. The church continues to be a haven of peace building and a site for spiritual cleansing during these arduous days of economic



and social changes. Thus, religious ideologies elevate tremendously the status of women in Sāmoan society.

Church and Creation

The relationship between God and human beings in the light of the environment requires explanation. Many times, some people see themselves as the boss of the environment, meaning they can do anything with it while ignoring the concerns of others. This is viewed as a deplorable attitude from a pure theological perspective, because humans should accept that they ought to be good stewards of the environment. Sāmoan churches need to be reconciled with creation. That is, they should commit themselves to the protection of biological diversity and the preservation of natural landscapes, especially those destroyed because of new church projects.

Sāmoa's natural heritage is in great danger, bearing in mind that its land area is limited in contrast to the rapid population growth. The fast cutting down of the tropical rain forest in Savai'i, the uninhibited exploitation of natural resources and the everyday devastation of plant and animal species, and sea and fresh water life are to be aggressively discouraged. The Church has a role in theological interpretation that is aimed at promoting the value of the environment as it is an invaluable asset for both the present and future Sāmoa.

One of the direct causes of the impoverishment of the natural heritage of Sāmoa is the destroying of endangered species including the humid areas by the rapid increase of deforestation of tropical rain forests in the biggest island of Savai'i which are so vital for ecological balance. Indirect causes of environment destruction are equally dangerous. For instance, the use of paraquat and fertilizers, the accumulation of heavy metals in soil and plants, the levelling of slopes, destruction of mangrove areas, cutting down of trees and the excavation of beach sand for road extension work. This means that Sāmoa's natural environment is on a re-habilitation phase, which will take years to recover. For all people who are concerned with the integrity of creation, the problem is a challenge and it is now time to do something about it.

Mr Peter Harris, a Methodist theologian and

biologist once said that religious people know very well it is time to take action to save the environment. However, they could not do much because of resource constraints. His statement is true but conservation of creation starts from a person's sense of commitment. Good stewardship equals integrity of creation. Sadly, the Church is part of the same society that pursues economic growth at the expense of the environment. In this sense, it should be involved in developing programmes to protect the environment for future generations. In fact, "the key to sustainable and holistic development in the Pacific Islands is for Christians (which make up the majority) to apply their faith and biblical worldview in activities of life including science, agriculture and environment".⁵

Culture in Christianity

This section will only highlight a few developments in Sāmoan culture and christianity. Culture in Christianity means christianity has adopted some of the Sāmoan cultural values for its own sake. Secondly, christianity has changed the culture according to christian principles of living. The process started from the initial accepting of the Church by the paramount chief Mālietoa Vainupo Tāvita when he decided to use the term "*susuga*"⁶ for himself and endowed "*afioga*"⁷ to the church missionary. This is a visible sign of the culture elevating the new religion to a level higher than itself.

Unlike any other government in the world, Sāmoa is unique because the church is placed before culture. People give much reverence to the church for they trust it as the power house of God's blessing for every individual.

In the urban and some rural areas where cultural structures are weak, the church becomes the centre for the people. Church leaders play a crucial role in the administration processes. They keep the community in close fellowship and tight networking for security purpose. The Church is concerned with the increasing crime rate in places where the church and culture are miles apart from each other. Partnership is thus encouraged to minimize conflicts and combat violence that threatens harmony in society. Thus, there is a mutually beneficial relationship between culture and Christianity in Sāmoa. As a popular saying in Sāmoa goes, 'Christianity

sits on the culture'. It means that Christianity is safe in the cradle of culture. For example, many church ministers depend on the protection of village councils⁸ to solve problems not only in the church but in the village community as well. For example, a church deacon who is guilty of misusing church funds can easily be dealt with by his/her family *matai* or high chief.

For years churches in Sāmoa abolished the utilization of fine mats, wooden bowls for *'ava*, rod and *fue*, even the presentation of a *"sua"* inside the church. Now, these cultural elements and tradition are all part of church life. The author believes that the churches in Sāmoa ought to enter into deeper dialogue with members of other faiths and cultures, including non believers and support existing groups and structures for bilateral or multilateral dialogue.

Youth and Children

Youth and children are the most valuable assets of all religions. To ignore them is like religion digging its own grave. Two of the fundamental goals of any religion are to promote human dignity and to build youth and children capacity in order for them to become useful people to their respective families and denominations.

Ever since the early days of Christianity the mainline churches have been pushing hard for the development of the mind, body and spirit of youth and children in order to prepare them for their future and for the continuation of the church. The church ensures that the youth are well versed in their religious beliefs and traditions, and culture and family values as the basis of who they are in this forever changing society of which they are part. However, despite this, the challenge is always there of youth being involved in criminal activities in both the urban and the rural areas. Clearly, the message for church leaders is to share whatever resources to combat youth crime and instill in youth love, peace, humility, honesty, respect and ceaseless patience in full measure, which are all values embedded in the Sāmoan culture.

It was also towards this aim that the Government of Sāmoa established the MESC in the early 1980s. The establishment of the Ministry enabled it to access global funds for humanitarian devel-

opment. Youth programmes initiated by the church and the respective ministry all contribute to the empowerment of the Sāmoan youth.

Youth receives their basic training in religious education at Sunday school. It is also the place where they learn about ethical questions relating to the philosophy of life and puritan discipline. Subjects like mathematics, history, creation, culture, good leadership and music are also included in the Sunday school curriculum. Most children learn how to read and write in Sunday schools. Equally important and strongly encouraged by the Church is the responsibility of the parents in the education of their children at home. The government has recently agreed to support early childhood education and the education of people with special needs. The MESC will certainly look at a national curriculum for these schools in the near future. From the Church's perspective, this is more than good news because it has always been responsible for the education of these children. Assistance from government is, therefore, highly welcomed. One challenging aspect in relation to the welfare of the youth and children is The Convention on the Rights of the Child (1994), which the Sāmoan government has adopted. It cuts at the root of the whole issue of the parent-child relationship in Sāmoan culture, which in many instances are in direct conflict. Even in the eyes of many of the mainline churches, which purport to place youth and children as their highest priority, children nevertheless are still only to be seen and not heard. There is a need for extensive consultations and open dialogue to work through all the issues.

Endnotes

¹ B.D.J., Class discussion at Piula Theological College, 31 May, 2004.

² Some denominations forgive or write off sundry debts after 10 years of non-payment regardless of whatever amount.

³ Reverend Sione Pula, 1989, personal communication, September.

⁴ Reference is made to Ulimasao College and Logoipulotu College that belongs to the Catholic Church and Avoka Girls College of the Methodist Church.

⁵ Dr Nacanieli Tuivaluvalagi 2004, "Science, environment, agriculture, religion and the key to sustainable and holistic development in the Pacific Islanders." A paper presented at USP Alafua, Seminar.

⁶ A Samoan honorary title of lower rank.

⁷ A Samoan honorary title of much higher rank.

⁸ "Council of Chiefs" makes decisions for everyone in the village community.

Recommendations

1. That the churches contribute in every appropriate way to guarantee religious liberty and the human rights of all individuals, so that their dignity and identity are well protected.
2. That the churches hold consultations on economic globalization and social issues bombarding Sāmoan society at large, with a profound concern for the needy people throughout the four main islands of Sāmoa.
3. That the churches are serious in their roles to eliminate all forms of exploitations and discrimination against women, children and young people.
4. That the churches continue to support initiatives worldwide for a sustainable creation, so that future generations will also enjoy and share its maximum benefit.
5. That the churches prioritize and continue to encourage education for all in their development activities, with a commitment to those with special needs and the marginalized.
6. That the churches' programmes to enhance the living conditions of people in Sāmoa be motivated and expanded wherever the need is found.
7. That the churches maintain a proactive and determined stance in their endeavours to attain a more balanced approach to tithing systems that are commensurate with the cost of living in the country and the rise in unemployment and hardship amongst their congregations.
8. That the churches initiate partnerships amongst various denominations so that sharing of welfare is encouraged where possible to the less fortunates of society.
9. That the churches develop and maintain relationships of mutual respect and sharing among different denominations and cultures to help maintain peaceful living.

