

PACIFIC PRESBYTERY FORGING A NEW STORY AND A NEW JOURNEY¹

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To imagine and dream of the ‘what if’ for the Pacific church communities within PCANZ, we need to highlight **‘what was and what is’**, because it sets the context of our dreaming and how far we need **to journey from our present reality**.

Contextual background

Prior to the Coronavirus pandemic lockdown, the Pacific congregations were aging, and the New Zealand born Pacific generations, especially the young people were declining and leaving the Presbyterian church community.

The church leadership and eldership established within Pacific churches is reflective of the traditional Pacific social structures of hierarchy and decision making reserved for the elders and elderly.

The women and young people do not have a strong voice or influence in the decision-making across the church which has hindered the connection with young people and participation of essentially New Zealand born Pacific generations.

“I’m an executive manager in my workplace but when I go to my Pacific church, I don’t have a voice, I’m still considered youth, but I’m 50 plus?”

‘there are only three categories in Pacific, you are either children, youth or elderly’

Covid-19 impact

However, since the Alert level 4 lockdown began and up to the present time, there has been some varied changes across the Pacific communities that has significantly shifted from the ‘norm’. These shifts have involved some radical changes and a mix of traditional cultural practices being modified (forced by the lockdown).

A few examples are noted below (but are not exhaustive):

- **Family connection and fellowship:** Pacific families returned to the traditional practice of daily evening family fellowship which involved singing a Pacific hymn, bible reading, key message and a prayer. The evening family fellowship was modified with the **use of zoom connection** to enable physical family bubbles to connect from across the city, country and abroad (creation of online digital family bubbles). The responsibility of sharing the message and main prayer was traditionally **exclusively provided by the head and or elders of the family**. However, a new norm was being created enabling the responsibility of preparing and delivering a message and prayer to be shared amongst each of the online family bubbles.

¹ Embargoed for discussion with Presbytery Council on 29/5/20 – Not for wider distribution outsider of the Mission Enabling Forum.

“our family lotu (prayer & worship time) reminds me of how we use to do prayer & worship back in the old days before the internet...it’s a great simple way of connecting back with each other as a family and with God”

“initially our elderly parents struggled with the idea of others in the family delivering the message rather than the elder within the family...however overtime, they warmed to the idea and welcomed the young people to share a message”

- **Online connections:** Many of the church communities, including leaders and elders were not familiar with the online capability and had limited or no IT knowledge prior to alert level 4 lockdown. To help facilitate and enable the online connections involved engagement with the young people within the homes to support and assist the church leaders and families to connect online. Training of the leaders and elders with Zoom and Facebook (set up and navigation, including email set up) has helped to build capacity and capability and to acquire new skills to help Pacific elders build confidence to engage online. This has also helped to bridge and strengthen communications and relationships between the young and older generations (the activation of the youth soldiers and army within the church).

“it’s so cool my nana knows how to Tik Tok and do Facebook”

The online connections have also helped set up smaller connect groups online within the church (sub-ministries), with greater attendance and engagement levels.

“we have a zoom night for our bible study and now more people come because its more convenient and easier to attend than driving to meet somewhere”

- **Activating the youth:** The changing church protocols and expectations has required more input and engagement from the young people and essentially the NZ born generation of Pacific are being activated to help facilitate, lead and be involved in the discussions for change. We are branding this movement as the equipping of our youth soldiers and army to connect the church to the online world (connectors and navigators).

‘never before, have I seen ministers join with young people and woman at the same table, having a talanoa about significant church matters...its surreal”

- **Cultural identity:** The lockdown appeared to stir NZ born Pacific to reflect on their cultural identity, values and connections to church. A growing interest is being experienced with NZ born Pacific including young people exploring and wanting to reconnect to their cultural heritage and language. Church has been a big part of their cultural identity, which has drawn some of the young people to return to church and attending the online services during the lockdown. However, whether this will continue remains to be seen.

“I’ve seen some of the old church people (i.e. previous church goers) return to online church”

“my church was always the place where my culture was practiced and cultivated, but when I left the church I lost that”

Future aspirations

This week is Samoan language week and the theme is '**Tapena sou ōso mo lau malaga**' which translates to '**Prepare yourself a gift for your travels (to handover to your family/friends that you are visiting)**'. From this theme we reflect **on the life-giving gifts (e.g. taonga/treasures)** we can share for future Pacific generations to benefit and thrive in their new and evolving faith journey.

The future aspirations and vision for the church is to create a Pacific church community, a member of the PCANZ body of Christ that will continue to honour and respect the cultural values and certain traditions of our parents and grandparents. “We honour the past but wish to build for the future.” We look forward to a new journey towards an evolving church environment that embraces and supports a new Pacific generation of Christian faith worshippers and believers that puts the revelation of a Jesus and Kingdom culture first, embraced through the gift by God of our Pacific culture and languages.

The challenge for us is this: How do we ensure that this generation hears the message in a relevant way – in the midst of the thousands of other voices vying for their attention? In 1 Chronicles 12, we read about the armies of David preparing for battle. God had revealed the time was right for David to overtake Saul, and in this particular account, the writer traces through the genealogy of David’s army and the tribes that served him. In particular verse 32 speaks out: “the sons of Issachar who had understanding of the times.”

Just like the sons of Issachar, we need to understand our times and know what we ought to do if we are going to effectively reach this and future generations. We need to stay relevant and in touch with a dramatically changing world without compromising the integrity and power of the message of Christ.²

An outline of areas to explore for future aspirations to help build a strong, resilient, and thriving **Christ-centred** Pacific church community includes (in no particular order):

- 1) Ongoing personal and professional development for Church leadership (a strong emphasis on laypeople, youth leaders, elders, ordained leaders) – biblical literacy!
- 2) Reviewing & resetting decision making structures
- 3) Building online capability and platforms for church
- 4) Delivering cultural language training
- 5) Developing creative arts & performance ministry
- 6) Discipleship and leadership training

Unless the LORD builds the house, the builders labour in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the guards stand watch in vain. (Psalm 127:1)

Where there is no vision, the people perish (Proverbs 29:18)

² Brian Houston, *Live Love Lead* (HarperCollinsPublishers, 2015), 205-206