

Address to the Ministry of Social Development

Pacific church and social service leaders fono

20-21 June Auckland

I'd like to begin by saying Kia orana tatou katoatoa i te aroa maata o te Atua. A warm Pacific greeting to you all. I acknowledge the Ministry of Social Development for hosting this fono; the Minister, the Hon. Anne Tolley, other honourable Members of Parliament present, and all representatives of MSD. Similarly, I acknowledge the leaders of our Pacific communities and churches gathered here.

I am appreciative to Liz Tanielu (National Director Pacific, MSD) for the invitation to be here and the opportunity to address you on behalf of our Pacific church leaders. I have been asked to contribute to our fono by way of commenting on the role of the church with our Pacific peoples. I am mindful of the diversity of our church traditions and of our respective experiences. Considering the limitation of time also, I will try to do justice by offering broad strokes in portraying the development of the Pacific church and its impact on our Pacific communities here in New Zealand.

Our Pacific peoples have increasingly been part of New Zealand society since the turn of the early 20th century. From supporting New Zealand's efforts in both the First and Second World Wars and then bolstering its labour force since the 1950s, Pacific peoples have productively contributed in more ways than one to the development of New Zealand as a nation. We need only to look at the composition of the All Blacks as an example of this as well as the calibre and achievements of people in this very room.

First-generation Pacific pioneers who came here were people of faith; people who belonged to the church in their respective homelands. Whether from Protestant or Catholic traditions, they naturally joined those churches when arriving to New Zealand. For example, Pacific Islanders who were part of the London Missionary Society churches in the islands (LMS), were incorporated into the Congregational Union of New Zealand (CUNZ).¹

¹ Jim Bernard Chambers, *A Peculiar People: Congregationalism in New Zealand 1840-1984, Including The Congregational Union of New Zealand 1884-1984* (Levin: Congregational Union of New Zealand, 1984), 125. As early as the 1920s missionaries in the Pacific were urged to notify the Congregational Union of New Zealand when members of their churches were visiting New Zealand so hospitality could be offered.

As the church was a core component of community life in the islands, it also became that here in New Zealand. The incorporation of Pacific Islanders in the church in New Zealand evolved into the establishment of Pacific congregations.² These congregations were initially pan-Pacific in nature (PIC) which enabled different island groups to worship and work together in ways that forged a co-operative life and identity. The term “Pacific Islander” may not be one that best identifies us respectively, but it implies a collective and collaborative identity in which our combined numbers meant strength to effect change in the church and in New Zealand society. Even the establishment and expansion of island-specific churches are encompassed in this identity despite their distinctive character. Pacific churches not only provided a place for Pacific Islanders to belong, they also kept Pacific communities connected throughout the country. As such, the chief assets of Pacific churches as the “ecclesia” or “ekalesia” are its people base and robust communal spirit.

The growing Pacific population enabled them to be more visible in our churches and suburbs, but it did not necessarily alleviate their challenges. More often than not, it was the church in its

² Nokise, Uili Feleterika. (1978). *A history of the Pacific Islanders' Congregational Church in New Zealand*, Master of Theology thesis, Dunedin: University of Otago.

formative years through the likes of Rev Challis, who welcomed and assisted Pacific folk to find a home and employment, including reuniting them with family.³ These aspects, together with supporting people regarding law and immigration issues, were an integral part of ministry adopted by the increasing Pacific clergy and lay leadership in the church. From its earliest years, Pacific churches in New Zealand have and continue to exercise strong pastoral, advocacy, and social justice roles among Pacific peoples.

As religious institutions, the formational and transformational capacity of Pacific churches upon its members cannot be underestimated. Apart from the proclamation of the gospel message, Pacific churches are also cultural repositories in which Christian beliefs and practices are shaped by cultural perspectives. This educational or instructional aspect is to encourage positive attitudes and appropriate behaviour in one's own life, family, community, and environment. In essence, churches are agents of change. Moreover, they seek to be a positive influence within society.

³ Robert L. Challis, *Social Problems of Non-Maori Polynesians in New Zealand*, Technical Paper No. 41, presented at the South Pacific Commission, Sydney, 1953, 3. Challis was a missionary and minister of the Congregational Church who served in both the Pacific and New Zealand.

However, there are obvious gaps in this compact picture I have tried to paint; gaps that evoke questions. How can Pacific churches as agents of change make a positive difference to the current challenges of Pacific peoples? What is our gospel response to the economic and employment disparities our people face? What part can we play to alleviate the plight of the increasing number who are homeless and living on the streets or in their cars? How might our theology engage with cultural assumptions about family violence or the no smacking law so that the wellbeing and dignity of family members are upheld? In what ways can Pacific churches work more collaboratively with each other, with NGOs, and with the Ministry of Social Development to ensure positive outcomes for our children and their families?

These questions and issues are not easy to answer. Yet, they are important enough to, at least, deserve our attention and attempt. We have to address these challenging issues because the truth is that Pacific churches are not immune from the struggles of its peoples. The reality, though uncomfortable and disturbing for us to hear, is that varying forms of abuse and violence happen in churches too. Within and amongst some of our families, congregations, and church leaders, there are

perpetrators and victims of violence and abuse. As Pacific churches, we cannot afford to be silent, invisible, or irrelevant when it comes to responding to the needs of vulnerable Pacific peoples.

Despite some shortcomings, Pacific churches have a history of care and support. We have a cultural value affirming that community matters to us. We have a theological conviction believing that change for the better is possible. Therefore, we still have something to offer our people and New Zealand society as a whole. If we are part of the problem, we must also be part of the solution.

I am not advocating that Pacific churches should become social service providers, although some churches may be already doing this. But I do believe that our proclamation of Christ is also through loving service. We are called to love God and neighbour (Mt. 22: 37-39). Christ taught that his followers would be known by their capacity to love others (Jn. 13: 35). This is not merely a matter of exercising religion; it is a matter of helping to make a real difference to improve the social well-being of Pacific peoples; particularly the disadvantaged. If there was ever a people or group who should stand up, say

something, and do something to this effect “for the least of these” (Mt. 25:40), as Jesus said, then it should be the church. And if there was ever a time to do so, it is now. Meitaki maata – thank you.