

# 5. A common conception of justice underlies Pacific churches' message on climate change

**Abstract:** This article presents an overview of the role mainstream churches can play in mitigating the climate change crisis in the Pacific and their role in facilitating climate induced migration. It builds on earlier work by the author (Cass, 2018; 2020) with a focus on Fiji, Tonga and Papua New Guinea. Both Catholic and Protestant churches share a concern for the future of the planet based on the principles of economic, social and climate justice, which complement moral and ecumenical imperatives. The article examines what message the churches convey through the media and the theology that underlines them.

**Keywords:** Bougainville, churches, climate change, Fiji, migration, Pacific, Papua New Guinea, Pope Francis, Tonga

PHILIP CASS

*Editor, Pacific Journalism Review*

We are no longer in need of scientific wisdom to prove beyond doubt, to each and every one of us, that the Climate Change is real. It is true and real and above all it is already destroying our homes.—*Anglican Bishop of Vanua Levu and Taveuni, Apimeleki Qiliho*

Creation is a gift, but at the same time it is a responsibility that God has given us to take care of.—*Catholic Archbishop of Suva, Peter Loy Chong*

## Introduction

THE CATHOLIC Archbishop of Suva, Peter Loy Chong, was once asked about climate change by a journalist: ‘Some people still find it difficult to understand what is the role of the Church in this sphere. Is it not rather an economic and political problem?’

To which he replied: ‘It is not simply a matter of something external, of economy or politics. It is a question of respect for God and his creation and of alleviating the pain of those who suffer’ (Lozano, 2018).

Across the Pacific Christianity remains the dominant religion and is embedded into every domain. Churches are regarded as more trustworthy and reliable than the government in many countries and command a respect not always common in some parts of the West. Christianity in the Pacific has been described as ‘the one set of ideas that is both widely shared and highly valued by the majority of citizens of each state’. (Mitchell & Grills, 2017) This article focuses on the views and actions of the three mainstream churches in the Pacific, which is to say the Catholics, Anglicans and Methodists (and the larger comity of the World Council of Churches), all of which, whatever their historical and theological differences, share a strong social justice perspective.

As Reverend James Bhagwan, the secretary of communication for the Methodist Church in Fiji, put it: ‘The Methodist Church is the largest and oldest faith community in Fiji. When the Church speaks, the people do pay attention’. Bhagwan said that churches had another advantage: They spoke in a way the people understood. ‘Non-governmental organisations and government have their own language. The people tend to speak in more spiritual language’ (Wheeling, 2017).

An argument might be raised about whether the stance on mainstream churches on climate change emerges from theology or whether the theology is shaped by social, economic and political interests, but that is, perhaps, a matter for a separate article. What seems certain is that the pronouncements and actions of the churches on climate change have political implications. However, some scholars like Luetz and Nunn (2020) have argued that the influence of spirituality on climate change decisions has been too often ignored and needs to be acknowledged.

White (2019) has argued that the role of Christianity in climate change in the Pacific has been greatly under-examined by academics, while he himself reports with some perception on the role of Christian symbolism and traditional Fijian practices in helping to make the necessary relocation of a village less traumatic. He also makes the important distinction between the mainstream churches in the Pacific and the more recently arrived fundamentalist American sects, which often proselytise and act from an End Times perspective (White, 2019).

The mainstream churches have taken well-publicised social justice-based stands on climate change and migration, such as Pope Francis’s ‘Don’t be afraid!’ campaign (Associated Press, 2017) and the World Council of Churches’ Otin Tai declaration (WCC, 2004; Pope, 2018) which declares:

We . . . affirm our commitment to care for the earth as our response to God’s love for creation;  
 Declare as forcefully as we can the urgency of the threat of human-induced climate change to the lives, livelihoods, societies, cultures and eco-systems of the Pacific Islands;

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Dedicate ourselves to engaging our churches in education and action on climate change;  
Commit ourselves to ecumenical collaboration among our churches and with other religious and secular bodies in the Pacific.

It is clear that there can be no such thing as ‘Catholic climate change’ or ‘Anglican climate change’ or ‘Methodist climate change’. This would be an absurdity. Climate change is, by default, an ecumenical issue.

It has to be kept in mind that while concepts like social justice are just as understandable and acceptable in a secular as much as a religious context, the churches are not just super-NGOs with a vaguely spiritual flavour; their commitment to meeting the challenge of climate change stems from a profoundly religious foundation and a common conception of justice (Phan, 2014). Kempf (2009) argues that:

. . . . there can perhaps be heard, in these appeals by the ‘weak’ to the humanity and decency of ‘the great’, a distant echo of the Christian injunction to help the poor and downtrodden of the earth. . . the Christian churches in the Pacific are . . . playing an important role in highlighting how climate change will impact negatively on those living in the respective island states. At the heart of the lobby work done by the Christian churches is the ever-more-urgent issue of displacement and resettlement, especially in the case of those Pacific island states that will be most strongly exposed to climate change.

Pope Francis’s encyclical, *Laudato Si*, has been shared across ecumenical lines and this has been cited as inspiring political co-operation leading up to pivotal international agreements during the 2015 climate change summit in Paris and ‘a coup for global discourse and action’ (Pope Francis, 2015; Burke, 2018; Bausch, 2016).

According to Pabst (2016), Pope Francis argues in *Laudato Si* for

the importance of natural law and a divinely created cosmic order that are not reducible to human will, but instead require careful judgement and prudence. We need to be wary of claims about measureless acquisition and endless growth in a finite world in which humankind transgresses all manner of physical and moral boundaries at its own peril.

Pabst (2016) goes on to cite former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams’ reading of *Laudato Si*, which argues that the materialism that characterises the dominant modern ideologies is in fact deeply anti-material and destructive of nature:

The plain thereness of the physical world we inhabit tells us from our first emergence into consciousness that our will is not the foundation

of everything—and so its proper working is essentially about creative adjustment to an agenda set not by our fantasy, but by the qualities and complexities of what we encounter. The material world tells us that to be human is to be in dialogue with what is other: what is physically other, what is humanly other in the solid three-dimensionality of other persons, ultimately what is divinely other.

Elsewhere in the Pacific, churches have incorporated existing beliefs into the environmental message. In New Zealand Māori spirituality has been woven into the wider Christian discourse, not just in the sense of *kaitianga* (guardianship), but in *manaakitanga* (welcoming).

In September 2020 Cardinal Soane Mafi of Tonga told Catholics gathered for a mass to mark the start of a week dedicated to climate change that Mother Nature was crying because of the harm being done to creation.

‘Her tears kept on dropping like a mother,’ Cardinal Mafi said. (Fangongo, 2020)

### **The current situation**

That the situation in the Pacific is grave does not need to be repeated. In March 2018, New Zealand’s Royal Society Te Apārangi warned that even if all the country commitments from the 2015 Paris Agreement were met, the latest data showed that by the end of the 21st century the global climate was likely to be operating at 3°C above pre-industrial levels. This is substantially higher than the Paris target of less than 2°C (Royal Society, 2018).

People who live on the coast in Oceania are on the front line of climate change induced sea level rise. Average sea level rises globally have risen about 20 centimetres since 1990 and expected to rise by up to another 30 centimetres by 2050. King tides and storm surges superimposed on rising seas are therefore happening more frequently and more powerfully. People living on small islands or low lying land near the coast are like ‘an early warning system’ to others of the threat of long-term sea level rise, the canary in the coal mine. (Caritas, 2018)

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted just how vulnerable the small islands states of the Pacific are. There has been real concern that the COVID-19 pandemic has been so overwhelming that climate change has been pushed into the background. Some see parallels with the slow action on climate change to the slow and chaotic handling of the pandemic in some countries. Chief Executive Officer of Samoa’s Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, Ulu Bismarck Crawley, said the island state’s vulnerability was exacerbated when the issue was not dealt with immediately and resources were limited (Pacific Climate Change Portal, 2020).

The Methodist church in New Zealand has called for COVID-19 recovery projects to be linked to global warming (Methodist Church in New Zealand, 2020).

Climate change is already affecting many countries. In Fiji, parts of the country's main island will disappear because of rising sea levels. People living in 45 coastal villages are in line to be relocated because of rising sea level. Four communities have already been moved and others have asked for government help in relocating. Villages already moved include one village in the province of Bua, which has been relocated to Yadua and there were plans to move the village of Tavea (O Flaherty & Pontifex, 2018; Cooke, 2020).

Speaking in August 2018, Catholic Archbishop Chong warned that it was now 'a matter of survival' to help people affected by climate change. In an interview with Aid to the Church in Need, he said: 'We can see it with our own eyes—the ocean levels are increasing each year, Viti Levu is disappearing' (Lozano, 2018).

Before, on our island, everyone tried to build their homes near the water. It was seen as a sign of development. The people living close to the sea considered themselves more civilized than the people from the mountains. My grandfather himself built his house just 50 meters away from the sea. The air was good, and it was easy to fish. But now, many houses have to be rebuilt closer to the hills, because the sea is approaching dangerously. (Lozano, 2018)

The Archbishop told the International Catholic Migration Commission that relocating coastal villages involved cultural disruption. If people had a choice they would not move because it meant leaving ancestral burial grounds and culture (International Catholic Migration Commission, 2020).

Elsewhere in the Pacific, people are already on the move from the Carteret Islands to Bougainville in Papua New Guinea. In the Carterets, the land has become too salty for agriculture due to sea rise, making it difficult for people to support themselves. In 2006, Islanders formed a group called Tulele Peisa, which means 'sailing the waves on our own', to formulate plans to move more than half the population to Bougainville by 2020. Caritas, the Catholic church's international aid and development body, has helped about 20 families, consisting of 85 people, to move to a resettlement area at Tinputz on Bougainville, but even there they are facing seashore erosion. This has led to some of them moving even further inland. Tulele Peisa's Ursula Rakova has been critical of what she says is a lack of support from the autonomous Bougainville government (Caritas, 2018; Rakova, 2014; Pope, 2018; RNZ, 2020)

In Tonga, the population has also suffered from the effect of severe weather. In 2018, Cyclone Gita, a category five storm, devastated the kingdom after causing damage in Fiji and Samoa. Caritas was involved in building new homes and providing shelter. Caritas and the Tonga National Youth Congress also distributed

water bottles to 124 households. In Catholic parishes 20 litre water bottles were distributed and water tanks installed (Cass, 2018b).

Gita hit Tonga with winds of up to 200kph. It has been estimated about 5700 people sought shelter in evacuation centres. According to UNICEF, about 80,000 people in Tonga, including 32,000 children, were at risk from Cyclone Gita. Damage was widespread with severe crop damage and many houses destroyed. As part of the recovery process 515 food packs were distributed with the help of the Seventh Day Adventist church to elderly and vulnerable people (Latu 2018; Cass, 2018a). Tonga has continued to suffer from cyclones of increased severity, with Cyclone Harold causing devastation in early 2020 (Al Jazeera, 2020).

### **Beyond morality**

One of the churches' more significant roles is to promote the idea that the present crisis is something that lies beyond morality or ethical behaviour. As Professor Charles Reid of the University of St. Thomas argues: 'While climate change is certainly a moral issue, it is something much larger and more significant than that. It is a threat to the common good'. The common good, he argues, is an Aristotelian concept which says that it is the community's duty to create and maintain the conditions which ensure the community's members lead a good life by addressing those issues which affect the lives of everybody (Reid, 2016). This, Reid argued, was at the basis of Pope Francis's *Laudato Si*, an appeal to the common good of all mankind.

Pope Francis is the latest of a line of pontiffs to call on the world to address a range of crises, a process that has been accompanied by the development of the church's teachings on social justice which guide its work and thinking in many areas (Phan, 2014).

The concept of the common good is one of the key components of social justice teaching. Chief of these in relation to climate change are subsidiarity, which requires that those most affected by change should be able to contribute to decision making; stewardship, people's role as guardians of the earth; solidarity, 'recognising others as our brothers and sisters and actively working for their good' and the preferential option for the poor and the most vulnerable (Caritas, n.d.).

The idea of the common good and the concept of justice are echoed in other churches and in statements in support of the right of those affected by climate change. At a meeting of the World Council of Churches Working Group on Care for Creation and Climate Justice in Jamaica, Rathgeber (2011) argued:

The concept of fairness contends that there is a fundamental right to a dignified existence and a right to have access to the resources that sustain this existence. The concept of 'justice' is considered . . . as a critical principle, as climate change is a problem for everyone while the responsibilities are distributed unevenly. 'Justice' in this context means that no one has

more right to use a common global asset as e.g. climate than anyone else. 'Justice' also means that people and countries who are affected by poverty and marginalisation should not only be treated differently with respect to their contribution to climate protection, but should also be given additional development support.

In New Zealand, Māori spirituality and Pacific culture has had a strong influence on the expression of several churches. In May 2016, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of New Zealand released a statement on the Day of Prayer for Refugees and Migrants: 'How well are we as a country offering *manaakitanga*—welcome and hospitality—to those recently arriving to our shores?' (New Zealand Catholic Bishops' Conference, 2016)

The Methodist Church of Aotearoa New Zealand's statement on climate change says: 'We affirm a deep regard for the diversity of all forms of life, and refresh our guardianship responsibilities for *Papatuanuku* earth as our common home'. It continues:

As a church in Aotearoa we are in solidarity with the Pacific region and in particular with Churches of the region. Our contributions to climate justice are based on Aotearoa as a Pacific nation.

Our church's faith based values are unique. Our approach to climate justice then comes from love as well as just moral obligation.

In this land we will ensure that Māori cultural values are embedded into climate justice decisions and activities that include concepts of *kaitiakitanga* guardianship and *whakapapa* kinship relations.

Samoa, Tongan, Fijian, and Rotuman values also enhance our mission and commitment to climate justice, through concepts such as *faaaloalo* respect and *sootaga* quality of relational life. (Methodist Church, 2018)

In line with broader developments among the different Christian churches, a strong sense of ecumenism is evident in many statements on climate change. Pope Francis and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople issued a statement urging people to be respectful and responsible toward creation. (Glatz, 2017) The Archbishop of Constantinople, H.A.H. Bartholomew, has referred to the 'irreparable distortion' of the relationship between humanity and the environment and condemned the 'illogical and selfish use of creation by a few' (Bartholomew, 2014 ix-x).

The Methodist church in Aotearoa New Zealand has stated:

Climate Change and inequality represent the principal challenges facing humanity in our day... We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one social and environmental crisis....to hear the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor. (Methodist Church, 2018)

As a natural corollary of their part in promoting justice and a moral, ethical and spiritual approach to the danger of climate change and migration, church leaders have also been engaged in publicly proclaiming the position of the churches on these matters.

The churches have a long history of involvement with the media in the Pacific. Indeed in almost every Pacific country it was Christian missions who first put local languages into written form and printed the Bible in indigenous tongues before, very soon afterwards, producing those countries' first newspapers.

The churches remain involved in a range of media, from newspapers to radio stations and through international co-operation and co-ordination through bodies like the World Association for Christian Communication. In some cases they have dealt with climate change directly through church-owned publications such as Papua New Guinea's Tok Pisin weekly *Wantok* (Cass, 2020) or they may use secular media to promote their views. They have also been identified by secular organisations and political bodies as being organs with an enormous role to play in the climate change crisis, especially in helping to preserve indigenous cultures and traditions (Cass, 2018).

While Pope Francis and Patriarch Bartholomew may capture the attention of a global audience, regional leaders have also spoken firmly through the media and, in an example of solidarity, given witness to the realities of climate change and its dangers. In nations where Christian leaders, from village pastors to bishops, are powerful community leaders, they exercise influence through the media as well as from the pulpit.

After his elevation as the first Cardinal of Tonga, Reid declared that Cardinal Soane Patita Mafi had 'clearly been given a responsibility to the world: to stand at the front line of looming climate catastrophe and carry the message of a world at risk to all of humanity' (Reid, 2016).

In an interview with the Jesuit magazine *America*, Mafi spoke about the 'permanent vulnerability' low lying Pacific islands such as Tonga faced from global warming (McDermott, 2015). Elsewhere he has spoken about the key role the churches play in Tongan society and local communities.

Our local Caritas Tonga in partnership with Caritas International has been initiating and encouraging community projects in villages and parishes that are part of these efforts against climate change. Such initiatives, for example, include planting trees along shorelines as measures of soil protection and windscreens protecting buildings'. (Grantham, 2018)

Like Fiji, the kingdom is predominantly Wesleyan, with smaller Catholic and Anglican congregations. The Mormons have a growing influence, even in the royal family. While he was in Rome in 2015 at the time of Cardinal Mafi's



elevation, King Tupou VI spoke with Pope Francis about climate change, the first time, according to some sources, that the Pope had explicitly addressed the climate concerns of small island states.

The Cardinal has described Pacific island nations as the victims of climate change. He said Island nations had to work together to present a strong collective voice telling first world countries to stop carbon gas emissions. Cardinal Mafi said nobody could deal with the crisis of global warming alone:

The crisis of climate change is a crisis of our common home—mother earth—a crisis of humanity. We church leaders must first really understand and be convinced of climate change and its urgent consequences that affect our people. This is a task for all. (Mafi, 2019)

Churches had to engage with stakeholders and other players who could contribute to solutions to reducing risks, saving lives, rebuilding communities and safeguarding the full dignity of the human person. Cardinal Mafi said church leaders should take a stand and work closely together in building a spirit of subsidiarity and stewardship with their people.

Church leaders like me have an important role to play in such critical situations. It is an integral part of our vocation to promote the unity of the human family and to protect human dignity, particularly in moments where the weak and most vulnerable, (the ‘poor’), are at great risk. Church leaders need to be always aware of their divine mandate that involves this specific ‘preferential option for the poor’. Church leaders should be working together under this divine imperative so they can effectively give a global voice to the voiceless. They are called to accompany people in their misery experiences from climate change where in many cases in some Pacific island nations it [has] led to forced displacement and migration. (Mafi, 2019)

There are two ecumenical bodies in Tonga; the Tonga National Council of Churches where the three mainline churches—Wesleyan, Anglican and Catholic come together. The other body is the Tonga National Forum of Church Leaders, which consists of all churches in Tonga, including the Mormons.

Cardinal Mafi said government agencies, NGOs and other civil societies used the two fora to meet with Church leaders. They knew its potential for working out strategies that could effectively respond to humanitarian crises such as climate change and forced displacement and migration.

Cardinal Mafi’s concerns have been echoed by the Anglican Archbishop of Polynesia, Dr Winston Halapua, who said the areas that he walked and fished as a boy with his father on the island of Pangaimotu in Tonga had disappeared.

The rising sea level speaks loudly for action. For some of us from Polynesia the truth is as plain as writing on the wall. Our land and our livelihood are drowning and others refuse to see it. How can we tell our grandchildren the home they were to inherit has been destroyed? There is no justice in that so we are fighting rather than drowning'. (Diocesan News, 2015)

In September 2006, the New Zealand Catholic Bishops' Conference issued a statement on environmental issues, which said, in part:

For the peoples of the Pacific, climate change is already among the most urgent threats facing them. Rising temperatures and sea levels, and the greater intensity of storms and natural disasters, are already affecting the food and water supply for people on low-lying islands in different parts of the Pacific. Long before these [Pacific] islands disappear into the sea, life on many Pacific Islands will become untenable. It is predicted that in the Pacific alone, there may be a million environmental refugees before the end of this century. (New Zealand Catholic Bishops' Conference, 2006)

In April 2018, the Bishop of Auckland, Bishop Patrick Dunn, who is president of the New Zealand Catholic Bishops' Conference, signed a call by faith leaders from across the Commonwealth calling for governments to take urgent action on climate change and to make every effort to keep the increase in global temperatures below 1.5 degrees. The letter to Commonwealth leaders said:

Not even the remotest corner of the Commonwealth remains unaffected or unthreatened by the impacts of climate change. Commonwealth citizens, especially the poorest, struggle to thrive amidst our changing climate.... In the Pacific, rising sea levels threaten the existence of whole countries. (Bowling, 2018)

One of the most vocal clerical voices on climate change in the Pacific has been Archbishop Peter Loy Chong of Suva. He has made it clear that he sees the issue not just in secular terms, but as a matter of the most profound faith. In January 2019, Archbishop Chong said churches in the Pacific had to commit themselves fully to the environment and combating climate change. He told Radio New Zealand:

For us in the small islands, this is a big issue . . . The churches really need to take this on. That the voice of the churches, not only the churches but the grassroots communities, that means the island people. We need to empower these voices so that these voices become recognised in the international community. (Radio New Zealand, 2019)

Speaking after the third anniversary of *Laudato Si*, which calls for an ‘ecological conversion,’ Archbishop Chong said: ‘Ecological conversion doesn’t happen in isolation. The conversion also has to be something internal in the heart of each individual. Creation is a gift, but at the same time it is a responsibility that God has given us to take care of’ (O Flaherty & Pontifex, 2018).

As a senior church leader with profound pastoral responsibilities, the crisis is also a personal one for the Archbishop:

How am I to console, to accompany the suffering that I see in my people? Their cries, their pain makes me think of the psalms of the Old Testament and of how they call on God to hear the cry of his people. For example in Psalm 12: 13, where we pray, ‘How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?’ Our faith teaches us to transform our suffering and anguish into prayer, into pleas that God may hear the cry of my people. (Lozano, 2018)

Whether participating in concrete action, or in promoting issues surrounding climate change-induced migration to their congregations, the churches in the Pacific draw on deep religious traditions for guidance and to formulate responses. Advocating for action to stop global warming, helping climate change migrants move to new homes or helping communities be more resilient are, for the churches, not just political or economic actions, but profound questions of justice and deeply held expressions of faith.

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*Dr Philip Cass is the editor and reviews editor of Pacific Journalism Review. He was formerly graduate programme leader in the Department of Communication Studies at Unitec in Auckland. He has been a journalism and media educator in the Arabian Gulf, Australia, United Kingdom, Fiji and Papua New Guinea. His doctoral thesis, People, Politics and Press in Papua New Guinea, 1950-1975, explored how the press in PNG reflected the rapid political and social changes from the end of the Second World War to the creation of an independent nation.*

[cass.philip@gmail.com](mailto:cass.philip@gmail.com)