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The Namoli Framework

“Steering the Vaka of Hermeneutics in Oceania”

PREAMBLE

The primary purpose of this document is to inform the member churches of the Pacific Conference of Churches and the Pacific Theological College, and the member schools of the South Pacific Association of Theological Schools, of the results of a week long deliberation on the theme *“Rethinking the Journey and Course of our Hermeneutics in Oceania”*. The second purpose is to set a platform for collective hermeneutical *talanoa* and reflections with the understanding that it is incomplete.

The methodology adopted in this framework aims to ground our *talanoa* and reflections with in our various Oceanic contexts by drawing on the life giving themes of our diverse communities. To this end a variety of different Oceanic terms have been purposefully instead of words only from the Greek and western traditions. In sharing the sacred words of our place we claim the ground on which we stand, the Ocean on which navigate as our starting points and so together learn more of one another as we weave our Oceanic framework together.

The Fijian word *“Vanua”*, which means, in simple terms, the intricate relationships between humans, land, sea and air is used in this document to denote the Greek word the *“Oikos”*. There are other Oceanic terms in Polynesia, Melanesia and Micronesia that have similar meanings. The reason for using *“Vanua”* in this document is because the consultation on the above mentioned theme was held in Fiji and the need to provide consistency through out the document. At other points in the document terminology from other parts of Oceania have utilised in a similar way to ground our framework in our Oceanic context.

One other important point that is that the affirmations are to be read as a whole, meaning that each of the affirmations is read in light of the other affirmations. For example, affirmation 5 is to be read in light of affirmation 1.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We, the members of the consultation met in the village of Namoli, Lautoka, Fiji from the 13th – 18th of March 2011 deliberated on the theme *“Rethinking the Journey and Course of our Hermeneutics in Oceania”* with the objective of producing a framework for hermeneutical learning and education for the region of Oceania.

We give praise and honour to God for bringing us together this week; for the grace which enables us to renew our desire to connect as people of Oceania, living in the one “*Vanua*” (*Oikos, Fenua, Maneaba, Hanua*) of God; for the inspiration to affirm our diversity as well as our need for unity; for the friendships strengthened and/or forged during the week; for the sustenance and nourishment to our spirit, minds and our bodies.

We gratefully acknowledge the deep generosity and the warm hospitality of the *Taukei Vidilo*, Ratu Viliame Bouwalu Saumaimuri and his people, and Rev. Savenaca Wilson, the Superintendent of the Namoli division of the Methodist Church in Fiji and Rotuma. It is through such generosity and kindness that we see God’s work of redemption and transformation continuing. Such graciousness speaks to us of hope and demonstrates that our destiny is in our hands.

We duly acknowledge the effort of cooperation between our three ecumenical organisations, namely, the Pacific Conference of Churches (PCC), God’s Pacific Peoples Programme of the Pacific Theological College (PTC) and the South Pacific Association of Theological Schools (SPATS) in bringing us together. Such cooperation bears testimony to our commitment to the prayer of our Lord in John 17:11.

The 82 participants of the consultation representing 24 member churches of the PCC and 15 of SPATS member schools present the following framework for the consideration of the churches in Oceania.

AFFIRMATIONS

1. We affirm that our objective in doing hermeneutics in Oceania is to nurture and fulfil the principles of love of God; and love of neighbour (Luke 10:27).
2. We affirm that Oceanic hermeneutics means relevantly interpreting and communicating the meaning of our Scriptures. We do this by being informed by the Word, understanding who we are and the realities of our life situations which are revealed in and through the interactive language between the text and the context.
3. We affirm that the understanding of “text” includes the biblical text, the ecological text, personal and community text, and the cultural text in its rituals, languages, symbols and art forms of song, dance, stories, myths, legends, and poetry.
4. We affirm that our “*Vanua*” (*Oikos, Fenua, Maneaba, Hanua*) in Oceania is our home. Key to the process of doing hermeneutics within our home is dialogue and sharing stories.
5. We affirm that there is not one but many forms of hermeneutical methodologies and plurality of meaning. The basis of our hermeneutics is understanding and appreciation of our diversities, praxis and evaluation of our hermeneutical experience.
6. We affirm that the oceanic hermeneutical reflections are rooted in: *lotu*, human experience, faith, scripture, culture and tradition.¹

¹ *Lotu*: this word, common to many Pacific contexts, is used here to convey the mystery and power of the human encounter with God.

WEAVING THE FRAMEWORK OF HERMENEUTICS IN OCEANIA

In respect of the Pacific Conference of Churches' call to "*Rethink Oceania*", hermeneutics becomes an essential aspect in understanding our region's pertinent issues and the discernment of God's will. This framework calls for a deeper appreciation of the history of our Christian hermeneutical legacy, who we are and where we stand. It is about claiming our *Turanga Waewae* with confidence.² It also calls for a serious hermeneutical critique of pertinent issues and trends that are rapidly and dramatically changing our societies

1. The history of our Christian hermeneutical legacy embraces the contribution of the Jewish scriptures, Greek mythologies, the Fathers of the early Church, the Reformation, the early Missionary experience in Oceania, and it also includes modern methodologies, theories and praxis (for example; hermeneutics of suspicion, gender and post-colonialism).
2. *Lotu* is the basis of hermeneutics. There must be "text" and context in *maroro*³ (dialogue, *talanoa*, *soalaupule*) and that such dialogue must include the participation of our community people. Therefore there is an on-going need to develop new translations and revisions of our Oceanic biblical texts.
3. The *mana* (energy, power) of our theological and hermeneutical reflections is God. As such, our hermeneutical journey for self-determination about life, creation and humanity must be rooted in the Triune God.
4. The complex political situations and conflicts in some of our island nations call us urgently to prayer and a hermeneutics and praxis of peace.
5. The principle "unity in diversity" is central to the hermeneutics of ecumenism in our "*Vanua*". The universality of the church, the localness and the prophetic nature of mission are the strands that weave us together.
6. An acceptance of diversity and differences, and openness to new ways of understanding our "*Vanua*" in Oceania are signs of Christian hope.
7. The ecological hermeneutics in our "*Vanua*" of Oceania traditionally and historically has been and continues to be connected to and grounded in God our Creator, the gifts of God's creation land, sea, air and the interaction between ourselves and these gifts.
8. The "*Vanua*" of Oceania has four main rules: honouring Gods work in Creation, taking only what is sufficient for one's needs; cleaning of the house as everyone's responsibility; and an openness to reviewing its contents so that the "*Vanua*" remains inclusive.
9. The concepts of power and authority are reference points to the analysis of socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for all people.
10. Recognise that our "*Vanua*" in Oceania includes also a diversity of religions and religious faiths and so our hermeneutics must welcome inter-faith cooperation.

² The Maori word *turanga waewae* is used here to convey the empowerment and connectedness that our Oceanic communities have in being deeply rooted in their own place.

³ An I-Kiribati word that means dialogue, discussions, etc.

11. The *Kautaha*⁴ is presented as a work-oriented model for governance and leadership. It is where information and thoughts are shared, and where reflections and cultural criticisms take place.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are directed towards our three ecumenical organisations

1. To facilitate:
 - 1.1 the translation of the Namoli Document into local languages.
 - 1.2 the development of a theology of ecology, that is based on the Trinitarian model and which highlights the community and its relationships of duties and responsibilities. This will help to restore a sense of respect and sacredness to relationships and move us away from a purely anthropological understanding of our relationship to the environment.
 - 1.3 the development of a curriculum for theological schools and other levels of Christian education on Oceania hermeneutics which includes ecumenism, ecology, peace, development and gender. Our Oceania communities need to be interpreting our contexts in a critical and informed way.
 - 1.4 the development of a methodology in story-telling as it is a key tool in Oceania hermeneutics. Such a methodology is to include the diversity of traditional and cultural story-telling processes, structures and tools such as the various art forms of dance, song and poetry.
 - 1.5 the development of a hermeneutics of inclusivity that is to be a constant in our hermeneutics on ecumenism, ecology, peace, development and self-determination.
 - 1.6 the development and promotion of a model of partnership of persons that respects the sacredness of relationships, promotes inclusiveness and mutual understanding of tasks and roles
2. To conduct a thorough critique of secular terminologies and concepts which are being adopted into the language of the “*Vanua*” in Oceania for example gender, development, security and good governance.
3. To provide sound theological and biblical reflections on the “Rethinking Oceania” concept paper.
4. To conduct research on the hermeneutical experience of “colonialism” in the biblical narratives; the findings of the research can inform the interpretation of our continuing experience of neo-colonialism in Oceania today.
5. To give greater space for women’s stories to be told and heard in ecumenical and denominational forums and activities.

⁴ *Kautaha* is a Tongan word that means ‘cooperate’, ‘become one’ or ‘work together’ and it is the common name for local teams of day workers/labourers or work party in villages.

6. To provide space for stories of the “forgotten” ones to be told and heard in ecumenical and denominational forums and activities.⁵
7. To collaborate in creating space for inter-faith dialogue, understanding, and fellowship in our ecumenical hermeneutics.
8. To *maroro (talanoa, soalaupule, dialogue)* with Christian organisations who are not members of the institutional ecumenical family.
9. To facilitate ecumenical responses of solidarity with our Oceanic communities in crisis; committing ourselves to prayer days, pastoral visitations, informed actions to address underlying issues and using our ecumenical platform to raise public awareness of issues and concerns.

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Namoli Village, Lautoka
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⁵ The word “forgotten” is used here in the sense of those who are usually not present in these forums; the vulnerable members of our vanua who may include differently-abled people, young people, single mothers, and people living with HIV-AIDS.