



Faith and health in the time of COVID-19

By Aletia Dundas

In a recent article on the Devpolicy Blog, authors Monica Minnegal and Peter Dwyer [expressed alarm](#) about a message shared on social media, that ‘PNG people will not be impacted by coronavirus disease’. These sorts of messages are alarming, and are certainly [not limited to Papua New Guinea or the Pacific](#). But it’s not just those from external perspectives and worldviews who are challenging

such harmful messages. Throughout the Pacific a strong movement of Christian leaders is cautioning against unhelpful messages when it comes to disasters. These leaders are providing alternative messages that support government directives and medical advice, and they are offering biblical references to back up their words.

In a [pastoral message](#) to Christians in the region, Rev James Bhagwan, General Secretary of the Pacific Conference of Churches (PCC), said:

As much as we may be attracted to simplistic and shallow faith-based answers, the Pacific Conference of Churches is appealing to our sisters and brothers in Christ to not be swayed by claims that COVID-19 is a punishment from God for certain communities, countries or people.

He goes on to quote from Romans 8:1, 'there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus'. The same letter also cautions against thinking that medical science and faith are incompatible. He also addresses the problem of who or what is to blame for disasters and suffering (an issue often contested in majority Christian communities).

Rev Dr Cliff Bird, a theologian well-known and respected throughout the Pacific, shared these words on [Facebook](#):

I want to reiterate quite strongly that faith and sound health/medical knowledge and advice are not polar opposites. Both are important and needed all the time, and especially at a time like this. Let us not negate one at the expense of the other. Faith is neither careless nor foolish. Stay safe all.

This leadership is welcome, and timely. But it hasn't emerged from thin air. Pacific Islander theologians have long been concerned about how to encourage Christians in the region to better prepare for, understand, and respond to disasters. In 2016, in the wake of Tropical Cyclone Winston, [Rev Dr Cliff Bird preached](#) about suffering, and the question of why disasters happen. He reflected

on Luke 13:1-5, which challenges the idea that suffering is caused by sin and offered several theological answers to the questions people have during disasters. His sermon was based on thinking among thought leaders in the Pacific in recent years.

In 2018, the [Church Agencies Network Disaster Operations](#) (CAN DO - a consortium of faith-based humanitarian agencies) was able to support theologians to further this work, through funding from the Australian Government. Baseline studies about Christian beliefs, attitudes and responses related to disaster preparedness were conducted in four Pacific countries: Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Fiji and Vanuatu. In PNG, the results of this research indicated that churchgoers frequently viewed disaster as a form of punishment from God for sinful behaviour and that people's belief in God is a strong source of comfort and wellbeing in times of disaster recovery. The role of these church leaders is to challenge the former faith interpretation whilst upholding the positive role of faith in strengthening resilience.

Theologians from Fiji, PNG, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, Aotearoa (New Zealand) and Australia then met together in August 2018 to explore what a context-specific theology on disaster preparedness might look like for the Pacific. The working group came up with the following core statement: **'Preparedness is an element of discipleship for a resilient Pacific Earth community'**.

From this statement came a set of Pasifika Christian theological resources and accompanying Bible studies to engage communities on the biblical motivation for disaster preparedness and response, entitled the ['Theology of disaster resilience in a changing climate'](#).

Since COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic, we have seen church leaders across the Pacific advising their members to follow medical advice, support government directives and keep faith through prayer. The Moderator of the United Church in PNG has circulated a series of memoranda to their membership,

advising people to follow the State of Emergency medical advice and pray at home in small groups. In his second memo, on 6 April, he said: 'No person, no family, no nation, no religion, no government, no organisation and no business can hide from the onslaught of the COVID-19 coronavirus.'

The President of the Fiji Council of Churches advised members to follow instructions and [stay home as an act of Christian faith](#). Church Leaders in Vanuatu [took to the radio](#) to advise members to follow health advice and participate in an hour of prayer each Wednesday. The United Church in Solomon Islands General Secretary shared a message on [Facebook](#) emphasising the importance of handwashing and social distancing, as well as resilience, care for one another, and fear for God. In PNG each of the mainstream churches have been given time on the National Broadcasting Corporation's 'Hour of Hope' program to preach sermons during this difficult time. From these examples we glean that faith has its place and shouldn't be disregarded. Churches and respected faith leaders are influencers able to reinforce government health messages by showing them to be acts of faith.

Furthermore, theological engagement and resourcing is being used to address more taboo impacts such as the exclusion of and stigmatisation of vulnerable groups and the problem of [family violence](#), which has increased globally during the pandemic restrictions. In [another pastoral letter](#), Rev James Bagwan emphasised:

particularly women and children who because of lockdowns, isolation, curfews, extended school holidays, etc are forced to stay in homes that may not be safe for them. COVID-19 has made some of these situations worse as there are many people frustrated with being 'stuck at home'... This frustration is very easily expressed in violent behaviour towards others in the household.

While some bad theology has emerged during the time of COVID-19, many of

these harmful messages have arisen from sources external to the Pacific. Pacific leaders are challenging and countering this theology with strong positive theological messaging in support of government and health messaging and identifying it as an act of faith. Our experience shows that when such messages are developed and delivered by respected Pacific Islander church leaders and theologians as outlined above, they are particularly powerful.

This post is part of the [#COVID-19 and the Pacific](#) series.

About the author/s

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