

ENVIRONMENT AND COMMUNITY IN MELANESIA

Leslie Boseto

Address at the inaugural meeting of the National Environment Council for Papua New Guinea, held at the National Coordinating Centre, Waigani, February 18, 1985.

First of all, I see that God has a great concern for the whole world, and for the universe – because He is the Creator, the owner, and the giver of all things, the beginning and the end of this world, and the hope for a new heaven and new earth.

His Spirit in creation feels anger and pain at what is happening. If we read Rom 8:22, “The creation itself groans for the new birth of the earth”, we, too, have the same spirit that creation has, groaning with the creation – strangled together.

I think this is very important for us to realise as we try to care for the earth, and try to be good stewards, to have human kindness in the world. Therefore, our goal is clear, because we are aiming at something, which God has already assured us that we will be part of, in His community.

Today, we hear a lot about people (from all corners of the earth) talking about the politically oppressed, economically poor, racially alienated, and the consequences of such talk – we hear of refugees running away from their government.

We continue to hear about hunger in all parts of the world, exploitation, fighting, and increased unemployment. I was in Vancouver in 1983, and the figures they gave at that time were 35 million unemployed in the industrialised societies. I used to think that if we were following them, we would be better in terms of development . . . but for what? For whom? To where? And so forth. But they haven’t reached a goal yet, and one writer said, by the end of 1990, there will be 100 million unemployed in

industrialised societies. It is a fact! But where are we going? Are we developing a majority, or supporting the survival of a minority? But to be sure, they are secure.

What is wrong? We try to look for more researchers from outside to keep on researching to know more about the things we can put together in programmes or systems. Especially in Third World countries, we continue to look for such people. We look for a new international order (there's a lot of talk about that one!) – "How can we narrow the gap between rich and poor people?" Something's going wrong – we try to find a new system, new programme, and so forth. Those of us who are Christians preach a lot about "Jesus is the answer to our problems". But how?

Sunday by Sunday, we talk a lot about that from pulpits. For me, it is a time for Christian churches in the Pacific – the Melanesians – to look at what is gospel, what is the concern of God. Is God just concerned with the survival of individual denominations? Or *is he concerned with the total community* and the people of Papua New Guinea, the Solomons, Vanuatu, New Caledonia, and the other Pacific nations?

I have come to see that the whole concern of God through Jesus Christ is for *the whole world*. His concern is for the totality of man, and the community in every context. Therefore, His movement was from the centre to the periphery. If I can give you some biblical references, this will remind you of what I mean: "The attitude you should have, is the one that Christ Jesus had. He always had the nature of God, but He did not think that by force He should try to become equal with God. Instead of this, of His own free will, He gave up all He had, and took the nature of a servant." (Phil 2:5, 7)

Let's reflect that He was the centre of all power, all resources, all wealth – all things; but yet, His movement is to the periphery, to the oppressed – to the poor. This sort of understanding of the gospel is very important for Christian churches today. We must take it seriously, in order to play our part in caring for society.

I am a lay person in relation to the environment, but I begin to see that when the gospel concerns the totality of man and the community, we begin to see that man's relation to nature, to His land, and to His people – to decision-making bodies – it so try to relate to each other, and that is where I begin to be interested in learning more about this question of caring for the environment.

Jesus, the whole gospel of God if you like, is wholly concerned about the human community; He started from the lowest level. He was born outside Jerusalem, outside the religious hierarchy, or the élite pyramid structure of society, and started where the people are. He was crucified outside the gate, too. This is what Paul saw when he wrote in 2 Cor 8:9, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich He made Himself poor for your sake, that through His poverty you might become rich".

In Mark 10:45, we read: "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served. He came to serve, to give His live to redeem many, to try to care for many. Not for a minority, not for the élite, but *He came to serve many.*" Here in the Solomons, I began to raise the question: What is work? I tried to develop a theological understanding of what it is, and what is the understanding of it in Melanesian society.

Here we see that, for Jesus, work is to help people, to care for many; not to help maintain institutions – although we need these things, to be cooperative. Then I came to the programme of the gospel, and this is how I saw it before I went back to the Solomons, and tried to experiment with some ways of helping people to understand their situation, and begin to be aware of their direction, to be critical of their situation, and so forth.

Jesus said, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has chosen Me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim liberty to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind. To set free the oppressed, to announce, 'The time has come when the Lord will save His people.' "

When they celebrate the jubilee, every 50 years, and every seven years, it is a time of liberation to set free the slaves onto their own tribal land. It is a time of recovery, it is a time to stop *spoiling the environment*, to stop spoiling *people*, to try to create reconciliation, unity, and the feeling of belonging to each other. And Jesus Christ, the Light of the world, has shown us the concern of God, and the heart of God, saying of Himself that “I have come in order to really communicate this gospel to humankind!” Therefore we see the concern of God, His holistic concern, and it is very important for the bearers of the gospel today.

In the Pacific, we talk about “total human development”, the constitution of Papua New Guinea calls it “integral human development”, and the gospel that we’ve been preaching also talks about the whole concern of God through the whole Christian community, the church, and so forth.

Therefore, the same thing that the government and the church are talking about is that we try to help the whole community – to start with people, from people, and for people. To work with the community, because His communities are stewards of God’s creation – to look after *His land, His forests, and His sea*.

These are some of my reflections behind my move to go back to the rural areas when I left Port Moresby four years ago. Perhaps you know that I was given the position to be the Moderator of the whole United church in Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands for eight years. I’d been attending a number of global meetings organised by the World Council of Churches, the Pacific Conference of Churches, and others. I came to ask serious questions of myself: “Where to start? – Where to start?”

It’s good for officials of the churches, and the leaders of the world communities, to talk about how we can help society, help people, help community; but the question of “how” and “who” can start is due, and very important. Both ministers and politicians are preaching how to help people in the rural areas, how to help majorities, but what we need is people who can implement those sermons and political preachings.

Therefore, I left here in 1980 and went back to my home island, Choiseul. I spent two years with my wife Hazel. We went travelling around, that's the first thing we did. We slept in every village, tried to understand their concerns, their struggles, their thinking, and their beliefs. Walking, paddling, riding on an outboard motor canoe around Choiseul, like this, for two years. We slept anywhere, on mats, on the floors, and talked with people – we enjoyed very much trying to relate to the people at the grassroots, and the next thing we did was to call a conference.

We used to call it a “Village-Based Conference”, and you see that behind it was my belief and conviction that God has total concern for the total community – the whole gospel for the whole people.

In these conferences, we invited politicians, we invited presidents of posts at the local level, and justices. We invited community leaders, nurses, and women. We tried to come together to share our concerns. But it's not just exercising traditional ways of running conferences, as you are familiar with. We used to have papers to collect information and stimulate discussions.

We tried to take the gospel seriously to where divisions were, where people are not getting on well. We tried to see that the gospel concern is with reconciling people, to create and establish peace, to help people to see that development is not just in terms of money – to put up the budget, and ask for money to come for building roads, and buying boats, and so forth. These are very good for helping people, but development is to help communities.

I found that one of the important things that we can do to help people is to be aware of what is happening in their environment, and this is exactly what we tried to do. The topic that we tried to share was the topic of whole community, and the whole gospel, bringing together the young and the old, male and female, to come together and to discuss what they can do to be a united force in the community, to build a better village, and a better community.

As I see this movement, it is both ecumenical, and also concerned with the total environment. In the course of planting coconuts in the Solomons, people did not think about the native trees, they just cut them down without utilising them for timber, they just let them rot. But in the conference we say: "Let us now look after our trees, and begin to utilise the trees". So the question of a portable sawmill came to our minds – to start a sawmill. We put it in the hands of the community to think about portable sawmills, and that made them question, "Is it good to bring logging companies into the area?" We weren't talking about the destruction being caused by logging companies on the island, we tried to start from the community, to be aware of the environment, and the responsibility to care for the forest. Then we put in their hands the portable sawmills.

Because of that, the awareness of the people was growing, and they began to ask: "Was it better to bring in logging companies or not?" The question came from the people themselves. They began to see their worth, and the potentialities that they can realise; that they can saw their own timber, and they can price it for sale in such away that their village communities are able to buy.

If the logging company had been invited to Choisel Island, perhaps they would saw the timber, but the cost would be very high for the local people, and perhaps they couldn't afford it. Therefore, you can see how the people began to think, "Perhaps it is better for us to look after our trees, our forest, and slowly to cut our own timbers."

Another programme that we try to develop is the question of land disputes. If anything came in relation to customary land disputes, people said, "Let us go to court, the court will fix it, the judge will settle it." But after they've been through the courts, nothing is settled, and people still raise the question. They were not satisfied with it. They take it to a higher level of court called "Customary Land Appeal Court", and so on. Even if they finalise the decision, there is still a conflict. There's no peace, there's no sort of reconciliation, no unity.

So we said: "Alright, the court is there if anyone wants to go, he or she can still go there, but let us put the brake on now, because, with regard

to customary land and land boundaries, people in the villages and tribes closer to the area concerned know more about the situation.” Therefore, we said: “Let’s invite some old people, who know about your tribal lines and your genealogies, to come and sit down and look at it, and then reach a solution.”

Also, we say that the gospel preaches about “the Kingdom”, and invites everyone to be in the Kingdom. Sunday by Sunday, we hear the message about “the Kingdom”, “belong to the Kingdom!”, save the souls of individuals, and so forth, but if we believe that the gospel preaches the presence of the Kingdom, to make the Kingdom present on earth, then the people must fight against anything that’s dividing them, and try to be reconciled to one another.

Here again, I think it’s very important to see how the whole concern of God is in each locality and context. Therefore, I was surprised when one time we held a Land Committee (it has become an annual thing for me to lead this), and one of the persons who used to receive reports about land disputes said that he was surprised that, since we started trying to settle our own land disputes, about 15 cases were withdrawn after they’d already paid court fees.

That is a sign that perhaps what we are doing is helping the people, and I hope that Christians, as St Paul says, “can judge the whole world, they can even judge the angels” (1 Cor 6:2-3). It is the gospel’s concern, and sometimes the gospel’s concern confirms the traditional values of our forefathers and our ancestors more than something imported or transplanted from Western society.

Therefore, what I have been trying to do, instead of trying to be specialised in my understanding of environment and the question of ecology (although I have been with Pacific people in saying that we want the Pacific “Nuclear Free”), is to see that the foundation of development is people, and the majority of people demands of us leaders, and the people making decisions, *to be with them*. This is why God helps us in Jesus Christ to see His action is not an action through preaching, or through just transmitting ideologies, theologies, and doctrines. But that He transmits or

carries through His will through people, and my concern with other church leaders today is to try to help people to be aware of their own context and the direction in which the world is moving.

After we've been hooked into the international system of the world, it is very difficult sometimes to *unhook* ourselves to *be ourselves*, and this is where, in the light of the gospel, I believe we can! And the only way to be able, is to start from where the majority of the people are, and this is the area where I am trying to operate today. This is my conviction and my belief, and this is what I've been trying to experiment with. I continue to learn.

Lastly, I would say that building a community, I believe, is the work of God Himself. He is the "Community-Creating God". He created community through Christ, to relate to people, to bring in the outcast, the oppressed, the sinners, to be together to form a group to express the presence of the Kingdom, and to witness to that Kingdom, but we can only witness to it when we see people are reconciled, are forgiven, and are free. To be reconciled in order to be a reconciling force, to be united in order to be a uniting force, to be forgiven in order to be a forgiving force . . . these have elements of the gospel of Jesus Christ, as given to us.

I saw people cry after they were touched at a deep level of their existence by the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. They opened. In one of our Conferences, a person had taken another village person to court. After the court decided he had won the case, they had not been getting on well together, they continued to be enemies. Standing near us, he stood up and said, "Oh how can I today establish a living and united community with my brother there, can you help me?" They embraced each other, they were crying, and that is the power of the gospel, and what happens with Pentecost. It must be a Pentecostal Community, although we can only see it through human beings.

It must be "A Forgiven and Forgiving Community, a Reconciled and Reconciling Community", if it is to bring about justice. Development, justice, and peace are interrelated, and I see that we must try to understand more what God's concern is in Jesus Christ, and what is "Good News".