

EVANGELICALS AND CHURCH/STATE RELATIONS IN POST-INDEPENDENT PNG – SOME RESEARCH CONCLUSIONS

Dr Bob Fergie

Dr Bob Fergie lived in PNG from 1973 to 1993, firstly as a university student, and then as a missionary with the Evangelical Alliance's Christian Leaders' Training College at Banz and Port Moresby. During the 1980s, he represented EA on the National Youth Council of PNG. In 1993, he was contracted by the Department of Home Affairs and Youth to draft the government's National NGO Policy. Since 1996, Fergie has been based in Melbourne, at the Bible College of Victoria, where he is currently the Dean of Studies. He continues to regularly visit PNG as a member of the CLTC Council and its executive. His ThD degree was awarded in 2001 by the Australian College of Theology.

INTRODUCTION

This article presents the conclusions of my doctoral dissertation.¹ I begin with a brief introduction to the central questions addressed through my research. This is followed by the conclusions I formed, as recorded in the final chapter of the thesis. A final postscript highlights questions arising from my research for future researchers, for the government, and the mainline churches in general, and for the Evangelical Alliance of Papua New Guinea (PNG) in particular.

EVANGELICALS – “SO HEAVENLY-MINDED, OF NO EARTHLY USE?”

The caricature: “so heavenly-minded, of no earthly use” has, on occasion, been used disparagingly to describe evangelicals. It suggests a preoccupation with spiritual piety, so that minimal importance is assigned

¹ R. D. Fergie, “A Study of church/government relations in PNG, with particular reference to the Evangelical Alliance of the South Pacific Islands, and its involvement in the Government's National Youth Movement Program during the 1980s”, ThD thesis, Melbourne Vic: Australian College of Theology, 2001.

to addressing the chronic social, political, and economic problems crippling society. This was the way some government people in Papua New Guinea, both national and expatriate, pigeon-holed member churches of the Evangelical Alliance of the South Pacific Islands (EASPI) at the time of independence in 1975. But was this a fair conclusion? Given that the earliest evangelical missionaries to Papua New Guinea had been praised for their holistic approach to mission,² had there been, in fact, a retreat from socio-political activism at independence?³

It would appear that some senior government officers, at least, viewed evangelicals as disinterested in non-spiritual matters at independence. This was certainly the sense behind the words of one of the government's most senior youth development officials, when he reflected on the EASPI's decision to accept a government invitation to join the other mainline churches⁴ on the National Youth Council in 1983.⁵ A youth crisis of the 1970s and 1980s saw the government urgently in search of help from the mainline churches to reduce escalating law-and-order problems. Out-of school and out-of-work youth, associated with rascal

² For a helpful review of the attitude of the early London Missionary Society missionaries (particularly W. G. Lawes and James Chalmers), see J. King, *W. G. Lawes of Savage Island and New Guinea*, London UK: The Religious Tract Society, 1909, chapters XIII-XIX. For a broader overview, up until World War I, see: D. Langmore, *Missionary Lives: 1874-1914*, Pacific Islands Monograph Series, No 6, Honolulu HI: University of Hawaii Press, particularly the chapter "Sinister Trio".

³ There is evidence of evangelical withdrawal from socio-political activism from the late 1920s in Australia, and other developed nations, as I have documented elsewhere. That this was transposed wholesale to PNG has been questioned, however. See: R. D. Fergie, "Three Antecedents of Evangelical Involvement in Post-Independence Government Church/State Policy Formation in Papua New Guinea in the 1980s", in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 17:1 (2001), pp. 8ff.

⁴ The recognised mainline churches were the United church, Lutheran church, SDA church, Roman Catholic church, and Anglican church.

⁵ Chris O'Connell, the first Principal Program Coordinator of the government's NYMP wrote of this occasion: "we were able [surprisingly] to secure the conscious and informed consent of the *hitherto purely spiritually-orientated* Evangelical Alliance to participate in the NYMP at all levels, including the National Youth Council" (emphasis added). C. O'Connell and R. Isaiah-Zarriga, "Papua New Guinea's National Youth Movement", in: S. Sewell, and A. Kelly, *Social Problems in the Asia Pacific Region*, Brisbane Qld: Boolarong Publications, 1991, p. 230.

gangs, were commonly blamed for this problem. The largely-neglected needs of many young people, denied access to formal education, or tossed out of school prematurely, prompted the government to establish the National Youth Movement Program (NYMP) in 1980.⁶ This new non-formal education approach, while controlled by the government, depended heavily on the support and participation of the mainline churches, particularly through representation on the National Youth Council.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS ADDRESSED

The thesis, tested through my research, was: “The influence of the relatively small EASPI upon Papua New Guinea government initiatives to redefine church/government relations, through youth development in the 1980s, reflected a revitalisation of evangelicalism’s socio-political activist roots.” Five important questions were considered with regard to post-independent church/state relations in PNG. Three questions consider the EASPI’s relative influence on government attempts to establish a national policy related to church/government relations within the context of youth development. Firstly, in what ways did the late 1970s youth development strategies of the Roman Catholic church, the Evangelical Lutheran church and the EASPI, influence government initiatives to harness the social influence and resources of the churches, through the creation of a national youth program in the late 1970s? Secondly, in what ways did the 1980s National Youth Movement Program, as a government-sponsored partnership with churches, become the major catalyst in redefining church/government relations in Papua New Guinea? Thirdly, to what degree did the EASPI influence government attempts to produce a national policy on church and government relations between 1985 and 1995? These questions were important, given the primary shift of church/government policy development from the health and education departments to the youth and home affairs department in the early 1980s.

Two further questions dealt with the issues of the EASPI’s attitudes to socio-political engagement. Firstly, what prompted the EASPI, contrary to popular expectation, to participate enthusiastically in the National

⁶ For a detailed analysis of the situation, see: Fergie, “A Study of church/government relations in PNG”, chapter 2.

Youth Movement Program and the National Youth Council? Secondly, why did the EASPI, together with the other mainline churches, seek more formal church/government dialogue mechanisms in the late 1980s that extended beyond youth development? These questions continue to be important, in view of the popular perception that evangelicals have little interest in socio-political engagement, given their apparent preoccupation with spiritual matters.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS ASSESSED

The NYMP as a Catalyst for Post-independence Church/Government Policy

The relative importance of the National Youth Movement Program period to church/government policy development in the 1980s was not insignificant. There was a noticeable primary shift of church/government policy development from the disparate education/health/welfare mechanisms of pre-independence years to a more-centralised youth affairs location in the early 1980s. By 1983, senior officers from the Youth Division of the Office of Youth, Women, Religion, and Recreation had become the primary custodians of church/government policy development. While a Religious Affairs Division was eventually established, directed by an officer transferred from the Youth Division, perhaps the two most important guiding documents for the Religious Affairs Division were produced by the Youth Division. The first of these, the *Christian Declaration on Youth and Development*, produced in July, 1981, became the government's primary church-government policy reference throughout the 1980s.⁷ The second was a paper prepared and presented by Chris O'Connell on behalf of the Minister for Youth, Women, Religion, and Recreation at the September, 1983, EASPI national youth conference. While titled *Government Youth Work and Church Youth Work*, its thrust was much broader than the Evangelical Alliance of the South Pacific Islands (EASPI), or youth development, *per se*.⁸ It detailed the essential rationale and agenda for later 1985-1987 attempts by the Religious

⁷ Office of Youth and Recreation, "Christian Declaration on Youth and Development", in *Catalyst* 11-4 (1981), pp. 245-280.

⁸ C. O'Connell, "Government Youth Work and Church Youth Work", Mt Hagen PNG: unpublished paper presented to the second national EASPI youth conference, 1982.

Affairs Division to produce a national policy on religion and development. In a real sense, the “O’Connell paper” represented the main hermeneutical key for the interpretation of the *Christian Declaration on Youth and Development*.

EASPI Motivation to Participate in the NYMP and the National Youth Council

Well before the formation of the EASPI, evangelicals participated in, and contributed to, socio-political initiatives of the government or other churches. When circumstances warranted it, evangelicals were prepared to speak out on issues perceived to be contrary to biblical values and principles, and dangerous to the welfare of society. Indeed, at times, they played prominent roles, as both contributors to, and critics of, government policy and practice. Motivated by a concern to help marginalised sub-groups within society, many evangelicals involved themselves as advocates of such groups. This was the case again from the mid-1960s, with respect to the peculiar needs of young people by-passed by, or pushed out of, the government’s national education system.

Deliberations and decisions, associated with the 1978 National EASPI Youth Conference demonstrate the EASPI’s endeavour to seriously review its own youth development strategies, and to carefully evaluate new government initiatives. With respect to the latter, important motivating factors were the need to access government resources, together with a desire to contribute positively to government youth development strategies. Representative welfare councils and boards were seen as useful fora in this regard, as was the case with the National Youth Council in the 1980s. In some respects, this paralleled earlier pre-independence arrangements, although church representation on national welfare boards and councils was reduced somewhat during the 1970s, in accord with decentralisation policy.⁹ The establishment of a National

⁹ Peter Smith suggested, for example, that another agenda underlay the 1970 Education Ordinance, and its decentralised structure; “to diffuse the power of the churches from the national to the local level”. P. Smith, “Education and Colonial Control”, in *Papua New Guinea: a Documentary History*, Melbourne Vic: Longman Cheshire, 1987, p. 277.

Youth Council in the late 1970s reversed this trend, as the government afforded generous representation to the six major church groups, including the EASPI. Reflecting something of the global reawakening of evangelicalism's socio-political activist heritage, following the first Lausanne congress in 1974, EASPI personnel embraced the opportunity to be involved.¹⁰

EASPI Influence on Government Youth Strategies

At a time when the government was seriously considering developing its own national youth program, the approaches of church-based programs were closely monitored by government personnel. While the personnel and strategies of the Evangelical Lutheran¹¹ and the Roman Catholic¹² churches clearly influenced the early design phase of the National Youth Movement Program, it was from 1983 that the influence of the EASPI was greatest. In some quarters, the EASPI's use of imported approaches, such as Boys' Brigade in the 1970s, were viewed as inadequate, and, by some of the early senior government youth development officers, even harmful.¹³ This was in spite of the fact that, by independence, the Boys'

¹⁰ For a fuller discussion, see: Fergie, "A Study of church/government relations in PNG", chapters 3 and 5.

¹¹ The Evangelical Lutheran's *Yangpela Didiman* (young farmers) program, with its rural-based community development focus, contributed much to the government's national youth program, particularly the village-motivator concept. In part, it was incorporated into the National Youth Movement Program's community youth coordinator scheme.

¹² In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Roman Catholic's *Young Christians Association's* liberationist emphasis was seen as conveniently compatible with the economic self-reliance ethos of the National Youth Movement Program. Certainly, the *Christian Declaration on Youth and Development* owed much to the input of Roman Catholic personnel, and represented possibly their greatest contribution to government youth development initiatives during the 1980s.

¹³ They were concerned about the militaristic connotations associated with the Brigade's use of uniforms, marching, and drill, on the one hand, and cultural inappropriateness on the other, given its Western youth culture roots. As it turned out, many young Papua New Guineans were attracted by the marching/uniform dimensions, reflecting something of a common romanticised view of war and the army. See: R. D. Fergie, "Minors, Mandarins, and Missions: the legacies of Boys' Brigade Australia in Papua New Guinea church and state youth development, 1966-1980", in M. Hutchinson, and G. Treloar, *This Gospel Shall be Preached: Essays on the Australian*

Brigade had become one of the fastest-growing youth programs in Papua New Guinea. Certainly, there were administrative and financial difficulties that led to its collapse, but the overall experience of the national leadership of Boys' Brigade proved invaluable to the architects of the EASPI's On Target Youth Ministry strategy in the 1980s. Indeed, the later positive influence on the government's youth program of EASPI personnel during the 1980s owed much to the Boys' Brigade legacy.¹⁴

EASPI Input into Government Attempts to Produce a National Policy on Church/Government Relations

There was a popular perception at independence that evangelicals were little interested in socio-political engagement, because of their apparent preoccupation with spiritual matters. While a personal spiritual relationship with God remained at the heart of evangelicalism, in the tradition of the earliest evangelicals, this served to strengthen, rather than weaken, redemptive socio-political engagement. This was certainly the approach of the Clapham sect pioneers, as well as the early evangelical missionaries to Papua and New Guinea. Indeed, evangelicals in Papua and New Guinea continued to invest substantially in mission/church health, education, and welfare services throughout the colonial period. The formation of the EASPI in 1964, brought a greater coordination and partnership to these endeavours, both within the EASPI and, also, alongside the Melanesian Council of Churches. While evangelical leaders continued to express a wariness of liberal social gospel attitudes, they did not withdraw from socio-political activism, to the degree that many of their contemporaries in Australia, and other developed nations, had done. Some expatriate contract officers and Papua New Guineans, educated in an Australian system, unwittingly, but inaccurately, assumed a wholesale transposition of Australian withdrawal attitudes to Papua New Guinea. In fact, most likely they were unaware that evangelicals in other Western

Contribution to World Mission, Sydney NSW: Centre for the Study of Australian Christianity, 1998, pp. 66-85.

¹⁴ See: Fergie, "A Study of church/government relations in PNG", chapter 4.

nations, including Australia, had been front runners in socio-political engagement activities before the close of the 1920s.¹⁵

During the 1980s, and together with other mainline churches, the EASPI welcomed the opportunity to meet with government personnel regularly in ways, similar to post-war mission/administration conferences. Maintaining a continuity of dialogue in the early post-independence period of constant change of government was difficult, however, in spite of the EASPI and Melanesian Council of Churches' leaders' eagerness for more stable and regular church/government fora. Initiatives of the Department of Youth and Development's Religious Affairs Division to develop a clear policy and mechanism for church/government relations were received, therefore, with much interest. Although the Department's first attempt at this, in the mid-1980s, stalled over the issue of religious freedom, a second attempt, in the early 1990s, through the Non-Government Organisation Division, proved more successful. The development of a national non-government organisations' policy represented the clearest post-independence joint statement on church/government relations, although not without some contention regarding the mechanism's location.¹⁶ EASPI personnel were prominent in the drafting of this policy.

EASPI's Commitment to Formalised Church/Government Mechanisms

The EASPI's involvement on the National Youth Council, and its executive committee, between 1983 and 1990, and, particularly, its participation in the Religious Affairs Division church/government consultations between 1984-1987, demonstrated the EASPI's interest in improving formal church/government dialogue mechanisms. While efforts to produce a national policy on religion and development collapsed in 1987, the experience was not altogether a failure. A number of heads of churches' meetings, cohosted by the Melanesian Council of Churches and the EASPI, continued to develop strategies and lobby government ministers concerning mechanisms that would facilitate greater continuity of church/government dialogue. EASPI personnel were among a small

¹⁵ See: *Ibid.*, chapter 3.

¹⁶ See: *Ibid.*, chapter 8 and appendix 9.

group of church representatives who prepared strategy papers in this process in the late-1980s. The government's initiative to develop a national non-government organisations policy in the early 1990s provided another opportunity to build on these Melanesian Council of Churches/Papua New Guinea Council of Churches¹⁷ and EASPI initiatives. EASPI representatives were very involved in this. Indeed, with the support of the Papua New Guinea Council of Churches, senior government officers from the Department of Home Affairs and Youth contracted an EASPI representative to prepare the early drafts of the government's National Non-Government Organisations Policy.

RESEARCH CONCLUSIONS

A Revitalisation of Evangelicalism's Socio-political Activist Roots

Clearly, the EASPI did contribute much to the government's initiatives to redefine church/government relations in the early post-independence period, particularly between 1983 and 1993, in various initiatives of the Department of Home Affairs and Youth. But did this represent a continuity, or a revitalisation, of evangelical socio-political activism? Evangelicals certainly did engage in both social service and social action¹⁸ throughout the colonial period, although the primary focus was on the former before independence in 1975. Following World War II, there is evidence that evangelical missions engaged in education welfare, as much in response to administration and local community pressure, as to any general designed purposes of their own. By the early 1960s, however, a more conscious policy began to emerge. The experience of the Unevangelised Fields Mission, in conjunction with the EASPI's education agency, bears this out through the work of Alwyn Neuendorf.¹⁹ Even so,

¹⁷ The Melanesian Council of Churches became the Papua New Guinea Council of Churches in 1990. The EASPI also decided to change its name to the National Council of Evangelical Churches of Papua New Guinea not long after. Interestingly, it changed this title in 1995 to the Evangelical Alliance of Papua New Guinea, when it became clear that the National Council of Evangelical Churches title failed to be associated with the former EASPI by many community and government personnel.

¹⁸ See: Fergie, "A Study of church/government relations in PNG", cf. figure 3a "Christian Social Responsibility", p 48.

¹⁹ See: *Ibid.*, pp. 67-70.

early leaders of the EASPI, while open to cooperation with the Melanesian Council of Churches from the mid-1960s, registered their concern when the Roman Catholic church was admitted into membership. While there were a number of concerns, one very clearly was linked to the perception that it would introduce liberal and liberationist social gospel attitudes.²⁰ Even so, while the EASPI did not withdraw from cooperation with the Melanesian Council of Churches in socio-political matters,²¹ it is clear that evangelicals in Papua and New Guinea shared the concerns of their evangelical peers in Australia and New Zealand.

This wariness continued into the early-1970s. The 1974 international gathering of evangelicals at Lausanne proved to be a major watershed. The celebrated Lausanne Covenant reversed the earlier withdrawal position of many evangelicals, re-emphasising evangelicalism's socio-political activism responsibilities. Through the Papua New Guinea delegates, who attended the Lausanne Congress, the EASPI and the Melanesian Council of Churches cohosted a national follow-up conference on evangelism. Through the input of Osei Mensah, in particular, church and mission leaders from both the EASPI and the Melanesian Council of Churches embraced the thrust of the Lausanne movement, and began to explore ways of integrating evangelism and socio-political engagement. Youth ministry leaders were among the most proactive in this regard. While still wary of the peculiar social gospel thrust of the liberationist movement, these evangelical leaders purposefully entered into broader fora and debates, as was the case, with respect to joining the National Youth Council in 1983.

²⁰ In some respects, this concern was well founded, given the prominent role of some Roman Catholics in initiatives like *Pacifique 77* meetings. However, leaders of other Protestant members of the Melanesian Council of Churches shared similar views.

²¹ There are a number of important examples of close working relationships between Roman Catholic and EASPI leaders during the late 1960s and 1980s, in the areas of education and youth. Alwyn Neuendorf, for example, worked closely with the Roman Catholic representative on the Territory Education Board in the lead up to the formulation of the 1971 Education Act. Similarly, the EASPI national youth coordinator coedited the joint churches' community leadership series with Fr Salvador Dougherty, of the Roman Catholic church, in the mid-1980s.

While there is a sense, in which this reflected something of a continuity of engagement, there is a real sense, in which it was also a case of revitalisation, consistent with evangelicalism's roots.

A Postscript

While not essential to the thesis argument, it seems appropriate to highlight some questions, worthy of further investigation, following this necessarily provisional study. While relevant for scholarly research, these questions are also important for church and non-government organisation practitioners, as well as for government officers, at the dawn of a new millennium.

Questions for Researchers

There is no question, as Leslie Fullerton predicted,²² that post-Christendom secularisation has influenced the shape of church/government relations in Papua New Guinea, even though churches continued to be welcomed, even wooed, as partners in development by national and provincial governments into the late-1990s. Was this simply a case of pragmatic marriages of convenience, or a case of a persistent integrative worldview continuing to be embraced by many highly-educated and senior government and church Melanesian leaders? Valuable in this regard would be case studies of a number of the senior Melanesian public servants, referred to in this study – particularly Felecia Dobunanba, Tau Peruka, Kepas Paon, John Sania, Julian Paraha, Ruby Isaiah-Zarriga, and Charles Semwakesa.

While both the Papua New Guinea Council of Churches and the EASPI consistently endorsed the importance of formal church/government relations, both as partners and prophets, to what degree did the actual front-line involvement rest with individuals with a peculiar interest and commitment to this? A useful study in this regard would be that of the attitudes and strategies of long-serving UFM/APCM missionary, Alwyn Neuendorf, in his role as the EASPI education agency representative,

²² L. D. Fullerton, *From Christendom to Pluralism in the South Seas Church-State relations in the 20th Century*, PhD thesis, Madison NJ: Drew University, 1969.

operating, at first, from the outside, and later from within the Department of Education.

Questions for the Government and Churches

Historically, partnership between missions/churches and the administration/government has dominated health, education, and welfare development in Papua New Guinea. Since World War II, however, in the interests of national coordination and standards, the administration/government has assumed the position of senior partner in these arrangements. During the 1980s and early 1990s, churches, together with the broader non-government organisation community, argued for a more equal partnership in joint development ventures. The serious dissipation of church network support, following the replacement of the National Youth Movement Program/National Youth Council with the National Youth Service/National Youth Advisory Boards, warrants further assessment. Similarly, the churches' reaction to the 1995 government decision to locate the Non-Government Organisations Bureau within the Department of Home Affairs, raises the question: what balance of partnership in *integral human development* will now be appropriate between the government and non-government organisations, and between churches and other non-government organisations?

Questions for the Evangelical Alliance of Papua New Guinea

Declining attendance at annual Evangelical Alliance of Papua New Guinea meetings from the mid-1990s, the significant post-independence growth of non-aligned Pentecostal and independent separatist groups, and a noticeably-reduced participation in ecumenical and church/government meetings, raises the question of the long-term viability of the Evangelical Alliance of Papua New Guinea. Has the Evangelical Alliance of Papua New Guinea passed its use-by date, or has it simply been working through a common transitional phase? Are there parallels to the earlier experience of the Melanesian Council of Churches in the early 1980s, when emerging national church leaders, in the absence of expatriate founders, grappled with the present and future relevance of an ecumenical council? Further, what continuing role does the Evangelical Alliance of Papua New Guinea have in Papua New Guinea, as a coordinating/support body among

evangelicals, and as their spokesperson at ecumenical and church/government fora? Should Evangelical Alliance of Papua New Guinea leaders continue to value the maintenance of the cooperative relationships with the Papua New Guinea Council of Churches of earlier years, in relating to the national government of Papua New Guinea? If so, what are the most appropriate ways of reactivating and enhancing these contacts? Conversely, are there peculiar reasons (perhaps theological and/or cultural) for evangelicals to consciously withdraw from broader coordinated engagement in the socio-political arena with the Papua New Guinea Council of Churches and/or the government?

A Final Summing Up

My research sought to evaluate the attitude and response of evangelicals to the NYMP. While it is true that some evangelicals, at different times, have consciously and unconsciously sanitised and separated the sacred from the secular, I found that this was not the case with regard to the NYMP experience during the 1980s. In fact, some evangelicals positioned themselves at the forefront of socio-political reform in the area of youth development *because of* their commitment to Jesus, and the missionary proclamation of His gospel. I have argued that this commitment to “integral human development” was consistent with Melanesian spirituality. It also paralleled the example and theology of the founding fathers of evangelicalism (e.g., William Wilberforce and the Clapham Sect, who played major roles in the abolition of slavery), and the post-1974 Lausanne movement (which reaffirmed socio-political activism alongside evangelism). It also continued a consistent commitment to holistic ministry by evangelicals in PNG, from the arrival of the first LMS missionaries in the late 19th century.

If nothing else, the challenge of this study for evangelicals is to maintain proactive, prayerful, socio-political engagement. It is to recognise in this an appropriate and necessary complement to, and extension of, a personal relationship with Christ, and responsibilities to His mission. In a relatively young nation that has enjoyed a concentrated dose of the Christian gospel since the 1870s, this dimension of mission is as urgent as ever. The government, and wider community, continue to look to the

churches for help in addressing chronic social and political challenges that threaten the nation's present and future well-being.