

# THE CHURCH IMPACTING MELANESIA: A CASE FOR PEOPLE-CENTRED AND PARTICIPATORY MINISTRY

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## INTRODUCTION

The Melanesian region in the South Pacific has a rich Christian heritage. It is one of the most-Christianised regions in the world.<sup>1</sup> Most, if not all Melanesians subscribe to Christianity in some form or another. From the beginning, Christian missions have been key players in facilitating the process that led to many Melanesian nations attaining their statehood. In recognition of their indebtedness to Christianity, a number of Melanesian nation-states explicitly subscribe to Christian principles in their constitutions.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, over the last few decades, the momentum of Christian influence, and the impact of the church in Melanesia have declined considerably.<sup>3</sup> The church can no longer speak persuasively, and act decisively, concerning many injustices occurring in the region. On

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<sup>1</sup> This statement is found on page 13 in the book titled *World Christianity: Oceania*, edited by Leonora Mosende Douglas. See the bibliography for details of the book. The latest and expanded data on the extent and scope of Christianity in Melanesia is available from the *World Christian Encyclopaedia*, 2nd edn, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> For instance Papua New Guinea (PNG) and the Solomon Islands.

<sup>3</sup> The word “church” in uppercase is used with consistency to describe true believers who make up the true community of God’s people. Although they observe different institutionalised forms of expressing the Christian faith, their simple faith in God through Christ, and the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, knits them together as the “one body of Christ” (1Cor 12:12-13; Eph 4:2-6).

occasions, when she does, the message is often incoherent to the society-at-large. In the meantime, crime, civil strife, violence, and environmental degradation continue to escalate, unabated. The irony is that this is happening in Christianised Melanesia. Why has the church, formerly a transforming force in the region, now become virtually ineffective?

The supposition presented in this article is that unless the *whole* church is brought to the true realisation of who she is, and what her role is in society, she will not be in a position to impact Melanesia in a significant way ever again. The answer to the problem of the ineffective work of the church in Melanesia rests directly with the *believing peoples* themselves: those mandated and equipped to bring glory to God and reconciliation to the world (Eph 1:6, 12, 14; John 17:20-24; 2 Cor 5:18-19). It is obvious, at least for Melanesia, that the current concept of “church” militates against the explicit biblical teaching of church as the *laos* (λαός) of God (1 Cor 11:18-25; Eph 4:3-6).<sup>4</sup> Most believers are precluded from the “communion of God’s people”,<sup>5</sup> and do not live responsibly for God as a result.<sup>6</sup> Christians of Melanesia must recover the *whole-people* concept of the church, fully and urgently, if they are to emerge vibrant, impacting society, and ultimately bringing glory to God in the region.

The first part of this article discusses the *filial* love that God’s people have for Him, resulting in their obedience to Christ in the world. The second part traces the establishment and development of Christianity in Melanesia, discussing the problems confronting contemporary Melanesian societies and churches. The final part emphasises that Christ, in His life and ministry, was focused on the whole person. When He departed this earth, He provided the equipping power of the Holy Spirit to all those that would follow Him, so they, in turn, can have a *whole-people-oriented* ministry. After suggesting a number of forward steps, the article is brought to a close with concluding remarks.

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<sup>4</sup> The Greek word *laos* (λαός) is translated “people” in English versions of the Bible.

<sup>5</sup> A phrase used in ecclesiastical discussions for the church.

<sup>6</sup> See Acts 2:42-47 and Heb 10:25.

## MOTIVATIONS FOR WHOLE-CHURCH AND PARTICIPATORY MINISTRY

At Caesarea Philippi, Jesus declared to His disciples: “I will build My church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.”<sup>7</sup> These prophetic words were fulfilled with the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. Since then, the church has continued to grow – now into the 21st century. The formative event on the day of Pentecost, moreover, catapulted the church from her ancient Jewish roots to envelop the entire globe.<sup>8</sup> From that point onwards, the church became inclusive and universalised,<sup>9</sup> encapsulating both Jews and Gentiles.<sup>10</sup> The typology of the Old Testament had become a realised entity: the new *laos tou theou* (λαῶ τῷ θεοῦ)<sup>11</sup> – universal, holy, catholic, and apostolic.<sup>12</sup>

Also hinted in Christ’s prophetic words is the fact of the church’s ministry calling in the world – to assail the gates of Hades.<sup>13</sup> The *laos tou theou* (λαῶ τῷ θεοῦ) remain in the world to carry on with the unfinished task of exposing the vanquished powers (Col 3:15-16), and to

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<sup>7</sup> Matt 16:18.

<sup>8</sup> Although there is continuity between the believers of the Old and New Testaments, the change brought about at the Pentecost was so startling that the New Testament could look at the Old Testament only as preparation. Edmund P. Clowney argues this thoroughly in his book titled, *The Church*, Gerald Bray, ed. (Leicester UK: IVP, 1995), pp. 49-60.

<sup>9</sup> *Katholikos* (καθολικός) is the Greek word translated “universal” or “whole”. The word is used in this context to mean that the church embraces every believing individual in every place, and for all time.

<sup>10</sup> David Watson, *I Believe in the Church* (London UK: Hodder & Stoughton, 1978), pp. 75-95.

<sup>11</sup> The phrase *laos tou theou* (λαῶ τῷ θεοῦ), is rendered “people of God” in English translations of the Bible. The word *laos* (λαός) means “people”, and the possessive compound, *tou theou* (τῷ θεοῦ) means “of God”. See the following Bible references; Rom 9:25-26; Heb 4:9; 11:25; 1 Peter 2:9, 10.

<sup>12</sup> For a detailed discussion of the four characteristic aspects, other writings should be consulted. For instance, Professor Hans Kung’s book, *The Church* (London UK: Burns & Oates), is recommended for its very thorough commentary on such characteristics. See bibliography for detail.

<sup>13</sup> Matt 16:18-19.

preach reconciliation in the world (2 Cor 5:18, 19). As she advances in God's purposes on earth, Christ's rallying call rings out more audibly: "Go . . . surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matt 28:19, 20).<sup>14</sup> As Christ's emissary on earth, the church cannot but follow her Saviour and Lord, who calls her to advance, and to excel in the task for which she exists. Moreover, ministry is not optional for the church, an added duty for her to do when she chooses to do so. Her ministry response is intrinsically bound to her identity as Christ's emissary on earth.

Overall, the nature and ministry response of the church is rooted in two premises. Firstly, her passionate love for God, and secondly, her loyal obedience to the summons of her Saviour and Lord, who calls her to serve as His emissary on earth.

## LOVE FOR GOD

The church is portrayed as God's family (Eph 2:19; Gal 6:10; Heb 2:11; 2 Pet 4: 17). Her conception was divine. She took form in the bosom of God the Father before the dawn of time (Eph 1:4). God has adopted her as His very own prized possession (Eph 1:14b). Understood in this context, ministry proceeds from a *filial* relationship, transpiring between the *laos* (λαὸς) and God, their Father.<sup>15</sup> The "Spirit of adoption"<sup>16</sup> energises this relationship so that the church is propelled to respond, as members of God's family in the world. Ultimately, the church was birthed, and lives, to radiate God's glory on earth (Eph 1:6, 12, 14), the very thing she was designated to do before creation existed (Eph 1:4).

### *Passionate for God's Glory*

The very nature of the church, as God's holy people, makes her produce one supreme and ongoing response, through her being, ministry, and varying organisational forms in the world *to bring glory to God*. The

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<sup>14</sup> All scriptural references are quoted from the New International Version (NIV), unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>15</sup> David Watson, *I Believe in the Church*, pp. 75-95.

<sup>16</sup> Gal 4:6-7.

church is conceived, redeemed, and invested with the power of the Holy Spirit, to bring glory to God (Eph 1:6, 12, 14). This fact cannot be emphasised enough.

Comparable only to their Saviour and Lord, God's people must be driven by great passion for God's glory. Since this was central to Christ's life and ministry, it must also be equally true for them (John 17:1-5). The church exists to shine, so that people may see her good works and "give glory to our Father in heaven".<sup>17</sup>

God's glory summarises all His features – His holy love, His grace, His mercy and justice. . . . The doxological motive implies that people who know the true and living God discover that *He is such a delight that they want others to get acquainted with and live in fellowship with Him as well* (emphasis added).<sup>18</sup>

*Glory by Life.* The people of God, characterised by godliness, are distinguished from non-believers. What they do with their lives revolves around God's glory (1 Cor 10:31). Their bodies are offered up to God as living sacrifices (Rom 12:1-2), and they are no longer controlled by their sinful desires (cf. Eph 2:1-3). They hunger and thirst after God's righteousness (Matt 5:6). This longing is unquenchable. The more their lives are brought under the control of the Holy Spirit; the more Spirit-borne features (Gal 5:18-19) become manifested in their lives.

The Bible explicitly states that the *laos* are the members of God's household (Eph 2:19). They *are* the temple, in whom God *dwells* by his Holy Spirit (1 Cor 3:16; 6:19-20; Eph 2:22). Since this is the case, Godly living is possible. God's people can live exemplary lives, as God's glory shines out from among them into the world.<sup>19</sup> The result is that God is exalted and glorified.

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<sup>17</sup> Matt 5:16.

<sup>18</sup> Eddie Gibbs and Ian Coffey, *Church Next* (Leicester UK: IVP, 2001), p. 63.

<sup>19</sup> Anderson, Leith, *A Church for the 21st Century* (Minneapolis MIN: Bethany House, 1992), p. 129.

*Glory Through Proclaimed Gospel.* Though lifestyle is the indispensable part of radiating God's glory in the world, it is incomplete without the proclamation of the gospel. The Lord launches the people of God to every part in the world to proclaim the good news of Christ's salvation. Christ said: "Go, into all the world and *preach* the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned" (Mark 16:15-16, emphasis added). The faith response of the lost can only eventuate in the context of the proclaimed gospel.<sup>20</sup> The church is sent to articulate the gospel, as clearly and persuasively as possible, so that estranged humankind is able to respond intelligently to its claims.<sup>21</sup> When God's people, who are His herald, proclaim the gospel, in the power of the Holy Spirit, God's kingdom rule is declared over creation, and His name is glorified, both in heaven and on earth.

### ***Passionate About God's Kingdom Rule***

"Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth, as it is heaven", Jesus taught His disciples to pray. They were encouraged to pray, and to persist in prayer, asking God the Father to realise His *will* on earth. This task must be carried out until Christ returns to fully consummate God's kingdom.<sup>22</sup> Even though the church is not the kingdom, she is the agency through which God's rule is partially realised in the world. At Christ's request, the church functions both as a *sign* and *signpost* of the kingdom of heaven in the world. As a sign, the church models the kingdom lifestyle before the watching world, and, as a signpost, she points the way to God's kingdom of righteousness.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Rom 10:14.

<sup>21</sup> Rom 10:17.

<sup>22</sup> R. P. Stevens coins the word "orthopathy", which he defines as: "Caring for what concerns God, caring for God's concerns in daily life, and caring for God above all." See his article "Living theologically: towards a theology of practice", in *Themelios* 20:3 (1995), pp. 4-8.

<sup>23</sup> "Editorial", in *Evangelical Review of Theology* 22-2 (1998), pp. 99-100.

*The Worshipping Church: A “Sign” of the Kingdom Presence.* The church’s primary calling is to worship the triune Godhead. This response distinguishes her from the people of this world. Through worship, the church perpetuates God’s rule of, and presence, in the world. God is the creator and the owner of this world, even though the world cannot acknowledge this fact in the present (John 1:10). Nonetheless, the world can be brought into such a conviction when the church offers up rousing testimonies of God’s working in the world. The worshipfulness of the church causes unbelievers to pause, be it momentarily, from their preoccupation with the world’s passing desires (1 John 2:17) to reflect on the more significant issues of life.

Worship is expressed as an event as well as a habit. It is eventful when God’s people assemble together in their locality to magnify God’s worthiness. The church also expresses worship to God when she is dispersed throughout society, and is occupied with the daily activities of life, doing everything out of reverence for God. Thus, worship involves all of life. The bottom line in worship is that believers are responding in gratitude to God the Father, for all He has done for them in Christ. James B. Torrance remarks:

It is *our self-offering in body, mind, and spirit* to the One True Offering made for us in Christ, our response of gratitude (*eucharistia*) to God’s grace (*charis*), our sharing in grace in the heavenly intercession of Christ. Therefore, anything we say about worship – the forms of worship, its practice, and procedure – must be said in light of that to which it is a response. It must be said, in light of the gospel (emphasis added).<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> J. B. Torrance, “The Place of Jesus in Worship”, in *Theological Foundation for Ministry*, Ray S. Anderson, ed. (Edinburgh UK: T. & T. Clark, 1979), p. 349.

The lost world is able to comprehend more clearly who God is, when the community of believers worship God gladly and exuberantly from their hearts, and with all their minds, and as they demonstrate, by life, God's glory in their local assemblies and societies-at-large.

*The Fellowshiping Church: A "Sign-Post" of the Kingdom's Presence.* Fellowship is another feature that characterises the church's love for God. It designates the important aspect of reaching out to others so that they, too, can share the benefits. The Greek word *koinonia* (κοινωνία) translated "fellowship" draws out this idea. The word carries a threefold idea of "having a share, giving a share, and sharing".<sup>25</sup>

Worship and fellowship, together, show the essence of the Christian faith. Through worship, believers affirm the fact that the triune Godhead makes them fit to be sharers together with Christ, and of His possession (Eph 1:14). In fellowship, they affirm their reliance on God, and on each other, and, as they disperse, they take the radiance of God's glory wherever they go, sharing with others God's good benefits.<sup>26</sup> As God's people, they have experienced for themselves, in the most tangible way, the *shared* abundance of God's good benefits of salvation, and thus, the treasure of infinite value, which lay within them (2 Cor 4:7). Since this is the case, they are necessarily compelled by the love of Christ (2 Cor 5:14) to share it with those in need. Since God's good gifts are for sharing, ministry is a natural expression of God's *agape* (ἀγάπη = love) lavished on His people, overflowing in generosity to others.

## **PASSIONATE ABOUT CHRIST'S COMMAND**

The ministry response of the church is also essential for one other reason. It is evidence of their obedience to Christ's summons. Christ, who is her Saviour and Lord, has mandated her to this task. The church can only respond, in obedience to her Lord.

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<sup>25</sup> Ralph P. Martin, "Communion", in *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (London UK: IVP, 1980), pp. 307-308.

<sup>26</sup> John Stott, *One People* (London UK: Falcon Books, 1968), pp. 75-81.

Christ's summons to the church was preceded by His own example of obedience to God's will. The church's ministry is not entirely innovative. She follows in the footsteps of her Lord and Master.<sup>27</sup> On earth, Christ stooped to minister to needy people, as a Servant. Ultimately, the Cross is the epitome of Christ's resolute obedience to the will of God on earth. What could be a more compelling example of obedience? Christ commands His people to go and to do likewise!

The compulsion to reach out to the lost world comes not from charitable motives, honourable though these are; nor are God's people responding to the dictates of world events. No! They are compelled to do so out of *absolute devotion* to their Lord and Saviour. Ultimately, it is Christ's explicit and resounding challenge that leads her to respond accordingly:

All authority has been given to *Me!* Therefore *go* and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to obey everything *I* have commanded *you*. And surely *I am* with *you* always, to the very end of the age" (Matt 28:18-20, emphasis mine).

Christ bids His people go. They must do so without delay!

### ***The Ministry of Service***

The call of Christ logically implies *service*, since those in the community of God are His servants. In the New Testament, most particularly in the Pauline epistles, the noun form of the word translated "minister" is *diakonos* (διδάκωνος).<sup>28</sup> It is used, in a very broad sense, to describe someone who waits at tables, in order to serve. Even though the New Testament recognises that some members of the church are "specifically" gifted to serve in full-time church ministry (Acts 6:4; cf. Eph 4:11), the word "minister" must still be understood in its broadest sense of the

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<sup>27</sup> Luke 9:23.

<sup>28</sup> The word can be translated either "minister" or "deacon".

term.<sup>29</sup> Every believer is engaged in an *ergon diakonias* (ἔργον διακονίας = work of service).<sup>30</sup> Leon Morris states; “Christianity knows nothing of a spiritual elite, occupying positions of special privilege. Paradoxically, for Christians, the highest privilege is that of being lowly.”<sup>31</sup>

This then, is how the call of the church to ministry is to be understood. A. T. Hanson expresses this point succinctly, when he remarks; “The pattern is Christ – the ministry of the church, and the task of the ministry is not to undertake some specialist activity, from which the rest of the faithful are excluded, but to pioneer in doing that which the whole church must do.”<sup>32</sup> The mandate of service is the enterprise assigned *inclusively* to everyone who confesses Jesus Christ as his or her Saviour and Lord. It is necessary to say, however, that obedience to Christ is anything but casuistry. Christian service is innately *voluntary*! It is a spontaneous activity, arising from transformed lives undergirded by the qualities of gratitude and humility.

*Service of Gratitude.* The inevitable response by the *laos* (λαὸς = people) of God to serve Him in the world originates from a heart-felt gratitude at the wonderment of the great salvation that has been offered freely to them by God in Christ. Gratitude ignites their resolve to obey Christ. God’s people cannot remain complacent when Christ’s *agapao* (ἀγαπάω)<sup>33</sup> compels them to act. The apostle Paul remarks: “For Christ’s love *compels* us”.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, God’s people cannot remain apathetic, when God’s compelling love has been shed abroad in their

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<sup>29</sup> C. K. Barrett, *The Church, Ministry, and Sacraments in the New Testament* (Exeter UK: Paternoster Press, 1993 reprint), pp. 31, 32.

<sup>30</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, “Christ Ministry through His Whole church”, in *Theological Foundation For Ministry*, Ray S. Anderson, ed. (Edinburgh UK: T. & T. Clark, 1979), pp. 430-457.

<sup>31</sup> Leon Morris, *The Great Doctrines of the Bible: Ministers of God* (Downers Grove UK: IVP, 1964), pp. 35, 36.

<sup>32</sup> A. T. Hanson, *Church Order in the New Testament* (London UK: SCM Press, 1961), p. 72.

<sup>33</sup> The most common form of the verb translated “to love” in the New Testament.

<sup>34</sup> 2 Cor 5:14.

hearts. They can only expand their lives in loving service for their Saviour and Lord.

*Service in Humility.* The call is to *table-wait*: to consider the needs of others before one's own interests and needs. God's people must be eager to dispense with pride; to put on an apron of humility, and to wait on the needs of fellow believers, and the needy world around us. Christ demonstrated *humble service* to His disciples, in the Upper Room on the eve of His passion, when He peeled back His outer garments, wrapped a towel around His waist, and stooped to wash their feet (John 13:4-5). Even though He was God Himself, His profound concern for the needs of estranged mankind, and the created order, ultimately resulted in His death on the cruel Cross.<sup>35</sup>

In responding to the ministry call of Christ, then, His people are demonstrating the qualities depicted by him as God's lowly *diakonos* (διδάκονος = servant) in the world.<sup>36</sup> They can only finally respond to this call and say: "We are only your *unworthy servants*" (Luke 10:7).

### ***Emulating Christ***

The ministry calling of the church offers believers the opportunity to emulate Christ in the world. As they respond, in daily life, to Christ's summons, they grow more toward Christlikeness in their lives. This is a reassuring thought, and yet one that is most challenging for God's people to understand.

The connection between service and Christlikeness is often lost to ordinary believers, because of the way Christianity is portrayed or taught. Most often, Christianity is presented as merely *assenting* to correct propositions. In truth, the Christian faith is more about *obedience* than it is about accumulating propositions – even correct

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<sup>35</sup> Phil 2:5-8.

<sup>36</sup> Ray S. Anderson, "Living in the World", in *Theological Foundation For Ministry*, Ray S. Anderson, ed. (Edinburgh UK: T. & T. Clark, 1979), pp. 567-594.

propositions.<sup>37</sup> The shared participation of every believer in the ministry task is obligatory, since it is fundamental to change occurring in his or her life. Service is an important means, through which God does this in the believer. Even if Christians do not fully understand the connection between the two, they can at least obey Christ in the opportunity afforded them, and, by so doing, grow more into the likeness of Christ.<sup>38</sup>

The prospects afforded to the church to emulate Christ are numerous, since ministry deals with the whole of life. Nevertheless, two possibilities stand out distinctively that serve this purpose: suffering and fruit-bearing.

*Through Suffering.* Suffering is inevitable in an environment that is estranged and hostile toward God and His rule. Christ Himself remarked that, following Him, will entail suffering: “If any man would come after Me, let him take up his cross daily and follow Me” (Luke 9:23). Most certainly, the people of God will be assailed with trials of many kinds.<sup>39</sup> In most cases, this will occur daily, as heavenly values clash with those of the fallen world, the ruler of the kingdom of the air, and man’s fallen nature.<sup>40</sup> God’s people are not exempted from suffering, as they seek to bring glory to Christ in a hostile environment. The fact is, they will most likely suffer more, for the simple reason that they are followers of Christ. Paul warns, “those who want to live godly lives in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim 4:12). Nevertheless, God’s community will not shrink from suffering. It is through suffering that a valuable opportunity is afforded to them to draw strength from the power of God (2 Cor 12:10), and excel in their attempt to bring glory to His name.

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<sup>37</sup> The 2nd-century church father, Ignatius of Antioch, expresses the similar idea in his letter to the Roman Christian in the latter half of the 1st century AD. He writes: “Christianity is not a matter persuading people of particular ideas, but of inviting them to share in the greatness of Christ.” Cited in *Roots of Faith*, Robert Van De Weyer, ed. (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1997), p. 27.

<sup>38</sup> Rom 8:29.

<sup>39</sup> Jam 1:2.

<sup>40</sup> Eph 2:2.

*Through Fruit-Bearing.* In the Upper Room discourse (John 13-17), Christ discussed *fruitfulness* with His disciples. They were to abide in Him, to be able to bear fruit: “You did not choose Me, but I chose you, and appointed you to go and bear *fruit* – fruit that will last” (John 15:16, emphasis added). The words spoken by Christ have as much relevance and potency for the church now as when they were first spoken to the 12 back then. Perhaps a question worth answering is: What evidence can God’s people submit as proof that they are growing and bearing fruit for Christ in Melanesia today?

Fruitfulness is evident when the following things occur: firstly, believers are progressing in *holiness* and godly living; secondly, believers are *replicating* themselves in the lives of others; and, finally, they are *excelling* in good works. Is this the case for the church in Melanesia?

### **AN APPRAISAL OF THE IMPACT OF CHURCH LIFE AND MINISTRY IN MELANESIA**

Although Christianity made its initial appearance in the region as early as the mid-1500s,<sup>41</sup> Melanesians<sup>42</sup> waited another three centuries before any deliberate attempt was made to Christianise them. In the early 1800s, the attempt to Christianise the islands of Melanesia commenced with great earnestness. With a westward push from the Polynesian islands, coupled

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<sup>41</sup> The Portuguese brand of Roman Catholicism was introduced to Timor in the 16th century. The other parts of Melanesia were evangelised three centuries later. Although the Roman Catholic mission entered the Bismarck Archipelago in 1847, it was mostly a fruitless attempt until 24 years later, when the LMS mission was established in the southern Papuan region in 1871. The Sacred Heart Order re-entered German Nuigini in 1881, and only four years later in 1885 held their first religious service. For detailed information about missions and the church, in individual states and colonies of Melanesia, see the 2nd edition of the *World Christian Encyclopaedia*, vol 1 (2001).

<sup>42</sup> Melanesia, in the western Pacific, includes the following: Timor, West Papua Province of Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, New Caledonia, and Fiji.

with the opposite thrust from the north, the Melanesian region was opened up for Christian missionary work. This pioneering effort is credited to the London Missionary Society (LMS), and a number of Roman Catholic Orders. Other mission agencies and denominations, such as the Methodists and Lutherans, were to follow suit.

From the initial efforts of the 1800s, to the dawn of the 1900s, the number of Christian converts in Melanesia had multiplied enormously. Incidentally, from that point on, the work also became more competitive, with the influx of other Christian missions and denominations vying for the souls of Melanesians. By the latter half of the 20th century, the people of Melanesia had almost been fully Christianised.<sup>43</sup> It is hardly disputed that the efforts of foreign denominations and mission agencies to Christianise the Melanesian region were markedly successful. Generally speaking, the overall goal of establishing the church in the Melanesian region appears to have been accomplished.

With the advent of the church, the social and cultural situations of Melanesia have been changed for the better, making life for the people of the region a lot more agreeable. Missions-related projects, essential to the welfare of the people, form part of the everyday reality for most, if not all, societies of Melanesia. Importantly, people have eagerly embraced the Christian gospel; parting with features of their traditional religions contrary to the Christian gospel.<sup>44</sup> Even as believers gratefully acknowledge the significant changes Christianity brought to Melanesia, it is also timely for them to pause and take stock, to seek out the reasons for the ineffectiveness of the church's influence in the region.

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<sup>43</sup> These remarks do not represent the most accurate historical details. They are simply a generalised description setting the stage for our discussion. For a more expanded historical account of the establishment of the Christian church in Melanesia see other writings. A helpful sketch of early missionary work in Melanesia can be found in Rufus Pech's article titled: "A Historical Sketch of Christian Missions and Ministry in Central Melanesia", published in the *Point* 7 (1985): 17-71.

<sup>44</sup> Gernot Fugmann, "The Role of the Church in Society", in *Point* 5 (1985), p. 1.

Why, one may ask, if there is such a huge Christian presence in Melanesia,<sup>45</sup> is the region sliding more and more into moral decay each day? Why is there little passion for God, and for His glory, in the region? Why is the church still immature, after many years of Christianity impacting the region? These serious questions, and more, beg for answers, considering the current plight of the church and the region generally.

### **THE ANOMALY OF “CHRISTIAN” MELANESIA**

The ills of Melanesian societies, as well as that of the church in Melanesia, continue to generate discussion. Observers have commented that the region is replete with escalating social, religious, and political problems.<sup>46</sup> The writings of socio-political scientists also abound with descriptive, as well as prescriptive, commentaries about such problems.<sup>47</sup> There is also an expanding volume of material written by Christian scholars about these issues.<sup>48</sup> The international media, and expatriate observers, also harangue Melanesian peoples about these problems, on a regular basis.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Christian adherents in Melanesia make up to 85-95 percent of the total population. Fiji and West Papua are exceptions, for obvious reasons – Fiji has an equal number of Indo-Fijian, who are mostly Hindus, and West Papua is a province of Indonesia – the most populous Islamic nation in the world. Nevertheless, the Melanesian populations of these two societies are still disproportionately Christians.

<sup>46</sup> A regular commentary in the print media by Mike Manning of Transparency International (TI) is a case in point.

<sup>47</sup> Allan Patience, a political science professor at the University of PNG, has written and spoken quite a lot about the problems of Papua New Guinea, but also of the Melanesian region as a whole.

<sup>48</sup> For example, the writings of Joshua Daimoi and Mosende L. Douglas cover some of these issues quite extensively.

<sup>49</sup> An email dispatch of August, 31, 2006, is a case in point. The dispatch is titled: “PNG Careens towards Chaos”, and describes the impending collapse of one of Melanesia’s largest states, due to issues such as poverty, law-and-order breakdown, corruption, and the increase in HIV/AIDS infections, to name but a few.

### ***Trouble in Society***

There is no doubt at all that Melanesia is a *troubled* region. It is among the most violent in the world. Crimes of all forms ravage the region. It seems that Melanesian societies gravitate more toward brutality than to neighbourliness. Aggravated assault, thuggery, and wilful murder, occur unchecked, on a daily basis, both in the towns and rural villages.<sup>50</sup> This is a direct indictment of the “Melanesian way”.<sup>51</sup> The most vulnerable – the poor, women, and children – suffer immensely in Melanesia. Violence of all forms is directed, almost daily, particularly against women and children.<sup>52</sup> Rape cases are also reported daily in the papers, and have reached peak proportions.<sup>53</sup> Anti-social behaviour and petty crimes are prevalent. Poverty is on the increase, causing it own sets of problems. The HIV/AIDS epidemic is escalating in the region. One of

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<sup>50</sup> The situation in Melanesia can be compared to some of the nations in sub-Saharan Africa, which are the most violent in the world. All the member states and entities in Melanesia have, without exception, undergone civil disorder. The assumption that Melanesians value harmony more than confrontation is probably an idealistic notion, which should be accepted with a “grain of salt”. But, see Joshua Daimoi’s article “Understanding Melanesians”, in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 17-2 (2001), pp. 6-21. A report of a series of studies to ascertain the magnitude and the various forms of violence occurring in the whole of Oceania are recorded in the “Special Issue” of the *Pacific Studies* 13-3 (1990).

<sup>51</sup> Bernard Narokobi, a lawyer and PNG government minister, was an ardent advocate of “the Melanesian Way”. His thoughts are recorded in the book of the same title: *The Melanesian Way*. In essence, it was held that, given the opportunity, Melanesians could very well deal with their problems, using skills and wisdom, transmitted from their forebears for many thousands of years. Incidentally, this thinking seemed to have overlooked the fact that mankind is inherently sinful, and is unable to deal with its problems amicably. In the current environment, this concoction does not appear to be potent enough, and so, Melanesians must look elsewhere for others to help us with our predicament.

<sup>52</sup> For a thorough catalogue of domestic violence in Oceania region, see “Domestic Violence in Oceania” (Special Issue), *Pacific Studies* 10: 3 (1990), especially pp. 225-254.

<sup>53</sup> A 152-page report titled “Black and White”, published in 2005 by the *Consultative Implementation and Monitoring Council of Papua New Guinea* (CIMC-PNG), gives us a snapshot of the pervasiveness of brutality in PNG. Although this report chronicles the PNG situation, it is assumed that it reflects the situation throughout Melanesia generally.

its member states now has one of the highest HIV virus infection rates in the world.<sup>54</sup> Pillaging of national coffers is rampant in these societies. Only recently, a retired head of state in the region is reported to have freely admitted to have stripped Government House bare of its furnishings at the end of his six-year tenure.<sup>55</sup> The irony being that this individual was often candid about his commitment to the Christian faith in many of his public speeches.<sup>56</sup> Church leaders and lay Christians themselves are colluding with criminals and con men<sup>57</sup> to satiate their lust for wealth, in the most blatant ways possible, knowing fully that they are consigning themselves, their people, environment, and their societies “to the dogs”. Each day, the print, audio, and visual media churns out a concoction of the wickedness that is so pervasive in Melanesian societies. In the midst of this, the church *sleeps!*

### ***The Trouble with the Church***

Other writers have discussed the ills of the church in greater detail than offered here.<sup>58</sup> Nevertheless, it is important to revisit three of the more-insidious “isms”, which contribute considerably to the ineffectiveness of the church in the region: nominalism, syncretism, and pragmatism.

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<sup>54</sup> Some reports indicate that three out of every 10 people in PNG are infected by the HIV virus. Nationwide, the number of infected people is estimated to be 60,000 to a 100,000. The rate of infection is reported to be comparable to some Asian and sub-Saharan countries, and it is still rising.

<sup>55</sup> Source: *Deutsche Press-Agentur*, 2006.

<sup>56</sup> Many Melanesian politicians and government bureaucrats profess to be born-again Christians.

<sup>57</sup> In the mid-1990s, a number of quick money schemes, sprang up, primarily in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, with a large following in other Melanesian island nations. These QMS alleged that they were Christian organisations, and so had the strong backing of certain denominations and their leaders. After siphoning people’s money, they vanished – together with the “investment” – a large proportion of which belonged to ordinary believers and Christian denominations.

<sup>58</sup> See especially, books and articles by Boseto, Daimoi, Douglas, Kendi, Kero, and Manu, listed in the bibliography.

*Nominalism.* The Melanesian church is besieged by nominalism. Some people have projected that 96 percent of Melanesians, who profess to be Christian, are only nominally committed to the faith.<sup>59</sup> Nominalism can be referred to colloquially as a “six-inch deep by 60 miles wide”<sup>60</sup> commitment people make to the Christian faith. It is also a profession of faith, much talked about, but very rarely, if ever, lived at all.

The problem of nominalism becomes very obvious to any observer, when she or he tries to correlate the packed church buildings every Sunday or Saturday with what goes on during every working day. The spillover effect of packed worship activities in the homes and workplaces of Melanesian societies leaves so much to be desired. Schwarz remarks:

Sunday services may be crowded, and the sacraments dispensed in record numbers, but, despite the appearance of success, one must ask how the church is experienced here. How effective is this approach, in helping people to respond to their baptismal calling in daily life, and, in this movement toward the church building, who and how many are left behind?<sup>61</sup>

It is probably safe to venture to say that the hazard called “nominalism” dates back to the early days of the mission endeavour in Melanesia, and is the result of misguided strategies, whether people want to admit it or not.

*Syncretism.* Syncretism is another malady that permeates the church in Melanesia. Perhaps it is an even more-serious problem than nominalism. It has been pointed out by others that, since Melanesian societies are caught in the whirlpool of rapid change, it is not uncommon for people in such situations to concoct a hybrid belief-system, consisting of both the

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<sup>59</sup> Kewai Kero, “Nominalism in Papua New Guinea”, in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 14-1 (1987), pp. 57-87.

<sup>60</sup> Source unknown.

<sup>61</sup> Brian Schwarz, “Ministry in Urban Context”, in *Point 7* (1985), p. 174.

old and new belief-systems.<sup>62</sup> This brew is *syncretism*. Syncretism is also designated “folk Christianity”. Syncretism is a severe problem, because it pervades the church more than it is often acknowledged. Even born-again Christians exhibit syncretistic tendencies in Melanesia. Quite often, they resort to their traditional religious practices, when they find that Christianity does not completely answer some of their life problems. For instance, Christians are known to regularly seek the help of traditional healers, when medical treatment and prayer fails to exhibit anticipated results. It is probably realistic to say that syncretism is the cause, while nominalism is the effect.

*Pragmatism.* The other problem is similar to syncretism; it is designated *pragmatism*. It is common for people to say that Melanesians are functional pragmatists.<sup>63</sup> An untold number of Melanesians have embraced Christianity, out of a sense of expediency. This is a very typical response in Melanesia. Melanesians look for results. Beliefs or ideas are accepted or rejected on the basis of their *utility*, and not on the basis of their *credibility*. What works is accepted; what doesn't is either put on the backburner, for future use, or is rejected outright. It is fair to say that many Melanesians seem to have embraced Christianity, more because of its social reasons than for its credibility as a world and life view.

Sadly, many Melanesians ignore the fact that, in essence, Christianity provides the only credible life “story” to human existence. Christianity must evoke commitment, not because it anticipates results, even though it does, but, more importantly, it provides humans with a window to understanding themselves, their predicaments, as well as their achievements in the world. This, then, is the conspicuous situation of the church in Melanesia, despite the fact that the Christian gospel has

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<sup>62</sup> See especially, Lacey's article “Religious Change in Precolonial Era”, in *Point* (2/1978), p. 178.

<sup>63</sup> Kewai, “Nominalism”, pp. 57-87.

become well and truly established in the Black Islands<sup>64</sup> for over two centuries.

### IDENTIFY THE ROOT CAUSE

The ineffectiveness of the church in Melanesia, and her ills, will continue to generate discussion, and spill much ink, as time goes on. No doubt, the momentum will increase, as more and more indigenous church leaders and home-grown thinkers become more conscious of the issue. Unfortunately, it is noticeable that current discussion and writing are inclined to discuss the surface illness of the church rather than root causes, which are far more urgent. This article is an attempt to contribute to the latter cause; to probe beyond the surface problems of church in Melanesia, and try to identify a basic root cause to these problems.

The assertion of this article is that the most insidious root cause of the ineffectiveness of the church in Melanesia is that the *laos tou theou* (λαῶ τῶ θεοῦ = people of God) are excluded from participating fully in church life and ministry in Melanesia.<sup>65</sup> Unless the entire company of believers is “mainstreamed” fully into the church life and ministry in Melanesia she will continue to decline in her influence, and will never be a proactive presence for Christ in the region.

Put differently, the church’s deplorable state has eventuated, because the laity have been put at arms’ length from the centre of the life and ministry of the church in Melanesia. Moreover, the antidote to this root cause does not lie with the savvy clergy, structures, and techniques, but simply with the entire *laos* (λαῶς = people) of God themselves (cf. Acts 8:1, 4).

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<sup>64</sup> The Melanesian region is referred colloquially to as the “Black Islands”, because some people, who have the darkest skin complexion in the world, inhabit it.

<sup>65</sup> A growing number of Christian writers from the West, concerned about postmodernism, are proposing very much the same concern that is delineated in this article. For instance, see Gelder’s book *The Essence of the Church* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Books, 2006), see especially chapters 4 -6.

The current state of affairs of the church in Melanesia is comparable to Europe in the Middle Ages, where the Reformers boldly contended for “priesthood of all believers”. The church in Melanesia is the monopoly of a few “specialists”. Nevertheless, to pontificate about the “priesthood of believers” in Melanesia is not sufficient. The situation demands more than paying lip service to God’s people. God’s chosen race, His royal priesthood, His special people (1 Pet 2:9) must be affirmed as coparticipants, released fully to live as His people, and to serve Him with their whole lives.

Junkin’s comment, although directed particularly at the church in North America, makes great sense in Melanesia:

The church members all too often are primarily the objects of the ministries of others: others pray for them; others tell them what scripture says; others tell them to what obedience they are called; and others engage in ministry on their behalf. . . . They remain children in faith, dependent upon others; and such dependency breeds voicelessness, powerlessness, apathy, and even anger.<sup>66</sup>

It is extremely important for the *whole-people* concept of the church to be recovered urgently. Until this happens, any real prospect of resolving the ills of the Melanesian church, and thus of the wider society, will continue to be remote and elusive.

Individual believers must be made to understand that they are *indispensable* to body life, as well as to the maximum effectiveness of the church, in the region of Melanesia. Christians are accountable to each other, and to God, for the use of their gifts and abilities as members of Christ’s body in Melanesia. Moreover, as they are provided opportunities to explore for themselves, they will be able to enhance the effectiveness of their gifts, and discover their niches in church life and ministry.

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<sup>66</sup> Edward Dixon Junkin, “Up from the Grassroots: The Church in Transition”, in *Interpretation* xlvii-3 (1992), pp. 279-280.

The point hardly needs emphasising that the scope of impact and effectiveness in the church in Melanesia can only be in direct proportion to the extent to which the gifts and abilities of God's people are utilised throughout Melanesia. In sum, the insignificance of the church in Melanesia can be correlated to the small percentage of believers currently involved in the life and ministry of the church in Melanesia.<sup>67</sup>

The solutions to nominalism, syncretism, and pragmatism, and to a host of other problems, for that matter, lie neither in human ingenuity nor in organisational structures, but with the *laos* (λαὸς = people) themselves.<sup>68</sup>

### **IMPEDIMENTS TO THE WHOLE-CHURCH PARTICIPATION**

A number of interrelated barriers inhibit God's people from fully expressing love for Him, and obedience to Christ, through the life and ministry of the church in Melanesia. The impediments are *conceptual* rather than organisational or functional. They are rooted in faulty ideas people have about the nature of the church, and her role in the world. The sooner these faulty conceptions are eliminated, and replaced with more biblical ones, the better placed the church will be to give maximum attention to her role in Melanesia. Until then, the maximum participation of God's people, envisaged in scripture cannot really and truly begin to happen.

#### ***Overt Clericalism***

One of the chief obstacles to *lay-participation* in the church in Melanesia stems from her unabashed clericalism. Church life and ministry are perceived by many as the domains of the "specialised" clergy. Though this may not be advocated explicitly, this perception is rooted in the mostly hierarchical styles of church governments, which were

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<sup>67</sup> Gaius Helix's short article titled "The Pastor and Resources", in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 11-1&2 (1995), pp. 94-103, also makes the similar observations that this article makes.

<sup>68</sup> See also Bill Hybels, *Courageous Leadership* (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2002), especially chapter 1.

transplanted to Melanesia by overseas missions and denominations. Most often, the mentality is reinforced, when the clergy, both expatriate, as well as national clergy, is located in mission stations some distance away from the masses. Thus, the masses automatically equate the mission station with the church.

Moreover, since it is the specialist *klēros* (κλήρος),<sup>69</sup> who have acquired the correct knowledge of the Bible – for an extensive period of time – people generally assume that they have the exclusive right to the church and her ministry. Designations, such as, “priest”, “reverend”, or “minister” add fuel to this faulty thinking by ordinary believers.

The *laos* (λαὸς = people), on the other hand, cannot accept that they are the church, because they sense so much distance between themselves and the clergy. They are content, together with the pagans of this world, to be passive *receptors* and *spectators* of the ministry of the “specialist” clergy.

### ***Reductionist View of Ministry***

This hurdle follows from the one above. Given the fact that church life and ministry is confined to the “specialist” clergy, the church’s ministry is also construed in a very restricted way. For the most, ministry is restricted to the number of things done by the ordained clergy.<sup>70</sup> Most often, ministry is understood in the following two ways only:

*Dispensing the Desirable.* Ministry is equated with service rendered to those who have a particular need or needs. In this case, it is treated as a *commodity*. It is something that can be accepted, or even refused, like other products in the marketplace. Church ministry must vie for its own

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<sup>69</sup> *Klēros* (κλήρος) is the Greek word, from which we get our English synonym “clergy”. In the New Testament, the word *klēros* (κλήρος) meant; “a part” or “a share”. In about the 3rd century AD, the use of the word was used to refer to those who ministered in the church fulltime, as against those who did not. See R. P. Stevens, *The Other Six Days*, for a fuller treatment of this subject.

<sup>70</sup> This fact appears to be equally true for both the “high churches” as well as for those that subscribe to a congregational form of government.

customers. The religious fraternity has total monopoly over this product. With so few specialists to go around, they must dispense ministry like “service station attendants”.<sup>71</sup> People, who desire some form of ministry, can respond in two ways: “shop” for it in the mission stations or the pastor’s study, or wait for it when the clergyman or clergywoman turns up to “deliver” at an appointed time and place.

*Wholly Inwardly Focused.* Ministry, moreover, is restricted entirely to the interior life. When the term “ministry” is mentioned, it automatically invokes the notion of something “spiritual”. Since the specialist clergy is schooled in the interior life, it reserves the right to deal exclusively with issues related to it. This “spiritual” ministry is stressed to such an extent that the other equally-important aspects of life become completely redundant. The result is that an unbridgeable chasm is created between the spiritual and physical and/or the spiritual and mental, etc. The Christian faith can no longer lay claim to other parts of life. It is now restricted entirely to the spiritual maladies of the “souls” of men and women. Beyond this, the church is silent; this is the secular life – “the God forsaken” – that must be left to its own devices.

### ***Institutionalism***

The third impediment to whole-church life and ministry is institutionalism. Even though the church is institutional in its visible forms, Christians must be able “to recognise the limits of particular organisational forms, which become institutionalised”.<sup>72</sup> While the forms serve unchanging purposes, “they are not absolute, neither are they static and unchanging”.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Schwarz, “Ministry”, p. 174.

<sup>72</sup> Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church*, p. 159. This is one of the most valuable resources for understanding the nature, ministry, and institutional expressions of the church. Gelder expresses sentiments similar to this article.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

In Melanesia, people show a zeal for transitory expressions or “forms” of the church, rather than the underlying timely truths they point to. For instance, Melanesian believers continue to divide over organisational structures, modes of worship, and even such trivial issues, such as hand clapping or raising hands. Most often, these transitory forms date back to the early missionaries and missions. They are so embedded in people’s minds, and are even regarded as Bible truths, themselves. The result is that the church in Melanesia is distanced from authenticity, because she cannot move beyond these forms. The church in Melanesia should seriously consider the admonition of her Saviour and Lord if she is to elicit a hearing in the Melanesian region.

No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear worse. Neither do men pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst, the wine will run out, and the skins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins and both are preserved (Matt 9:16-17).

Clergymen or clergywomen must, again, bear some responsibility for inculcating this mentality in the minds of believers.

### **CHRIST’S LIFE AND MINISTRY ANTICIPATED IN WHOLE-PEOPLE MINISTRY**

Christ *anticipated* whole-people coparticipation in church life and ministry. The following features in His ministry characterise this:

- He made Himself accessible to everyone, in His life and ministry on earth.
- He called individuals to Himself, so that they could observe His life and teaching, and share in His ministry.
- Christ had a ministry focus that was *universal* – the whole world.

Christ understood His purpose for coming to earth, that is, to redeem Adam's progeny from the curse of the law, sin and death. Since all of mankind have equal share in the fall of Adam (Rom 5:12), He was concerned for the entire human race.<sup>74</sup> This is borne out by the fact that during Christ's life on earth, He ministered to everyone, regardless of his or her status or occupation in life.

People, in all their different situations and walks of life, had enormous value in the eyes of Christ. They had value, because they were created for God's glory, and created in His image, though fallen in sin. Christ was prepared to love them, even to the point of suffering and death on the cruel Cross to do so.

On His own initiative, Christ took the form of a servant so that He could deal a death blow to sin, death, and the Devil, once and for all (Gal 2:20; Phil 2:6-11; Col 2:15). The result of this is that every believer now has equal access to God the Father in heaven (Heb 10:19-23), and is endowed equally with His blessings in the heavenly places (Eph 1:3).

The fact of a *whole-people* ministry becomes more convincing when we consider Christ's call to individuals to follow Him and to share in His ministry. The 12 disciples are a case in point. They were called: separated from the throng, so that they could observe Christ, His life and teachings, carefully at close quarters. They were ordinary men, prone to failure, as is the rest of mankind. What differentiated them from the rest was their obedience to the call of the Master, and a commitment to follow closely in His steps. It was to these 12 disciples that Christ "entrusted the secrets of the kingdom" (Mark 4:11; see also 1 Cor 2:7; 1 Cor 4:1). It was also to them that Christ personally committed the task of proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, to the ends of the earth.

Inevitably, this rag-tag company of 12 formed the nucleus of what emerged on the day of Pentecost as the new community of God's people – the church – birthed and empowered by the Holy Spirit. This is the very

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<sup>74</sup> See John 3:16 and Rom 5:15b.

same community, into which Melanesian believers are instantaneously baptised by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:13; Eph 4:5), the moment they trust in Christ's redemptive work and its merits.

## THE WHOLE-PEOPLE ARE CHRIST'S COPARTICIPANTS IN THE WORLD

Privilege and responsibility run parallel to each other in scripture. Those who are redeemed by Christ are also called to serve Him as His representatives on earth. The church, as the sum total of God's people, exists to expand on the work Christ began when He was on earth. As members "of the body of Christ", they are obedient to Christ, who is their "Head", and are committed fully to His cause on earth. The church, as Christ's body, is his coparticipant, entrusted with a sacred trust. This sacred trust is mandated to the entire *laos tou theou* (λαῶ τοῦ θεοῦ = people of God), by Christ, without exception. R. Paul Stevens remarks:

"Laity" in its proper New Testament sense of *laos* (λαὸς) – the people of God – is a term of great honour, denoting the enormous *privilege* and *mission of the people of God*. Once we were not a people at all, but now, in Christ, we are "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people (*laos/λαὸς*) belonging to God" (1 Pet 2:9; Ex 19:6, emphasis mine).<sup>75</sup>

Since Christian ministry is essentially about kingdom lifestyle, everyone, without exception, can participate in kingdom work. Unfortunately, over the centuries, "specialised" practitioners, and human ingenuity have often disparaged the Bible-sanctioned *whole-people* concept of church and ministry. For Melanesia, at least, the most urgent need is for the *laos* (λαὸς = people) to be returned to the centre stage of church life and ministry. Until that happens, the concept of *whole-people* church life and ministry, anticipated by Christ, and envisaged in the Bible, continues to be ignored, or simply disobeyed, but at the risk of perilous consequences. The fact that Christ anticipated whole-people participation in church life

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<sup>75</sup> R. Paul Stevens, *The Abolition of the Laity* (Exeter UK: Paternoster Press, 1999), p. 5.

and ministry is established indubitably when two additional truths are brought into the equation.

### ***They are Empowered Evenly***

Before His departure to heaven, Christ instructed His 11 disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, He said, would empower them to be His witnesses in the world. On the day the Holy Spirit descended, the number of those waiting was 120 in all (Acts 1:15). This entire company was imbued with Christ's gift of His Spirit on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:4). It is important to note a number of characteristic aspects of the company assembled in the Jerusalem. Notable are the following features:

- The group consisted of both men and women (Acts 1:12-14).
- They were men and women, who responded humbly to the claims of Christ in their lives (Acts 4:13).
- With a few exceptions, they were mostly very ordinary men and women (Acts 4:13 cf. 1 Cor 1:26-31).
- The group consisted of individuals from all walks of life and occupations (see the Gospels).
- The entire group, both men and women, were filled and empowered by the Spirit, without exception (Acts 2:4).
- The entire group ministered the glories of God to the Jerusalem audience, without exception (cf. Acts 2:17-18).

The impact of the Holy Spirit on this timid band was stupendous. In an instant, the believers' lives were transformed. The once-timid band became filled with divine boldness and power. They, *all together*, fearlessly proclaimed the glorious gospel to the Jews of Jerusalem, and also to those of other regions. The result speaks for itself: by the end of the day, the number of believers swelled to over 3,000 (Acts 2:41).

God's Holy Spirit is poured out in the same measure and power to God's entire people today. In very much the same way, He was poured out on the waiting followers of Christ on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:17-22). What happened in Jerusalem, 2,000 years ago, is occurring repeatedly in the rural communities and cities of Melanesia. This is true for the church in Melanesia, as well as for every other part in the world.

### ***They are Equipped Impartially***

The giftedness of God's people is taught explicitly in New Testament, and hardly needs justification. The nature of the church, as Christ emissary alone, demands this to be the case. Indeed, God's people cannot hope to accomplish the task, unless the necessary apparatus is placed at their disposal. The same Holy Spirit, who provides power to the church, also equips her to carry out Christ's summons in the world. This equipment comes in the form of charismatic gifts (1 Cor 12:1-31; 14:1-40; Rom 12:6-14), as well as charismatic individuals (Eph 4:1-16).

Moreover, since *all* believers are baptised by the Holy Spirit into one body, and made to drink of the one Spirit,<sup>76</sup> no believer is excluded from the liberality of the Holy Spirit, as He dispenses His grace gifts. The entire church of Christ is showered with a variety of gifts and special abilities, so that she is equipped, fit, and ready for various forms of ministry (1 Cor 12:7; Eph 4:12). Even though God's people are endowed with different gifts and abilities, they have a common task to accomplish. In Eph 4:12-16, Paul points out, explicitly, the reason for which Christ dispenses His gifts to His church. The different gifts are distributed to the "body of Christ", to equip her to carry out the works of service, so that she attains unanimity in the faith, maturing, until she reaches out to the measure of the fullness of Christ, who is her Head (Eph 4:15; see also 1:22; Col 1:18). This is the reason why *whole-people* coparticipation in church life and ministry is both inevitable and indispensable in Melanesia.

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<sup>76</sup> 1 Cor 12:13.

## WHOLE PEOPLE ARE SENT TO THE WHOLE WORLD

The universality of the church is strategic. Christ commissioned: “Go into *all the world*” (Mark 16:15, emphasis added). God’s people are dispersed far and wide in the world as ministers of God. The very nature of the church consists in her *being sent* to the world. Jesus compares the community of believers to wheat scattered among the tares of this world (Matt 13). For as long as Christ’s Second Advent is delayed, God’s people must coexist among the people of this world. The church’s existence in the world has been predetermined by the triune Godhead. Christ’s prayer in John 17 clearly alludes to this very fact. “My prayer is not that You take them out of the world, but that You will protect them from the evil one. . . . *As you have sent Me into the world, I have sent them into the world*” (John 17:15, 18, emphasis mine).

The ministry mandate, recorded in all the Gospels and the book of Acts (Matt 28:18-19; Mark 16:15-18; Luke 24:46-49; Acts 1:7-8), indubitably establishes the reason for God’s people sojourning in the world. They are in the world with a *mission* to serve the triune God, and ultimately to bring Him glory! As long as Christ tarries, each believer must judiciously respond to the opportunity to contribute to God’s kingdom rule on earth (Eph 5:15-17). Immersed, as they are in the world, with its nagging questions of life (about existence, suffering, pain, and death), God’s people are called to respond as *table-waiters*. This response demands a practical theology – an active-reflective theology – that exegetes both scripture and life.<sup>77</sup>

This ministry task, begun by Christ, comports itself most comfortably with God’s people – earthen vessels – who know the world so innately, and yet are possessed of God so intimately, so that they become His *gift* to the world.

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<sup>77</sup> R. Paul Stevens, *The Other Six Days*, pp. 16-17.

## FORWARD STEPS: SOME SUGGESTIONS

This article's burden has been to point out the urgent need for the *whole* church to recover her identity and calling, at the *bequest* of Christ in the region of Melanesia. The author is optimistic about the church's potential to be an advantageous influence in the Melanesian region. This article, moreover, points out that one of the chief root causes of the ineffectiveness of the church in Melanesia is the exclusion of the entire *laos tou theou* (λαὸν τοῦ θεοῦ = people of God) from church life and ministry.

Identifying the root cause is perhaps the easiest thing to do. The task of reintegrating it fully into the life and ministry of the church remains the hardest part of the equation, requiring much prayer and reflection.

Nevertheless, the church, in her multi-faceted forms, and in a variety of contexts in Melanesia, must begin to work through such important issues. The situation demands courageous and bold steps to be taken. It is most urgent! A remark from a Melanesian Christian leader is worth stating:

It is my strong hope that when all Christians in Melanesia are caught up by the activity of God's Spirit, then we will rise above our denominational boxes, to see each other as brothers and sisters. . . . The world, today, desperately needs to see Jesus walking about again with His body WHOLE, serving the needy, liberating those who are under the power of the devil, and raising the dead.<sup>78</sup>

The following suggestions are offered to assist concerned Christians, but, more particularly, to those entrusted with the responsibility of *envisioning* a new and proactive pathway for the church into the future.

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<sup>78</sup> Leslie Boseto, former Moderator of the United church of Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands.

## MISSIONAL TEACHING

One of the immediate needs of believers in Melanesia is to understand clearly their identity as God's *missional servants* in the world. This requires that academicians in theological institutions, as well Bible teachers and preachers, available to the local congregations, be harnessed fully, to convey this truth, as clearly as possible, to Melanesian believers, in culturally-appropriate ways. Teaching should place greater emphasis on retelling the Bible as a "divine story", as well as instilling correct knowledge. The Christian community must be made to understand, and identify clearly, who she is "in Christ", and what her role is in God's great purpose in the world. Greater emphasis must be placed on teaching the following:

- The church, as both divine and human, is God's missional agency, whose primary task is to proclaim God's kingdom rule in the world.
- The nature of gifts, and their place in Christian ministry.<sup>79</sup>
- The nature of the Christian leadership, and its role in the church, and in society.

## FLEXIBLE MODELLING-FACILITATIVE STYLE OF LEADERSHIP

Church leadership, at all levels, must exercise greater flexibility, as it seeks to respond to the changing environments of both the church and the society at large. Institutional expressions of the church, which promotes autocratic leadership styles, and breeds ongoing dependency of the *laos* (λαὸς = people), is dated, and probably needs to be discarded. Today's leadership must assume a more *modelling-facilitative* style that strives to enhance the entire community's competency to carry out ministry.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> An excellent resource tool for dealing with spiritual gifts has been written by Eric Wright, titled *Church: No Spectator Sport*. See Bibliography for full details.

<sup>80</sup> Mary McDonald, writing about ministry in Melanesia, proposes that the leadership style needed is *facilitative*, where the main task of leaders consists primarily of enhancing and assisting God's people to fulfil the ministry responsibility, to which they

## PLURALITY OF LEADERSHIP

Christians must rethink the traditional concept of solo-leadership style, currently in vogue in Melanesia. There is a great need to recognise, promote, and incorporate fully, the concept of *plurality* of leadership.<sup>81</sup> It is envisaged that, when this happens, a greater number of people will sense a heightened responsibility as members of the church, and use their gifts, with greater urgency. As the Bible quite explicitly teaches *plurality* in leadership, it is envisaged as the norm for all time (see Acts 20:17; Titus 1:5; and 1 Peter 5:1).

## BASIC WORSHIP/FELLOWSHIP-CENTRED GROUPS

Leaders of congregations must promote and encourage small-group fellowships, where all members are able to participate more fully in worship and fellowship together around God's Word. This probably means discontinuing some church-related activities, or rescheduling others, to allow group members to concentrate more of their effort in their own groups. Such "basic communities" should focus on providing their members with the opportunity to care more for each other by "bearing one another's burdens", in very practical ways. The base-group arena also provides the opportunity for mature believers to *model* Christian conduct before new believers.

## LIFESTYLE MODELLING FOCUS

Discipleship is probably the critical link to whole-church coparticipation in Melanesia. Pragmatic Melanesians cannot be easily convinced with words alone. Christian life and conduct must be *seen to be believed*. This means that mature Christians must seriously consider identifying people they can get alongside, and commit themselves to, in order to model Christian faith and conduct to them in their immediate life setting.

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were called. See her article "Community and Ministry", in *Point* 7 (1985), pp. 141-152.

<sup>81</sup> For an expanded treatment of the issue, see Gilbert Bilezikian, *Community 101* (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1997), pp. 161-168.

## CREATIVE AND AFFIRMATIVE MINISTRY OPTIONS

Believers, who cannot put their gifts and abilities to use in the worship-fellowship setting, must be provided with opportunities to do so elsewhere. The task of leaders, in this case, is to affirm these individuals, and assist them in *envisioning creative options*, to develop their gifts and abilities, and to channel them (gifts and abilities) in meaningful and practical ways, to enhance the believing community's image and capability to impact society at large. On the other hand, individuals, who are serving in the secular professions, must be affirmed publicly, so that they sense an acceptance for what they do: their work has value, and contributes to God's kingdom rule on earth.

## HOLISTIC MOBILISATION APPROACH TO MINISTRY

As the Melanesian region becomes more and more inundated with multifaceted needs and problems, there is a growing demand for the formation of multiskilled teams that can be *mobilised* quickly to meet the problems. The initiative could be particularly targeted at young adult (youth) members of congregations, who are in the prime of their life, and seeking some adventure.<sup>82</sup> Team mobilisation is something the church in Melanesia can explore, since she is well placed for such a response among the grass-roots communities, as well as the towns and cities of Melanesia. Interestingly, some mainline denominations are beginning to explore these options.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> The author has been involved in similar initiatives for about 11 years. He has been involved in mobilising his village young people, a significant number of them Christians, to deal with some of their community's needs. He has assisted them in establishing gravity-fed water-supply systems, a clinic, a power-supply, and a couple of school buildings. Through their participation in these projects, a number of young men have acquired trade skills. They are now responsible for the ongoing repair and maintenance of the projects. He has also assisted youth groups, women's groups, and communities in other parts of the Bougainville province with some of their own initiatives.

<sup>83</sup> The response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic is a case in point. See L. Pirpir, "Report: Heads of Churches' HIV/AIDS Leadership Workshop", in *Catalyst* 35-2 (2005), pp. 174-182.

## CONCLUSION

The region of Melanesia is undergoing a tumultuous period in its history. It is being assailed by a multitude of forces that can undermine its viability in the world. This is causing much stress and anxiety to the people of the region.

Famous for its pervasive Christianity, Melanesia now struggles to find lasting answers to its perplexing problems. Who or what is the solution? The answer, no doubt, is etched in many of the Melanesian states' constitutional preambles: the Christian gospel! It is the news about God reconciling all things to Himself, in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ.

The church embodies this gospel. She is sent to this region to live, act, and proclaim this gospel. However, this gospel must be *fleshed out* in society to be effectual. This is the reason why this article contends for the full participation of whole *laos tou theou* (λαὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ = people of God). The gospel can only sufficiently suffuse the region if God's people together live out their convictions to the full. Above all, this response can only occur if it is grounded supremely in the passionate love believers exude toward their God and Father, and in their undying obedience to the Saviour and Lord of the church, who summons:

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matt 28:18-20).

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