



Pacific Conference of Churches

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A Pastoral Letter on Jubilee for the Earth

50th global anniversary of Earth Day calls for a return to the normal of living the Kingdom of God.

Grace and Peace to you my sisters and brothers in the name of the Risen Christ!

Today marks the fiftieth anniversary of the first Earth Day, held in America, which gave voice to an emerging public consciousness about the state of our planet and the birth of the modern environmental movement. ¹

Earth Day became a global event in 1990, mobilizing 200 million people in 141 countries and lifting environmental issues onto the world stage. Earth Day 1990 gave a huge boost to recycling efforts worldwide and helped pave the way for the 1992 United Nations Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro.²

In 2009 International Mother Earth Day was established by the United Nations General Assembly, to be commemorated on the 22nd of April annually. It recognizes that "the Earth and its ecosystems are our home" and that "it is necessary to promote harmony with nature and the Earth." The term Mother Earth is used because it "reflects the interdependence that exists among human beings, other living species and the planet we all inhabit". ³

The 2009 General Assembly President Miguel d'Escoto Brockmann welcomed the creation of International Mother Earth Day, saying: "International Mother Earth Day promotes a view of the Earth as the entity that sustains all living things found in nature. Inclusiveness is at the heart of International Mother Earth Day; fostering shared responsibilities to rebuild our troubled relationship with nature is a cause that is uniting people around the world."

¹ <https://www.earthday.org/history/>

² <https://www.earthday.org/history/>

³ <https://undocs.org/A/RES/63/278>

In his message for International Mother Earth Day 2020, United Nations Secretary General, António Guterres, said that, “Mother Earth is clearly urging a call to action,” adding, “we need a shift to a more sustainable economy that works for both people and the planet. Let’s promote harmony with nature and the Earth”.⁴

He further highlighted the close relationships between human, animal and environmental health:

Nature is suffering. Australian fires, heat records and the worst locust invasion in Kenya. Now we face COVID -19, a worldwide health pandemic link to the health of our ecosystem.

Climate change, man-made changes to nature as well as crimes that disrupt biodiversity, such as deforestation, land-use change, intensified agriculture and livestock production or the growing illegal wildlife trade, can increase contact and the transmission of infectious diseases from animals to humans (zoonotic diseases) like COVID-19.

From one new infection disease that emerges in humans every 4 months, 75% of these emerging diseases come from animals, according to UN Environment.⁵

While there are stories of the “visible, positive impact” of the Coronavirus on the environment, “whether through improved air quality or reduced greenhouse gas emissions,” Guterres points out that these, “are but temporary, because they come on the back of tragic economic slowdown and human distress.”⁶

Last month, senior BBC journalist Martha Henriques asked the question, “When the pandemic eventually subsides, will carbon and pollutant emissions “bounce back” so much that it will be as if this clear-skied interlude never happened? Or could the changes we see today have a more persistent effect?”⁷

As “Earth Day” turns 50 years old and celebrates its “Golden Jubilee,” in the midst of Corvid-19, among proclamations of a “new normal”, I invite us to reflect on what an Earth Jubilee might be; and, in the context of Easter and the coronavirus, what a “renewal” of our normal might offer Pacific churches and communities.

Jubilee for the Earth

In Judaism and Christianity, the concept of the Jubilee is a special year of remission of sins and universal pardon. In the Biblical Book of Leviticus, a Jubilee year is

⁴ <https://www.un.org/en/observances/earth-day>

⁵ <https://www.un.org/en/observances/earth-day>

⁶ <https://www.un.org/en/observances/earth-day>

⁷ <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200326-covid-19-the-impact-of-coronavirus-on-the-environment>

mentioned to occur every fiftieth year, in which slaves and prisoners would be freed, debts would be forgiven, and the mercies of God would be particularly manifest.⁸

This was intrinsically connected to ensuring that the land enjoyed a Sabbath ensuring renewal of the soil every seventh year.⁹

When this law was followed, there was to be no pruning or planting in the sabbath year, nor any attempt to kill the insects, or otherwise interfere with natural processes in the field. The fruit had to remain in the field, except for what passers-by, servants, or owners plucked to eat; no real harvesting was permitted, only eating.

As a result, the land rested, and soil was restored. As weeds grew, they brought topsoil minerals from below and to revitalize the soil. Unpruned vines and trees grew freely, renewing their vitality. Ripened fruit which we unpicked, fell and rotted, feeding the soil.

“The function of microorganisms in the soil, and the value of compost and trees in regenerating the soil is great. So is the value of wild animals and birds in the life cycles of the earth. The earth clearly is renewed by rest, or it is exploited ruthlessly and finally turned into a desert.”¹⁰

However, the extractive nature of the modern capitalist economic norm gives no room for a sabbath for land. Instead, the land is enslaved and exploited. Instead of natural cycles working, manufactured fertilizers, poisonous herbicides and pesticides and other devices are used, and the soil is steadily mined and abused.

The brief respite that the land, oceans, rivers and even air have received as a result of COVID-19-induced lockdowns, has shown what is possible if humankind allows the earth to experience a sabbath, a jubilee.

Renewal of Hearts, Minds, and Lifestyles – Recommitting to “The Way”

This morning your as part of our daily morning devotion, we had a special worship to commemorate the 50th year of “Earth Day and to also mark International Mother Earth Day.” This was held outside under the frangipani tree and passionfruit vines, led by our Ecological Stewardship team. ¹¹

In her reflection on Genesis 1: 1 -4, our Ecumenical Enabler for Ecological Stewardship, Iemaima Va'ai of Samoa, shared that, “from this darkness, God had birthed light and it was seen to be good. To be enlightened means to have a multi-colored consciousness or a multi-dimensional worldview.”

⁸ Leviticus 25:10

⁹ Leviticus 25:1-4

¹⁰ <http://www.ecclesia.org/truth/sabbath-land.html>

¹¹ https://www.facebook.com/JayEsBee2/videos/683136655777191/?notif_id=1587501828325687¬if_t=feedback_reaction_generic

The reason why I define this term to be multicolored is because it also involves the inclusion of our environment in this worldview. It involves multiple relationships and speaks on the beauty of diversity in God's creation where balance and harmony is very much present thus resulting in feeling a sense of justice....there is hope for us to shift our global economies from a single colored consciousness to a multicolored consciousness to help call for action on the climate crisis. Earth day is a great day where us as Christians can reflect on our calling from God to be good stewards for this earth, therefore I suggest we firstly start with focusing on our climate consciousness in order to help us steadily veer ourselves towards finding justice and having action follow after.¹²

Many have been calling the effect of the lockdowns across the planet due to COVID-19, a "New Normal". There has been a reprioritising of values; more family time, albeit enforced; a return to indigenous traditional practices of food security for those who have lost employment or income; the reintroduction of barter systems in some communities.¹³ In terms of spirituality as reflected in an earlier pastoral letter,¹⁴ we have been innovative using appropriate technology and by promoting home worship have strengthened family spirituality. New ways of working, connecting and interacting are being used. We have begun to realise what we can do without, what is important to us. Individualism and materialism are waning as relationality and positive traditional values and spirituality are increasing.

Yet, I would like to suggest that this is not a new normal. It is a return to the original normal.

The current normal that we have acquiesced to is a predatory system of economic extraction contradicts the purpose of God, through bondage by acquisitiveness, militarization, and consumerism.¹⁵

This extractive totalism of the current normal is contradictory to our Pacific spirituality and indigenous wisdom.

This naming of this destructive totalism and imagination of alternatives to continuing economic, political and cultural globalisation is articulated by Jesus, as the Kingdom of God.¹⁶ This speaks to an economy of abundance at a time when the scarcity model is the dominant narrative. This speaks to the resilience of not only Pacific islanders, but all humankind.

¹² Iemaima Va'ai, "Earth Day 2020 Reflection at PCC Morning Devotion", 22nd April 2020, Suva, Fiji

¹³ In Fiji, for example a barter network using social media has been established:

https://www.facebook.com/groups/2964591663604507/?multi_permalink=2966722400058100¬if_id=1587527613569846¬if_t=group_activity

¹⁴ <https://pacificconferenceofchurches.org/f/stay-safe-innovate-sanitize>

¹⁵ Walter Brueggemann, "Jesus Acted Out The Alternative To Empire," Speech to Sojourners' 2018 #SummitforChange, 22nd June, 2018, <https://sojo.net/articles/walter-brueggemann-jesus-acted-out-alternative-empire>

¹⁶ John 10:10

As those behind this deadly normal seek to resuscitate it, even while many still struggle and suffer as a result of COVID-19, let us dare to speak the prophetic word of an alternative to this “normal.” As Pope Frances prayed, “political and economic planning for recovery after the coronavirus pandemic would be inspired by concern for the common good and not for “the god money.”¹⁷

St. Paul challenges us not to be conformed to this world, but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds in order to what is good and acceptable and perfect – the will of God.¹⁸

Celebrating Easter in the context of COVID-19 offers us to look at the resurrection as an alternative to the current normal, a normal of exploitation of creation and of death. The resurrection offers a renewal of the normal. It offers a reorientation to us as followers The Way, the normal that God saw “was very good,”¹⁹ and the Kingdom of God inaugurated by Christ, who renews all things.²⁰

Pacific Churches are challenged to advocate this renewal as we have done previously.

The vision of the “Island of Hope” articulated by Pacific Churches and offered to the world at the dawn of this century has been subverted by the neo-liberal extractive “normal”.

Now more than ever, as we begin to rediscover this “Island of Hope” where:

...life is significant, valued and celebrated. There is a celebration of life over material wealth...The Island of Hope is in tune with nature and by sharing and caring, to which people want to journey in order to celebrate life in all its fullness (Isa. 25:6)...The Island of Hope has the "mana" (power) to draw human beings together.” The Island of Hope is sustainable, wholesome, peaceful and all-embracing...The concept of the Island of Hope is not merely a dream. It is founded in reality and has been “our normal” life in our islands. ²¹

The First Step: The PCC Foodbank

The Pacific Conference of Churches is taking a step forward the Island of Hope with the setting up of a Pacific Foodbank.

For many Pacific communities, the earth (ground) is their refrigerator, stock exchange, supermarket or ATM machine.

¹⁷ <https://cruxnow.com/vatican/2020/04/pope-says-pandemic-recovery-involves-choice-between-money-or-common-good/?fbclid=IwARoYJoScbtKvB668USstWFgUuHrlNBZn15hngqrqBJD62rpMWnkfhFCnMoWA>

¹⁸ Romans 12:2

¹⁹ Genesis 1:31

²⁰ Revelation 21:1-6

²¹ World Council of Churches, *Island of Hope: The Pacific Churches’ Response to Alternatives on Globalisation*, (Geneva: WCC, 2001).

Sweet potatoes and yam can stay in the ground for extended periods and are not usually harmed by cyclones which cause so much damage to trees. Yaqona or kava can live up to 10 years in the ground and be harvested according to family needs to make purchases of vehicles, housing material, appliances or to pay school fees.

The Pacific Conference of Churches Food Bank is designed using this concept; crops planted in a secure manner to provide for those most in need.

We have half an acre of prime property lying unused just outside the Central Business District of Fiji's capital, Suva. It awaits the approval of a business plan before further development.

Tomorrow (Thursday) the land will be tilled to make way for quick growing crops – beans, cabbages, cauliflower, tomatoes, cucumber and capsicum.

Cassava (tapioca), bananas and bele (island spinach) already grow abundantly on the site. In three months or less we hope to start providing food at the site.

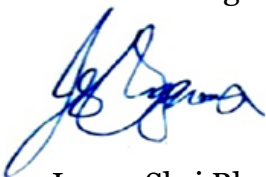
Anyone is free to come and take food as they need – some tapioca, cabbages and bananas for the family meal. There will be no charge.

The PCC gardens will be organic, and some sections will incorporate growing in cubes – a method which can be used in communities where arable soil is scarce.

It is our hope that this will be a step towards encouraging people to plant their own food, harvest responsibly and share from their abundance. Some of the food will be distributed to the destitute in informal settlements, housing projects for the destitute and aged care facilities.

Sisters and brothers, let us pray for jubilee for the earth, for renewal of our hearts and minds so that, with our multicoloured consciousness of God and our relationship with creation, we may once again walk in The Way of Christ: the way of peace with all creation, the way of the wisdom of our ancestors, the way of the Island of Hope, the Way of the Kingdom of God.

With blessings and love, your servant in Christ,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'James Shri Bhagwan', written in a cursive style.

James Shri Bhagwan (Rev.)
General Secretary