

**SPIRITUAL RENEWAL AND EMPOWERMENT IN THE
CONTEXT OF RAPID SOCIAL CHANGE:
Where is the Niche' of the Diocese of Central
Melanesia?**

By

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**An Invited Keynote Address delivered at the 19th
Synod of the Diocese of Central Melanesia
Vura
Honiara
Solomon Islands
29th August, 2017**

- The Archbishop of the Anglican Church of Melanesia, the Right Reverend George Takeli
- The Vicar General
- Clergy
- Sisters of the Church
- Brothers -- Tasiu and Friars
- General Secretary of ACOM, Dr. Abraham Hauriasi
- Ladies and Gentlemen

My most heart-felt “Good morning” to you all

While I cannot deny the pleasure, honour and privilege, I must admit that I am humbled, in fact, feeling rather small, standing before such a prestigious and esteemed gathering such as yours this morning giving this short presentation.

Although I was born and raised in a strong Anglican Church family, attended Anglican Church Schools and throughout the decades held steadfastly to my Anglican-based faith and spirituality in my university studies and teaching in the U.S.A, New Zealand and Fiji, I have never delivered a keynote address at a church synod such as on this occasion.

As a social scientist and not a clergyman I am used to and much more comfortable giving keynote addresses at international conferences on secular issues such as the role of science in solving human problems. Although, and I am not shy to admit, my Christian faith and spirituality have always been the guiding light in my engagement in such secular events.

So if I seem nervous and somewhat out of it this morning, it is because I feel a certain sense of disconnect or divide between yourselves and myself. I therefore humbly beg your pardon.

I am hoping, however, that this short presentation is not the end but rather the beginning or first of many more personal close engagements with ACOM for me, now that I am back home to stay. And I submit that with a most sincere heart.

Having said that, I have a caveat which is that I dearly wish I had had more time to prepare these few

remarks. The invitation to join you all this morning was delivered to me in person just last Friday, apparently as a “stand-in” for the person who had previously been invited to give the keynote address who could not make it because work-related matters.

Upon my having agreed to “step in”, the agreement was that I would be sent a few bullet points about the synod on the week-end so that I would have an idea and prepare my remarks accordingly.

Unfortunately, that did not transpire due to a miscommunication in email addresses and so the bullet points were delivered to me in person yesterday morning.

So if my remarks seem truncated, it has to do with the circumstantial inconveniences. I am, however, most honoured and privileged to be here this morning – for me it is a great moment of bridging science and religion, a subject for which I have always been a strong advocate as I do believe in the benefits each can

contribute to making the world a more peaceful and better place to live for all of us.

Globalization and Change

With globalization raging through the world – and most certainly our islands – like a wild beast, most institutions and practices we have held so dear for decades, in fact, a good part of our lives, have been shaken or rocked to their foundation

This dizzying change is undeniably true in government as it is in culture, religion, politics, the environment, social relationships, spirituality, collective and individual behaviour, education, arts, business practices, the climate, etc.

Unfortunately or fortunately, depending on one's point of view, the phenomenon will probably get worse before it gets better. i.e, we can perhaps expect to experience greater escalation than de-escalation.

The truth, however, is the phenomenon is a human social construct and being so the cure or remedy lies within human agency

In view of this phenomenon, I see this synod as apropos or momentous because religion – and most certainly Christianity -- as we all perhaps can agree, is one of the institutions most fundamentally affected.

To give a concrete example, when I was last in the Solomon Islands in 2009, everyone in my family, village and community belonged to the Anglican Church, the Church in which they were born and raised by their parents as their parents were by their grand-parents

Coming back home this time, I cannot believe and, in fact, very disturbed, to see my own family, let alone my village and community, split into different Christian sects or even denominations – constantly backstabbing Anglicans in some of the most culturally and spiritually vulgar manner.

For example, Anglicans are laughed at and called all kinds of names:

- **Pigs wallowing in mud**
- **Live in constant darkness**
- **Wade through over-grown garden**
- **People ruled by salaried clergy**

In my Kwaraáe culture, these are extremely insulting and denigrating descriptions or names for which in the past death by killing was the response by the insulted party

The first question I asked was: “What happened?” followed by “Is the change indicative of the general tenor of things within ACOM itself or the political leadership of the day?” Which one?

Now, that may sound like a lot of finger-pointing yet, and perhaps out of naivete’, I could not help asking the questions.

Of course, people have the right to choose and embrace religious practices which they feel speak directly to their faith and spirituality. Yet, I cannot help my questions, disturbance and sadness.

Now I am speaking as someone who has lived, studied and taught abroad for some 40 years, often finding myself in all kinds of circumstances yet never once had I shown any interest in changing my Anglicanism to something else. Am I just a conservative Anglican? Does conversion to some other Christian sect renew or strengthen a person's faith?

Based on personal experience, I argue otherwise which is the longer one adheres to a church, the deeper and stronger one's faith and spirituality becomes. Flip-flopping, for me, ironically weakens one's faith and spirituality and leaves one more vulnerable to multiple conversions, in the end resulting in disillusionment in one's faith and spirituality.

Renewal and Empowerment

In my terms, if there is an issue which the Diocese of Central Melanesia should address head-on, it is this vulnerability of ACOM members to convert to other Christian sects and denominations.

The speed and prevalence at which conversion occurs obviously is an indication of ACOM members crying out for help. In other words, the vulnerability of ACOM members to switch or convert to some other Christian sects so easily and readily indicates there is an endemic challenge that is not being addressed. The Central Diocese of Melanesia can play a great role in curbing church conversion through, for instance, evangelism, effective community out-reach programs, etc

I do apologize that, as a non-clergy I am fully aware I should not be raising this issue. Yet, as a Christian and a member of ACOM and a citizen of the Solomon Islands, I do feel some sense of responsibility to at least bring the issue to the attention of those who oversee the spiritual health of our country such as the clergy.

If the problem is tearing my family, village and community apart, I would be profoundly surprised if other families, villages and communities in other parts of the Solomon Islands are not experiencing the same thing.

Why Am I so concerned with this issue?

ACOM is one of the earliest and most effective founders of Christian faith and spirituality in the Solomon Islands. It is thus one of the pillars of education, peace and political stability in the Solomon Islands.

Every effort should thus be made to make sure ACOM resumes or is returned to its original proper place in Solomon Islands society as one of the pillars of peace and stability beside the Catholic Church, SSEC, Methodist, etc.

All the new Christian sects and denominations, as prophetic and spiritually alluring as they may seem, are ephemeral and in many respects divisive as I am

finding with great disturbance in my own family, village and community.

All this may seem I am addressing ACOM more than the Central Diocese of Melanesian. Most definitely not. Any work carried out by the Central Diocese of Melanesia on the challenges I have described will in the long run promote its own work at the same time that it equally promotes the work of ACOM.

Science and Religion

To most people religion and science do not mix. I disagree vehemently. The challenge described can be easily and effectively addressed by the Central Diocese of Melanesia through scientific research. Data collected through scientific research can greatly inform any policy or program that the Central Diocese of Melanesia may want to design to address the problem of vulnerability (and others) to religious conversion so rampant or endemic among ACOM members.

I am willing to say that a lot of problems, economic, spiritual or otherwise, the Central Diocese of Melanesia may currently be experiencing are closely related to the exodus of ACOM members to the new Christian sects and denominations.

We need to bring our people back. This is not religious protectionism or dogmatism. Rather it is reaching out to our fellow Christian men and women who, in being vulnerable to switching to new Christian sects or denominations, obviously are crying out for spiritual help.

THANK YOU

