

REWEAVING THE STRANDS OF JUSTICE

Pacific climate and social justice advocates
Frances Namoumou and James Bhagwan from
the Pacific Conference of Churches speak with CWS



CWS was delighted to host Frances Namoumou and Reverend James Bhagwan from Pacific Conference of Churches (PCC) on the 25th of October 2022. Here is slightly edited transcript of the presentations made by Frances and James, including the Q&A section.

James Bhagwan

In the Pacific, weaving is a very important concept. It is a process that involves the whole community. There is a job for everyone to do. Weaving brings people together. Sometimes women, sometimes men and women together, sometimes young people. The leaves are to be harvested, boiled, scraped, woven. One of the things we begin with when re-weaving the strands of justice is acknowledging that the weave is broken. I refer here to the sacred threads that bind us together in deep relationship with the land and the sea, in spirituality, and with others.

If we look at the Greek word for home, *oikos*, the household of God or the whole inhabited earth, we see it branches into three offshoots. (1) *oikos nomos* – economics – the managing of the household, (2) *oikos lokos* – ecology, and (3) *oiko mene* – ecumenism – people of faith and spirituality working together. These three strands were bound together as a sacred cord that guided people in faith, with culture and development.

When we talk about justice, we are not talking about abstract concepts defined by the United Nations, or any other organisation. We are talking about the lived experience of our people. We are talking about strands such as gender and ability, intergenerational equity, youth, children, and elders. If we take these strands seriously, and we weave them together intentionally, we can end up with a rich, vibrant tapestry that affirms and celebrates flourishing communities, and environment.

Psalm 137 “By the rivers of Babylon...there we sat down and wept ... how shall we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land” is a lament. The people faced immense and intergenerational trauma.

The Pacific Conference of Churches continues to call on its partner churches and their communities to sing the Lord's song in strange lands and in strange times - as messages of hope and resilience. For some strange lands may refer to the prospect of relocation, or lands that have become strange by rapid social change or changes in climate, of migration and critical issues around governance.

If we are focused on justice, what kinds of songs are we called to sing? Songs of praise for sure, but also songs of lament for people affected by climate change, extreme weather, Covid- as well as songs for God's justice, of peace, hope, truth telling, repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation, belonging in the face of a changing climate, of love and of life. What does it mean for the 33 member churches and 10 National Council of Churches that make up the Pacific Conference of Churches to reweave the strands of justice? These are the songs that we will sing.

When we are thinking about these strands of justice, and how to weave them back together into a strong mat or *bilum* [bags] or a sail, we must consider a large number of varying questions. What does it mean when we talk about reweaving the strands of justice that include self-determination for communities in West Papua? In Maohi Nui and the Marshall Islands under occupation and after the impact of nuclear testing and the nuclear waste that is leaking into the ocean? After the failure of the last referendum in Kanaky [New Caledonia]? In the context of Bougainville seeking independence? Or nuclear justice for Enewetak Atoll or the waste from Fukushima in the Pacific.

What does reweaving the strands of justice mean from the political, economic, social, gender, and ecological perspectives? What does justice look like for migrant labourers coming to New Zealand and Australia? What does social and climate justice mean in the context of deep sea mining? People take and take from our Pacific people. What does it look like in terms of gender justice, where we are working hard to transform patriarchal structures, or for children to be empowered as God's precious gifts? For good governance? For an Indo-Pacific strategy? For Australia and the USA rushing into the region? What does it mean for our indigenous people who seek free prior and informed consent before anything is done to the land and the ocean of which they identify as an integral part of their existence?

We are concerned about food security, climate security, human security but most important is the climate emergency.

Frances Namoumou is our main climate warrior at Pacific Conference of Churches. She is extremely knowledgeable and works at local community levels as well as at international levels. I now invite her to share:

Frances Namoumou

We work to bring the strands of justice together into a woven mat. It is in working with our communities that we can define what justice looks like. I would like to bring some of the stories from these communities over the past few years.

Since 2009, PCC has accompanied communities who know they will have to relocate because of climate change. The member churches play an important role in the discernment of what will take place in the context of each particular region. In 2009, the church leaders agreed on the [Moana Declaration](#), which focusses on how churches can respond both if people have to relocate or choose to stay.



Pictured left to right: Reverend James Bhagwan, Murray Overton - CWS National Director, Frances Namoumou

In 2007, the people of Vunidogoloa asked PCC how they could be church if they had to relocate. This community was the first to move and is at the forefront of bearing the effects of the climate crisis. The people felt that they were responsible for their situation. They are indigenous and have a responsibility to the land and sea. As Christians they were worried about their responsibility to God. Dealing with communities who think they are responsible for what is happening is a painful process and a demonstration of the inequity of the situation. They face that fact that even though they are the lowest emitters of carbon and the least responsible for their situation at the forefront of the climate crisis. PCC worked on the ground with the Vunidogoloa community for seven years before they agreed to relocate. The community used the timber from their forest to pay part of the cost for their homes two kilometres inland. What is the justice in that? When you are the least contributor to the crisis, yet you have to pay for your own relocation, and release carbon to build new homes.

PCC has also been working with Navunisavisavi on the second largest island in Fiji to protect and understand how the peoples' identity can be maintained when the ocean and land are an extension of who they are. Some of the community has relocated and some has stayed behind. What is climate justice for this split community?

The most recent community PCC has been engaging with is Togoru, an informal settlement 45 minutes from Suva. Fiji has been focusing on the relocation of indigenous and formal communities, but what does this look like for communities that are informal or non-indigenous? For communities that do not own land, but will have to relocate somehow if we do not respond to their urgent needs and requests?

PCC works with the people from Nauru who have been displaced by phosphate mining and others as a result of nuclear testing in the Pacific. These issues are re-emerging in the current context.

Even in our smallness, justice:

- is generous. Fiji can offer a place for Pacific peoples who need to relocate.

- Small is beautiful. That even in our smallness that we can still offer space for people to relocate to and find ways to connect in new communities.
- Understanding that the Pacific is one of the lowest carbon emitters, producing less than 1% of greenhouse gases but has been expected to pay for at least one third of the costs of adaptation. A lot of our communities are finding ways to engage with civil society to facilitate, determine and define adaptation and mitigation projects.
- We use conversation - a talanoa - to talk about the issues. Talanoa has been taken over in the political space, but in the traditional sense, a talanoa works when you go to communities and sit in the evening around a kava bowl, discussing the climate issues and relating stories of what they are all experiencing, and in the process find solutions. Communities that were once vulnerable and now 10-14 years down the line they have become the authors of these stories, not as victims to the ecological crisis, but as champions of mitigation and adaptation - people who can guide other communities facing likely relocation.

Honest discussion in the talanoas has helped Tuvalu and Kiribati take part in developing a regional framework – countries where it was once taboo to discuss climate change – which includes consideration of those who choose not to relocate and those who will.

The church plays a very important role because it is able to be flexible and can participate at all levels. It is able to be present in that negotiation in the political space and the church continues when the project timeline ends. Churches journey with the community over years and can talk about the priority and needs of the community.

PCC has recently engaged with the Pacific Island Feminist Alliance for Climate Justice (PIFACJ). I specifically want to say this because when we are talking about the context of climate induced displacement, one of the key issues that will often come up in the conversation is that it is a very expensive exercise. A lot of the displacement that has taken place in Fiji has been partially funded by the government or other institutions. The community has also had to contribute to these relocation processes. The question of resources is always part of the discussions at COP, regional and national levels. Where is funding going to? Why do Pacific people have to work extra hard to secure funding to respond to the climate crisis that they are facing as the frontliners of climate change? This engagement that we have had with PIFACJ has allowed us to shape the lessons we have learned over the years in engaging with communities.

Lessons we have learned

When engaging with communities, there is documentation that you have to fill out – criteria organisations must meet in order to access any funding. We have learned to evaluate what is available or could be accessible to these communities. If they see a form, will they be able to fill out the form? Do they have the knowledge needed to respond to the questions? What other method is available to the communities to help them complete funding applications?

We are able to specifically focus on the women's group because we have seen over the years how women have moved the conversation of climate change. They look for the food and can see changes in the weather patterns and what is happening out in the deep sea because they are there to catch fish for dinner. And on the land, in facilitating the gardens, they see and respond to the changes in the weather

pattern – like long drought periods that Tuvalu and Kiribati have been responding to for the last few months.

Women are always at the front line of responding to climate change. What mechanism is available to support women in this process. What resources are available? And when we are told resources are there, how can we make the resources more accessible? Are we supplying something that can respond well to the communities' issues? You will hear grants are being offered and not enough applications have come from the Pacific because of the administrative barriers? From our work in this area, we have learned that the processes and requirements that the donor organisation often demands are purely donor driven. It is a tick on the box. So, when we are talking about justice, the stories we have heard through relocation, designing and planning, justice is not what donors would prefer – the tick box of criteria – but rather designed to suit the context and priorities of the community.

James – PCC: Prophetic, Pastoral and Practical

PCC works to be prophetic, pastoral and practical. Prophetic in terms of the advocacy we do speaking truth to power. Pastoral in terms of our accompaniment with communities and churches. This has been risky at times, for example when we were in solidarity with the people of West Papua to the extent that partners refused to give funding because we supported a cause that they were being pressured not to support.

What does risky accompaniment mean when we as a church organisation really push on the issue of gender equality? What does it mean when we as PCC say to our member churches that it is time for conversations around the LGBTQI community? While the Pacific is nowhere near ready to talk about the issue of marriage equality, we need to talk about how we can ensure that people from the LGBTQI community are not raped, beaten, or killed. How do we start those conversations, and who will start them? This is some of the risky work that PCC is slowly trying to engage in. Some of this work has to be done quietly in order to keep the spaces safe. Some of this work we can talk about. Some of these things we shout from the rooftops because it is necessary for people to hear these things.

And finally, the third 'p' in our work is 'practical'. What are the practical aspects? Are we just doing policy and advocacy? How can we talk about these issues if we are not actually with the people or supporting our member churches in this practical work?

Reweaving for us is part of a deconstruction and decolonisation process. Not just a political decolonisation, but a decolonisation of ourselves, the way we look at our church, and the way we look at culture and identity. It is taking ownership of the narratives that we hear in our Pacific. We tell our own stories about our Pacific, not repeat the stories that others tell about what we think or who they think we are. And in that sense, Pacific communities can have agency.

Civil society all over the world is shrinking, but in the Pacific, unlike anywhere else, 90% of the region is Christian. PCC's membership accounts for about 70% of the Pacific human community. And so, we have a way in which we (PCC) can engage. Whether people work for government or civil society, many of them go to church. And so, the role of the church is both in being prophetic in speaking truth to power,

but also sometimes in being pastoral to those very same people we are speaking truths to. We are called to speak that truth in love and encourage a journey together.

This year with the support of CWS I [James Bhagwan] was able to attend the meeting of the UN Special Committee on Decolonisation, the [C24](#), in New York, in June. On behalf of PCC and the whole Pacific NGO alliance we made a statement in response to the monitoring reports on the third independence referendum in Kanaky (New Caledonia) – a referendum that was boycotted by 90% of the indigenous Kanak population. The Kanak said they felt it was rushed and unjustly called in the pandemic - they had no agency. So, we were there to serve our churches and serve the course of justice. And through your support, CWS, you were there with us.

Next year we will be engaging with the indigenous community here through our partners, the Māori Council of Churches, the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa NZ, and Methodist Church of Aotearoa NZ, again, with the partnership of CWS, to engage in the task of reweaving the ecological mat - re-looking at development from the context of indigenous communities, indigenous knowledge, indigenous wisdom, and spirituality. Looking at how we put the environment first rather than last. How we define development, not in terms of economic growth or GDP, but in wellbeing.

And we don't come here to tell the indigenous community of the Pasifika diaspora what to do, we come to listen. So that we can bring their stories into the wider Pacific. Justice sometimes is about talking, and other times it is just about listening. Sometimes it is about taking one voice to share it with people who need to hear. And that is what we try to do at the PCC.

We are a small team, a bit larger than CWS, but have a big region to cover. We are very grateful for the support that we have from CWS. We are very grateful that in our conversations about partnership today and again tomorrow we talk about what partnership really means for communities and organisations that not only want to have a transactional relationship, but want to have a common goal and common agenda and work for the flourishing for our Pacific community. In that sense perhaps we are much stronger than the political alliances that we see in our region today. In that sense we are really manifesting what it means to be Pasifika: people of peace.

Questions & Answers

Questions were received in person and from zoom audience members.

- 1. How much involvement do local island governments have in supporting the relocation strategy?**

Frances responds: In May this year, the Fiji government and the Tuvalu government shared the Pacific Regional Climate Mobility Framework. Having those two governments leading indicates that the Pacific Island governments are serious about the conversation about climate mobility – which includes relocation, displacement, and forced migration, depending on the context. A lot of the Pacific governments participated in this conversation and work and in conversation with civil society and faith-based organisations.

James responds: Climate induced displacement and relocation is a difficult issue because it touches on both internal and external relocation and migration. In some cases, you are talking about communities who are having to navigate relocation internally (within their own country). And in this case, some countries are currently working on standardised procedures and relocation guidelines. PCC has negotiated with partners to support some local civil society organisations and to accompany some of the communities in that space. But the trickier case is in external migration. There are so many factors involved from sovereignty, to making sure that the ocean space remains accessible to the community, analysing what identity looks like, and how to protect culture in forced external migration. These are contentious and challenging issues that a lot of people don't want to engage in.

PCC has been at the forefront of articulating their concerns to governments from 2009 and even as early as 2004 when it published the Moana Declaration from church leaders. Through the partnership of PCC with the International Organisation on Migration, UNESCAP (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific), UN Human Rights Commission and others, these migration frameworks have been proposed as the emergency lifejacket under the plane seat. It's the thing you hope you will never have to use, but if you need it's there. And the reality is that even if the world stopped producing fossil fuels today, the delayed effects of what has been done will push some communities over the brink – to the point where they need to be relocated.

Some people are already thinking about their future, and the futures of their families. They are trying to migrate early by themselves rather than wait for government. Labour migration of this sort also needs to be taken account of as part of climate migration.

There needs to be agreement on a [Global Compact on Migration](#). Relocation and migration are areas that no country *wants* to get involved in because they are a huge expense. They entail huge economic costs, but also huge non-economic costs, which are often worse. People and countries need reparation for loss and damage. The economic costs are the expenses of relocating peoples, for example. And the non-economic loss and damage that come with the loss of biodiversity and the trauma of having to leave the place where your umbilical cord was buried as part of a ritual that signals that 'you are now part of this *fenua*, and as this tree grows, so you grow', for example. What happens to your identity and cultural understanding when that tree, place of birth, and burial location of your ancestors is now underwater? You cannot put a price on the non-economic loss.

We work with a community where even at low tide you can no longer see the burial ground. This community is only 40 minutes away from the capital city of Fiji [Toguru]. It is not in some far-flung coral atoll island. Within an hour from Suva, you can see this happening. These people are fighters. They don't want to leave this land. It's the only way they know. Even if they are struggling, they can be together as a community, but if they are relocated, there is no guarantee that they will live together. Moreover, if they are relocated inland from this coastal area where they fish every day – rather than go to the market to feed themselves – and where they live a humble existence but still have dignity because they are in charge of their own lives, what will they do and how will they provide for their families? How will they fish? How will they feed their families? So when PCC asked them what they want to do they said, "we need help with a seawall. It will buy us time. We need solar energy, because even though we are 5 minutes from the nearest urban centre we don't have electricity or running water." It is a challenge we can take to government. This is the kind of loss and damage funded projects we need.



2. How much of Ekalesia (church) Samoa contribute to such relocation mission?

James responds: In terms of the Ekalesia Samoa, the Samoan Methodist church and Congregational Christian Church of Samoa are both strong and active members of PCC and also have representation on the World Council of Churches' Central Committee. We hope that they will be a very strong voice advocating Pacific issues at the global level.

Apart from through the Ekalesia, Samoa also plays an important role in the political space. We want to ensure that our churches have the capacity and the background information so that they can champion these issues to their governments who then champion them on the behalf of the Pacific. We have a very strong, bold Prime Minister in Samoa who speaks very strongly on these and other development issues. Also, Samoa is currently the chair of the Small Island Development States grouping. Churches can keep governments up to date and call them to action.

3. Who are, or would be, the possible funders toward this relocation mission?

James responds: Who pays? The polluters should pay. In the context of climate justice, we have the Global Climate Fund [established in 2010 at COP16]. There is supposed to be US\$100 billion put into this fund by polluters and governments of polluting countries each year, but we are still not even getting that much in pledges, let alone money. There are some major barriers and failings of this fund. The processes are so complicated, and the Pacific is only allocated about 2% of this money. It took Tuvalu two years to even access some of this money. The Global Climate Fund has an office and staff, compared to, for example, the one person responsible in Tuvalu who is in an office carrying other responsibilities.

What PCC is proposing is that we work more strongly with and get more support from, sub-national governance to lower some of these big administrative barriers. This would be a key way in which we could get more accessible support. For example, last year Scotland pledged Scottish £1 million pounds to the work of climate justice. This is a sub-national pledge. Now we need to see how money can get to the people who need it, so they can plan their own relocation if its internal, and what agency they have in negotiating with their governments and getting their governments to negotiate on their behalf if the relocation is external.

4. Other than prayer and giving money, what would you hope that the churches of NZ might do around this issue of climate change?

James responds: I think that there is still quite a lot that the churches of New Zealand can do. Let me first say that at a global level we are very grateful for the solidarity we get from the churches of Aotearoa New Zealand whether they are members of the PCC or the Christian Conference of Asia. We were able to work quite strongly together at the WCC Assembly. I encourage you to look at the very powerful statements that came out of the WCC Assembly. The [Living Planet statement](#) talks about climate change.

In terms of what you can do, you have a lot of influence here, even as individuals. One, in terms of what your government does, in terms of what policies your government makes, the way your government spends its money. And two, as churches, what are your churches investing in? Make sure that your church and personal funds are not in investment companies that invest in fossil fuels. Lobby your church to change their finance locations if they are there.

And finally, the spirituality of hospitality is very important. Lobby for the NZ government and churches to be hospitable when it comes to those affected by climate change. Respond to those internally and externally displaced by climate change within New Zealand.

5. I'm fascinated with the mention of decolonisation, and I'm heartened to hear that there is a conversation with Māori people next year. Will that conversation include what decolonisation might look like in Aotearoa?

James responds: You never know how conversations may go. From a self determination point of view when we talk about indigenous, or even second nations peoples, we need to think about how political

decolonisation will work, as well as economic, social, cultural and educational self-determination and decolonisation. In the Pacific, we are politically independent, but our education systems are still very colonial. This colonises our thought processes. How do we decolonise that? From what I hear from what is happening in Aotearoa, these are things that Māori communities have been working on and we can use to encourage our Pacific communities to engage in also.

6. With Chinese interest and stronger USA involvement in the Pacific is there engagement with their representatives to input from Pacific Church perspective?

James responds: Not yet. But we are working with their little brother Australia. This is a learning curve for the USA re-engaging with the Pacific after a very long time. Australia has had to learn, as have many organisations, that if you want to have meaningful engagement, meaningful change, then you need to work with churches. As I mentioned, 90% of the Pacific population is Christian. But this only depends on if you want *meaningful* engagement.

I think that some of these countries think that you can throw some money at governments who desperately need it because they are caught in the climate change debt trap. We are *borrowing* money to pay for climate change mitigation and adaptation because we are not getting funding, which is not soft loans but actual grants, to pay for the things that we need to do. For example, Fiji just signed a loan for Australian \$200 million. Our Fijian foreign debt ratio is at something like \$10 billion. We are almost at 90% of GDP in debt. My kids each owe about \$6,000-7,000 of foreign debt which they had nothing to do with. So, I think that's the biggest challenge for the Pacific. Our leaders are playing this game trying to be friends with USA, China, Australia and everyone else because we need this money. This is a big challenge for us.

Ngā mihi nui and vinaka once again to both James and Frances for sharing with CWS and Aotearoa.

Transcribed and edited by Lily Wenmoth.

