

Climate Change - A Story of the Present:
WCC Living Letters to the Pacific Churches
Nikos Kosmidis

The departure

I would like to share with you a little story; a story about a small island. To follow it we have to travel very far, over endless deserts and deep seas, more than 16,400 kilometres; in particular to the southeast coast of Viti Levu, the largest island of Fiji. In these warm waters lays the island of Viwa.

This story is about beautiful people with very warm hearts, magnificent landscapes, blue-green crystal waters, exotic plants and colourful fish. At the same time, it is a story of sorrow, fear, violence and uncertainty for what the future will bring. But my hope is that in the end the message of this story will be about self examination, raising awareness and activation; a Christian prophetic voice to our families, friends, Churches, communities and to the entire world.

The ecumenical family striving for peace with the earth

As a part of the 2001-2010 Decade to Overcome Violence (DOV) several ecumenical teams, the so called 'Living Letters', have travelled around the world visiting and encountering local contexts around the issues related to violence of different forms. The core of this programme was to deliver a message of Christian solidarity with Churches and people affected by a particularly painful experience of violence through listening, mutual learning, sharing and praying.

The knowledge the ecumenical family gained through these visits will be presented during the International Ecumenical Peace Convocation (IEPC), that will take place in Kingston, Jamaica, 17-25 May 2011. This gathering, which is expected to bring together up to 1000 participants and among them dozens of youth, will be a 'harvest festival'; a celebration for the achievements of the DOV and at the same time it will encourage the world Christian community to renew its commitment to nonviolence, peace and justice.

The IEPC will approach the crucial issue of peace through the four themes, one of which will be 'Peace with the Earth'. Indeed peace is in danger today due to the desecration of God's Creation by our lust for more natural resources and energy, the super profit of the multinational corporations, the rise of world industrial production and the improvident hyper-consumption of goods.

Climate change and the Pacific

Day by day, year by year we experience climate change, which affects the way of life of many people around the globe and even threatens their sustenance. Global warming is indeed a fact. The results include the increase of the average temperature in the past two decades – the highest ever recorded; the extinction of the population for more and more species of fauna and flora; the lack of fresh and clean water; upcoming danger for exquisite landscapes and the increase of the ecological refugees. Under this consideration the World Council of Churches decided the assignment of a 'Living Letters' delegation in South Pacific; one of the world

regions that is already experiencing the consequences of climate change¹. From 27-29 May 2010, a team visited churches, ecumenical organizations and civil society movements in Fiji as part of a mission for Christian love, fraternal accompaniment and solidarity, as regards the catastrophic consequences of climate change.

Today, seven million people live in the twenty-two Pacific island states. The emissions of greenhouse gases in this region, that intensify the global warming effect, come to 0.06% of the global emissions, a figure very insignificant. The inhabitants of the Pacific, who have contributed least to the global threat of climate change, are already suffering the effects. Among the many dangers the three major ones are:

- Increase of the surface of the sea, due to ice and glaciers melting at the poles. Many islands, like Tuvalu, Kiribati, Micronesia, Vanuatu, are threatened with imminent extinction.
- Erosion of coastal land as a result of the increasing intensity of tropical cyclones, hurricanes and by deforestation, caused by human intervention of the coastal mangroves plants that constrained the ground. The usual annual period of extreme weather phenomena from November to April has been destabilized, causing the disruption of residents' lives. At the same time the flow of saltwater in the aquifer makes it difficult to ensure the necessary quantity of drinking water.
- Warming of sea water becomes an immediate threat for the rich coral biodiversity of the area and causes the reduction of the schools of fishes, both valuable for the daily maintenance of the island populations, and of the larger aquatic mammals that rely on these waters for food.

For the residents these threats are not based on a dramatic scenario for the future or an intimidating scientific model. They already experience the changes.

In our meetings with local ecumenical and church leaders special attention was given to ethical issues related to the effects of climate change to the life in the Pacific, like the potential forced resettlement of whole communities to other countries of the region due to the rise in sea level. Already the governments of several Pacific countries are working for the preparation of international agreements with neighbouring states such as New Zealand and Australia, for the future potential of a compulsory relocation of entire populations.

Threatening a small paradise – the case of Viwa

Apart from meeting the official authorities we had the opportunity to visit a small earthly paradise, Viwa Island, which is also a significant Christian centre in Fiji. Here the New Testament was translated from the original Greek text into Fijian, by Rev. John Hunt, an English missionary and scholar of the 19th century. The village, with its 100 members and Chief, officially received and welcomed the 'Living Letters' delegation as representatives of the whole world by inviting them to join the traditional Kava Ceremony and opening heartily their houses.

As we were informed by the natives and testified with our own eyes, Viwa is also experiencing the effects of climate change. During our staying, Isikeli Komaisavai, the second in class of hierarchy and prospective community leader, invited the delegates to witness the

¹ The report of the WCC Living Letters solidarity visit to the Pacific Churches can be found here:
<http://www.overcomingviolence.org/en/news-and-events/news/dov-news-english/browse/4/article/1323/losing-paradise.html>
Mozaik 27, *Climate Justice Now!*, "Climate Changes: A Story of the Present", Nikos Kosmidis, 2011.

first effects of climate change. Our mission alone with some residents took a boat and sailed around the island, a journey that lasted 15-20 minutes. The same picture everywhere! Lush tropical vegetation that reached the water and exotic birds nestled in the roots of mangroves plants. We were wondering where these signs of climate change were. But this idyllic view was hiding some very dark secrets.

The coastal zone bears deep cracks and caves; the sea water increases its destructive work. Since 2002, due to coastal erosion, the total area of the island has dropped more than 40,000 square meters of land! As a result of this erosion, trees, which were ten metres above the sea level some years ago, today are almost touching the water. An image that seemed so exotic in our eyes and, at the same time, was testifying the dire change...

The village and its viability are threatened. In order to retain the soil, residents constructed a stone wall around the port. Ten years ago, Isikeli's house was quite a distance from the coast; now, it's likely to be found in the water. It is unknown if the sea wall will keep away the high waves of tropical storms and protect the village from a future disaster.

In March 2010, the powerful cyclone 'Thomas' caused major damage in homes, infrastructure and vegetation in most of Fijian islands. Despite these new circumstances and given the fact that life is becoming more difficult, the people of Viwa, both the old and the young, trust that the world community will finally take a strong decision to reverse the destruction of God's Creation and that they will not have to abandon their fathers' land, the place they were born, in order to become refugees in foreign lands.

Climate change is my problem too!

For the older generations in the Pacific these challenges are not easy handled. Many among them still deny that they are dealing with a potential danger, even as they witness the changes in nature. They believe that as God promised to the righteous Noah (Genesis 9; 8-17) there will be no more catastrophic floods.

Today most of the children in the Pacific learn about climate change and what really cause these changes very early. The children of Funafuty, the capital of the island nation of Tuvalu, learn about it from the age of six, as they start primary school. Now they know that it is not Atua (meaning *God* in the Polynesian languages) who creates the floods; it is not Atua who changes the stream of tropical cyclones; it not Atua who calls them to abandon their land. It is likely that this will be the last generation of children to grow up in Tuvalu before the whole community will have to move away. But still, the people of the Tuvalu, together with their brothers and sisters in the Pacific, continue to pray unceasingly for a miracle:

*Atua! Your Pacific people call out to you,
even as the waters continue to rise...
hear our prayer, we who trust in your love!
Atua! Your Pacific people call out to you,
even as our land disappears before our eyes...
hear our prayer, we who hope in your love!*

*Atua! Our strength! Our life! Our love!*²

How long will we refuse to see the results of our actions? Have we wondered whether we have the luxury of time to ignore the signs of nature or do we believe that our choices will have an impact only on other people far away from us? As a young Christian who is concerned about this crucial crossroad, I would like to raise my voice together with the voices of the Viwa people.

The destruction of Creation is the last sin of humanity against God. God who created the world *ex amore* and made us lords and ministers. “The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it” (Genesis 2: 15). But instead of being lords and ministers we became violators and abusers, destroying in this way our peace with God and Creation, our only home. Thus it is an imperative need for the churches to call now for repentance. It is important to understand that our growth, development and prosperity affected dramatically other parts of the world and its people; to recognize “that unsustainable methods of wealth creation and the adherence to unlimited growth impoverish communities and harm creation as a whole”.³ As Christian citizens of the western world we are called to find the courage to confess and to ask forgiveness for the mistakes of our forefathers and their injustice towards other people. This injustice has to stop NOW!

Especially as our world is dealing with the current crisis of the financial system, more and more religious leaders highlight both the connection between the financial crisis with the environmental one, as well as the truth that these crises are rooted in the same problem. One of the most prominent world religious leaders, the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople Bartholomew I, also known worldwide as the “Green Patriarch” for his strong ecological sensitivity, declared:

*the present [financial] crisis offers an opportunity for us to deal with the problems in a different way, because the methods that created these problems cannot provide their best solution. We need to bring love into all our dealings, the love that inspires courage and compassion. Human progress is not just the accumulation of wealth and the thoughtless consumption of the earth's resources.*⁴

Luxurious waiting?

This is not the time to become pessimists; we do not have that luxury! Instead, it is a time to speak a prophetic voice in the world. It is time for the implementation of major policy decisions by the global community, which will take as a priority the balance between economic growth and sustainable continuation of our existence, in harmony with nature. It is time for the conscious adoption of a way of life with new practices in all aspects; a way of life that will respect and protect the sanctity of Creation, the protection of human dignity and promote the demand for eco-justice “between people, countries and generations, human and

² As part of the 13 December 2009 church bell-ringing campaign, the members of the Ecumenical Centre Worship Committee in Geneva prepared a special service which proposed 350 drum beats – fifty beats for each of the seven days of creation. This prayer was offered during the service by and for the people of the Pacific.

³ *Budapest Call for Climate Justice - Addressing Poverty, Wealth and Ecology*, Joint WCC-CEC AGAPE Consultation: Linking poverty, wealth and ecology: Ecumenical Perspectives in Europe, (8-12 November 2010).

⁴ Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople Bartholomew I, *Message for the Day of the Protection of the Environment* (1 September 2009).

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non humans and with the Earth itself”.⁵ The tears in the eyes of the Viwa people and their farewell songs will always stay a reminder of what we are called to do!

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⁵ Ibid 3

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