Globalization and the Re-Shaping of Christianity in the Pacific Islands

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Excerpt from Foreword
There has been considerable anticipation by the Pacific Church community and ecumenical organisations of Dr Ernst’s book. It is a sentiment equally shared by overseas partners, mission boards and world organisations. This in itself is clear evidence of its importance and the first indicator of its assured status as one of the most important and needed piece of research done for our churches and the ecumenical movement in our region. The book is a must for all who genuinely desire to understand why our religious landscape looks the way it is today. It is an essential resource for all ecumenical organisations and theological training institutions. Given that we are still in the initial stages of our journey in the 21st century, this book is a timely contribution in our efforts to chart and navigate our way forward.

Analysis
Going beyond a mere description of what is labelled ‘The Re-shaping of Christianity in the Pacific Islands’, answers are offered to the questions that sparked off the research project, namely:

- What is the relationship (if any) between globalization and changes in religious affiliation?
- Why do people join new religious groups and bear the consequences of sometimes breaking away from families, relatives, communities and traditional ways of life, thereby causing pain and conflict?
- Why are the historic mainline churches in a long term state of decline and apparently unable to re-adjust their structures, programmes and activities to the challenges of a rapidly changing social environment?
- What are the implications on economics, politics and culture if more and more people join new religious groups and so form a conservative social movement, which in some islands already displays features of the New Religious Right or the so-called Moral Majority in the USA?

Finally, the research has tried to develop for the historic mainline churches an outline of how they could respond to the manifold challenges of globalization. In this context the possibilities for a new visionary model of being church are explored, with reference to the rediscovery and reformulation of ecumenical co-operation in all areas of work and a firm move towards a theology (in both theory and practice) that places the marginalized, disadvantaged, oppressed and poor in the centre.
The first part introduces recent Christian groups and denominations as well as globalization in general. While this introduction is illuminating for someone unfamiliar with the roots and history of Pentecostal/charismatic Christianity as well as basic theories of globalization, the reader interested predominantly in the situation in the Pacific might well skip this part. A lion’s share (more than six hundred pages) of the book is devoted to the actual presentation of the research data, country by country. The essential data are the membership figures of different religious bodies, and the historical trends of growth and decline are carefully studied. Kiribati is a low-lying island country in the Pacific Ocean. Currently over 100,000 people live there, at least for the moment. In the near future the population of Kiribati may be forced to look for a new place to live. According to climate experts sea levels could rise by almost two meters by the end of the century, flooding the group of islands which are only a few feet high. Some of the country’s 32 atolls are already disappearing beneath the Pacific’s waves. Villagers in some areas have already started to move as seawater has started to enter the fresh water basins. Kiribati needs to do so. Pacific Island governments are considering suing global polluters in a bid to save the region amid the devastating climate emergency. The traditional way of life in island nations like Vanuatu, Tuvalu, Fiji, Kiribati, and the Marshall Islands is deteriorating because of climate change. They’re experiencing warmer waters, coral bleaching, tidal flooding, erosion, changing weather patterns, and more brutal cyclones. Thousands of people have already fled the region for New Zealand, seeking a new life.