



The “Bula Bulletin”



January – February 2013

“I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food”

Genesis 1:29-30
(NRSV)

Spiritual nourishment: Food security, health and greening the Church in the Pacific

Access to fresh, nutritious food is essential for both physical and mental wellbeing. Climate change and personal lifestyle choices in the Pacific threaten the health and vitality of island peoples, both now and in the future. Over-reliance on imported and often nutritionally poor-quality food is costly in terms of personal health and family finances, but because of climate change, some communities in the future will be left with few alternatives. Rates of non-communicable diseases, such as obesity, diabetes and heart disease, already high across the region, are predicated to increase further as local foods are increasingly replaced with unhealthy imports.



The Pacific Conference of Churches (PCC) wishes to encourage churches to promote healthy living among their membership, and to lead by example, by utilising even the smallest available land for the production of healthy, local food.

Seeking to practice what it preaches, the Secretariat of PCC has converted some of the limited grounds around the PCC office in downtown Suva for the small-scale production of crops. Depending on the weather, each Thursday afternoon staff have the opportunity to undertake a spot of communal gardening (in the sunshine?) with their colleagues.

Climate change and food production in the Pacific

Climate change restricts local growing conditions and affects food production all along the food chain. The poorest in society will be impacted most, especially those dependent on subsistence agriculture and fisheries for daily survival or those living in informal (squatter) settlements without land tenure, but with greater exposure to disease.

Temperature: Warmer temperatures are expected: mean air temperatures in the southern Pacific are likely to increase between 1°C and 3.1°C by the end of C21st. Increases in extreme temperatures are also likely, resulting in increased heat stress on plants and population alike. Temperature increases will not be confined to just the land. Rising sea-surface temperatures across the region are already causing coral bleaching; in the future, the mortality of coral reefs will affect fisheries and impact onshore wave activity, resulting in increased coastal erosion.



Rainfall: Crop production in the Pacific is almost entirely reliant on rainfall, rather than irrigation, and, although predictions for rainfall in the future are less certain, the region is already prone to floods and droughts. More intense cyclones and prolonged periods of drought are forecast, and it is the frequency and intensity of rainfall in the future that will be important for food production. More rainfall in the summer (the wet season) and less in winter (the dry season) will have adverse effects on crop production throughout the year. Water-sensitive crops such as coconut, breadfruit and cassava may benefit from more rain; but, conversely, most crops will suffer if rainfall amounts decrease, especially the traditional, starchy crops of yam and taro (*dalo*).

Other effects: There will also be changes to the incidence of pests and diseases that will impact agricultural production adversely, and sea-level rise, an increasing, current concern for Pacific coastal communities, will affect food production from loss of land to erosion and the increased inland penetration of seawater.

CASE STUDY: Food insecurity in the Carteret Islands, Papua New Guinea

Recent environmental changes in the six atolls of the Carteret Islands, PNG have severely restricted the variety of crops that the atoll community can grow. Malnutrition is a serious concern for the population, who are now dependent on irregular, government-supplied food aid.

1980s

Banana
Breadfruit
Cassava
Chinese taro
Coconut
Green vegetables
Papaya (*pawpaw*)
Taro (*dalo*)

Today

Banana
Coconut



Only bananas and coconuts can be grown in the Carteret Islands today, and these crops are regularly exposed to saltwater inundation.

RELOCATION: In 2007 the decision was taken to relocate the 2,700 Carteret Islanders to the larger island of Bougainville, 60 miles away. The lengthy, complicated relocation process is on-going, and to date, only a few families have been resettled in the mainland.



Self-watering, plastic-bottle containers with wick and reservoir

The ‘Green Church Project’ of PCC

The PCC recognises the need to strengthen food security at the household and local level across the Pacific. Practical theological responses are required that reconnect and remind us of our relationship to, and responsibilities for, God’s ‘good creation’, and also that are consistent with the local capability and regional circumstances of the Pacific people: all should be able to contribute in some way to the project, and everyone should be able to benefit from their labours.

“The earth is the Lord’s, and all that is in it.” Psalm 24:1 (NRSV)

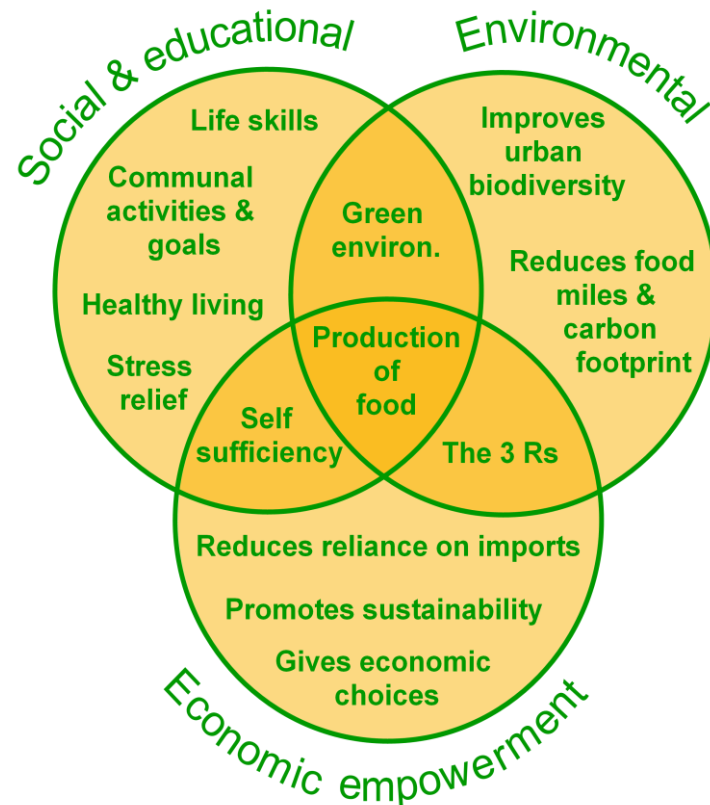


The PCC approach is to utilise small, urban spaces to create productive gardens and to promote the idea of reducing, reusing and recycling 'waste' materials (the 3 Rs). By growing multiple food crops in small spaces, it is hoped that the project will serve as a model of practical urban gardening. Its intention is to encourage families and communities to, not only improve the availability of food, but also to increase food-supply resilience at times of climatic adversity (different crops are affected differently by specific hazards such as intense rainfall and prolonged drought).

The concept of urban agriculture is not new; the appeal of the project is that it uses land in urban centres that would otherwise go unused. Steep slopes, sides of buildings, roof tops and even water-logged ground can all be used successfully to produce crops. Where possible waste (recyclable) resources, waste-water and organic matter can also be put to good use.

Additional benefits of the project

Aside from spiritual reconnection and responsibility, there are many other benefits for a church to develop an agricultural project in the urban setting:



A large, raised bed, bordered with used tyres. The area floods regularly in heavy rain, so the tyres help prevent erosion, and also create individual, elevated containers.



Glass bottles provide an alternative edging to the newly created, side-path plant border.

Prayer points & reflection:

- Pray for those people worldwide whose food supplies and livelihoods have been, and will be, adversely affected by climate change.
- Pray for the Carteret Islanders, PNG, who are reliant on government food handouts, while they await relocation away from their atoll home.
- Give thanks for the wonder of planting a seed and watching it grow.
- Give thanks for the Green Church Project, and pray for the continued commitment and enthusiasm of the PCC staff.
- Pray that the Church in the Pacific, as elsewhere, can guide its membership and communities to similar practical, Church-based agricultural action.
- Reflect on the role of food in our society and in our welcome of strangers.

It is hoped that the 'Green Church Project' model will give people, many of whom are aware that self-sufficiency and self-determination need to be addressed within the Pacific region, the means to take that critical 'self-empowering' first step, by giving them knowledge of what can be done and how.

But the project goes beyond merely personal action; it demonstrates a collective responsibility (as Church, community or neighbourhood) for us to look after the most vulnerable in society.

“And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.”
2 Corinthians 9: 8 (NRSV)

Commitment and discipleship

The Green Church Project is ongoing. Educational resource materials are currently being written to instruct others wishing to undertake similar work, and the project team is investigating waste-water capture as a method to irrigate the plant beds.

But as any gardener knows, and especially those who have practised in the tropics, once the tilling and sowing has started, the plots need constant tending, weeding, and watering. A well-tended garden is one that produces a good harvest.

“The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil...”
Matthew 13: 37-39 (NRSV)

Our spiritual lives, to be bounteous and fruitful, need similar attentive care to that of a garden. I wonder... how much time do we devote to our spiritual health compared with the time given to our physical sustenance? Are we self-sustaining, full-time farmers; occasional, part-time gardeners; or, do we look to others to fulfil our spiritual nourishment...?

Hmm, time for me to go and do some weeding...!

God bless
Julia

Old, halved oil drums, now seedling planters

