



# The “Bula Bulletin”



April 2011

“My goal is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ”  
Colossians 2: 2 (NIV)

## Rethinking the Journey and Course of Hermeneutics in Oceania, 13-19<sup>th</sup> March 2011

Hermeneutics\* is the interpretation of the Bible, and today the study goes beyond the traditional examination of written scriptures to include the use of all forms of verbal and non-verbal communications.

**The Consultation:** The 90 or so Pacific Church leaders and their representatives, who gathered in Namoli Village, Lautoka city for the week-long Hermeneutics Consultation had plenty of scope to discuss interpretative issues of relevance to Oceania. I was fortunate also to be among the participants and able to listen and, on occasion, contribute to their discussions.

The conference was a three-way initiative between the Pacific Conference of Churches (PCC), God’s Pacific People (GPP) within the Pacific Theological College (PTC) and the South Pacific Association of Theological Colleges (SPATS); invited speakers from across the region addressed the ecumenical gathering.

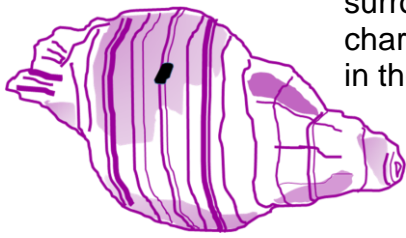
Each presentation was followed by related group work, with groups given a series of questions to guide our discussions. At the end of each session group feedback was given, and at the end of the week a four-page summary of the proceedings was compiled. This document will be used to steer the direction of hermeneutics in the Pacific over the next few years. Topics presented and discussed included: the history of hermeneutics; ecumenism and hermeneutics in Oceania; a hermeneutics of ecology; post-colonialism; governance and leadership; the need for a new hermeneutics of peace, and the challenges of gender and hermeneutics in Oceania. My personal challenge was to sit cross-legged on the mat-covered floor from 9am to 6pm each day. I challenge you to try 20 minutes!!

**Namoli Village:** Our village environment was particularly conducive to the task in hand as we were each hosted by a local family and stayed in their respective homes for the week. All our meetings and devotions were also held within the community. Villagers were welcome to attend the programme, and many of them sat alongside us each day following our discussions. (Several of them were also entertained during the sessions by my constant floor fidgeting.)

Like almost all villages in Fiji, the focal point for the Namoli community is its church and church hall. Namoli Village, however, is unusual as a Fijian

\* **Hermeneutics:** The term can be traced back to Hermes, the mythological messenger between the Greek gods and mortals. Aside from his role as a messenger, Hermes was also considered a thief, a liar and a manipulator.





village in that it's located entirely within a city. Lautoka, Fiji's second largest city, grew up around the original village settlement, and despite being surrounded by the city, Namoli has retained its independence, form and character. It still has the atmosphere of a small village, while being situated in the middle of a city of 45,000 other people.

**Culture and Hermeneutics in Oceania:** The peoples of Oceania have some of the strongest cultural identities of people anywhere in the world, and much of our discussions during the consultation reflected this cultural heritage.

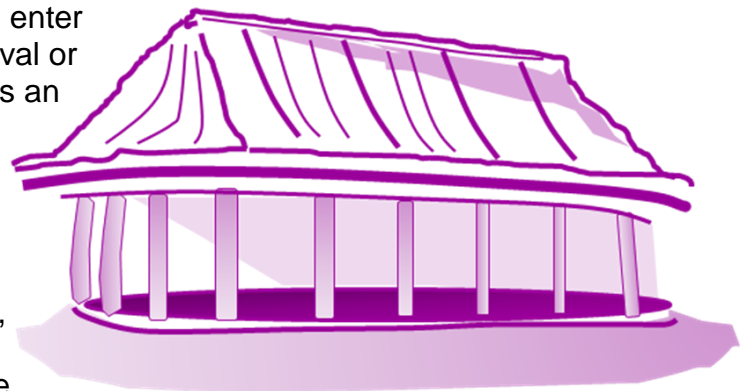
**Prayers & reflections:**

- Pray for those affected by the recent Japanese earthquake and tsunami, people of the Pacific region who have lost loved ones, livelihoods, possessions and hope.
- Give thanks for interpreters who can open our eyes to God's word in new and revealing ways.
- Pray for those, especially women and other marginalised people, who feel their views, abilities and opportunities are constrained by who they are, and not by what they can offer.
- Pray for reconciliation and peace among the hill tribes of Papua New Guinea.
- Reflect on how our personal environments influence our views and understanding of the Bible.

Sometimes culture can cause tension, conflict, confusion and fear. On several occasions we were questioned on our attitudes to the role of gender in the church. The issue of peace building and the Church was also raised in connection with the tribal warfare prevalent in the Papua New Guinean highlands. And the detrimental legacy of colonialism was highlighted, while at the same time we were charged to analyse how the post-colonial Church has moved forward within the region.

Culture, however, can also help affirm our faith and be the means of expressing love and respect for each other. I'll give two regional hermeneutics examples from our discussions:

- 1) **the conch shell:** This iconic symbol of the Pacific is sometimes blown ceremonially at the start of a church service; the shell has to be empty to make a sound. Likewise at the start of a service we need to empty ourselves before God to be filled with his goodness and grace.
- 2) **the Samoan fale:** A traditional house is where the whole family can sit in a circular arrangement where everyone can see each other. It is an open environment geared to community unity. The structure of the *fale* means that people can enter from any side and its oval or round shape represents an unbroken chain for those who enter. It is a symbol of unity.



Other Pacific nations have similar structures, and in some countries the sides of the *fale* are extended so low any person who enters has to bend almost double to get inside, showing the ultimate respect for those already seated.

**Outputs and recommendations:** In the past individual theologians from the Pacific have presented their own personal views on Hermeneutics in the region; this consultation, however, was the first time that a collective ecumenical position had been sought from within the region.

It was a tricky task. However, the Churches of the Pacific now have a commitment to the development of: inclusivity and partnership; a theology of ecology; a curriculum of Hermeneutics for theological schools and a methodology of story-telling, allowing space for personal stories to be told. I sense that our particular ecumenical Hermeneutics of *Maroro* (dialogue) is only at the beginning...

God bless  
Julia