

Christianity and the Shaping of Vanuatu's Social and Political Development

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Abstract

The Pacific island state of Vanuatu has been considerably shaped by its Christian heritage. Indeed, the role of the various Christian Churches has been pivotal in the development and sustenance of Vanuatu prior to and since its Independence. These Churches include Anglican, Catholic, Pentecostal and evangelical denominations. Missionaries and later local Church leaders were involved directly in Independence movements and shaped the legal and social infrastructure of this nation. This involvement and influence has continued to the present. This paper will consider the role the Church has played in the development of Vanuatu. Firstly, this paper will present case study analysis of both the historical and contemporary role the Church has played in the development of Vanuatu. This review will consider the impact of both key individual Church leaders who played central roles Vanuatu's Independence. Secondly, the paper will consider the contemporary role Christian Churches play in the provision of social service - including education and health - across Vanuatu. This paper

will conclude that Christianity has therefore played and continues to play a central role in the political and social development of Vanuatu.

Introduction

The Pacific island state of Vanuatu has been considerably shaped by its Christian heritage. Indeed, the role of the various Christian Churches has been pivotal in the development and sustenance of Vanuatu prior to and since its Independence. These Churches include Anglican, Catholic, Pentecostal and evangelical denominations. Missionaries and later local Church leaders were involved directly in Independence movements and shaped the legal and social infrastructure of this nation.

Vanuatu is a nation of islands with a population of just under 250,000. With 65 of its 80 islands uninhabited, the population is concentrated in five main islands: Espiritu Santo, Malakula, Efate, Pentecost, and Tanna. While the main urban centre of Port Vila is home to around 50,000, the majority of Ni-Vanuatu live in rural areas, where they are primarily engaged in subsistence agriculture and supplementary cash crop production. Like many Pacific nations, Vanuatu social and political development is challenged by small populations, difficult geography, reliance on foreign aid, poor terms of trade, and little comparative advantage (Leach et al. 2013; Clarke et al. 2013).

As with many other Pacific nations, the role of religion is pervasive throughout Vanuatu. While eighty per cent of the world's population profess religious belief, the historical legacy of mission activity has resulted in more than 95 per cent of Ni-Vanuatu self-identifying as Christian (Vanuatu NSO 2010)^{1, 2}. From the mid-1800s³, there has been a strong and continuing presence of Christian missionaries working and living across the Vanuatu archipelago. From their earliest encounters, a central tent of these early missionaries was the provision of education and productive skills (Hilliard 1978). Of particular importance to the social and political development of Vanuatu, these early Missionaries (and those that followed⁴) also genuinely focused on local autonomy and leadership within the Churches (Brown 2009b). Of course, this is not to deny that the experience of the Christian missionaries were not without negative

¹ The proportion of Ni-Vanuatu who are Christian is often cited as 83 per cent. This figure is drawn from the 2009 census. However it is based upon the misunderstanding that the 13 per cent nominating themselves as 'other' in the census are not Christian. Rather, the majority of respondents within this category are Christian, but not of the denominations listed on the census form: Presbyterian, Anglican, Catholic, SDA, Apostolic, Churches of Christ, Assemblies of God, Neil Thomas Ministries

² It should be noted that the personal commitment to professed faith differs widely across the population with, for example, Church attendance numbers falling in recent years - 'a lot of people in Vila and Santo don't go to Church' (Interview F10).

³ The first European incursion into Vanuatu was led by the Spanish explorer Pedro Fernandez de Queiros in 1606. This visit resulted in a temporary chapel being built, a Mass being held and the baptism of two local boys occurring (Beaglehole 1966).

⁴ Such community-focussed ministry continued with the arrival of new denominations (Catholic in 1887, Churches of Christ in 1901, Seventh Day Adventists in 1912, Apostolic Church in 1946 and so on

consequences on traditional lifestyles, beliefs and practices of Ni Vanuatu over the past 150 years (Tonkinton 1982a)⁵. However, the purpose of this paper, while not denying these negative impacts, will purposely adopt an appreciative perspective of the role of missionaries in Vanuatu - with a particular focus on social and political development.

As the British and French colonial services did not engage with Vanuatu until the turn of the 20th century, the Churches and their leaders were the sole providers of social services during this early pre-colonial period but also continued this role right through the last 100 years. While competition for influence did occur between various Churches over some of

⁵ *Nor will this paper explicitly focus on the impact of the introduction of Christianity on kastom. Within Vanuatu, kastom describes the traditional authority and structures that described relationships between community members and community members and the land (and sea). It is very important to note that kastom is very localized and there cannot be said (even in contemporary Vanuatu) to be a common kastom prevalent across the nation. While early missionaries did fight against local kastom, there is no firm agreement within the literature though as to whether the early missionaries purposely sought to transcend different cultures within this group of islands by tying kastom and Christianity together as a unified belief system (Douglas 2000) or whether the eventual widespread conversion of Christianity overtime weakened certain aspects of kastom that were considered "savage superstitions". The pragmatic reality is that these two positions were probably managed pragmatically by 'local churchmen (sic) (who...) turned a blind eye to practices that had been deemed un-Christian but were destined to persist: smoking, periodic drinking premarital sex, bouts of physical marital strife, the use of magic, beliefs in non-Christian spirit-beings, observance of traditional taboos, and so on' (Tonkinton 1982bp. 57 - see Clarke 2013 for acceptance of Church leaders of kastom and "black magic"). Thus, in present-day Vanuatu, 'Christianity co-exists with traditional belief systems exemplified by kastom..., with people able to maintain both belief systems in tandem, often with syncretic features' (Leach et al., 2012 p. 8).*

this time (see Miller 1978, Monnier 1987) and the Independence movement did see a strong demarcation between the Francophone Catholic population and the Anglophone Christian Churches (see Regenvanu 2004), recent cooperation between Christian Churches has increased. Such co-operation increases the agency these Churches have in assuming a greater and more formal role in Vanuatu's civil society that better reflects the historical influence and role they have played in the social and political development of this nation.

Yet, the role of the Christian Churches has not been fully investigated or acknowledged. Whilst development needs remain high, very important work has been undertaken by various Churches to improve the material living standards throughout this region prior to and since their Independence. These Churches include Anglican, Catholic, Pentecostal and evangelical denominations⁶. Missionaries and later local Church leaders were involved directly in providing social services, leading Independence movements and actively participating in the civil sector of this new nation. Their involvement and influence has continued to the present.

⁶ *Given the relatively ecumenical manner in which these different denominations have worked together within Melanesia over such a lengthy period of time and the almost complete absence of non-Christian religious beliefs held by Melanesians, the different Christian denominations will be referred to collectively as 'the Churches'.*

This paper will consider the role that Christian Churches have played in the development of Vanuatu. It will do so in two parts. Firstly, this paper will present case study analysis of both the historical and contemporary role Christian Churches have played in the development of Vanuatu. This review will consider the impact of both key individual Church leaders who played central roles in nation-building as well as the emergence of a 'theology of Independence' that evolved during this period within the Pacific. Secondly, this paper will consider the contemporary role Christian Churches play in the provision of social service - including education and health - across Vanuatu. This paper will conclude that Christianity has therefore played and continues to play a central role in the political and social development of Vanuatu.

This paper has been introduced in this first section. The historical impact on the social and political development of Vanuatu is discussed in section 2, before the Christian Churches impact on contemporary Vanuatu is reviewed in Section 3. Section 4 concludes this paper.

Historical Role of Christianity on Social and Political Development

Anglican missionary activity in Vanuatu began in 1849 (prior to there being any colonial presence in this region) when Bishop Selwyn of New Zealand undertook the first of more than ten missionary trips to

*Melanesia*⁷. Under his leadership, the Melanesian Mission held a theological position of 'true religion, sound learning, and useful industry' (Brown 2009b) that underpinned its activities within Vanuatu. Thus, from its inception, the provision of education and skills was a central tenet in the mission work undertaken in this part of the Pacific. The role of missionaries in providing education and health services in Vanuatu is important to note (Hilliard 1978). Not only did missionaries provide basic welfare service in the absence of that provided by the colonial powers⁸, they also laid the groundwork for a cohort of educated Ni Vanuatu that was essential to gaining Independence. There was an almost an entire dereliction of duty by the dual-ruling French and English colonial powers within Vanuatu with direct involvement in the provision of health and education services not occurring until the mid-1960s⁹.

One of the early tasks undertaken by Bishop Selwyn was to establish a boarding school in New Zealand for Melanesian youth (later relocated to Norfolk Island). These young people, 'mostly boys but some girls, were brought from the New Hebrides, Banks and Torres islands, Santa Cruz and

⁷ At this time Vanuatu was known as New Hebrides (which also included what is known as Solomon Islands).

⁸ see Miles (1998) for a description of the Condominium Government established between the English and French in 1907 and the dual control prior to this

⁹ Though they did financially support some missionary-run activities, for example supporting various Anglican run hospitals from the mid-1930s (Brown 2009a).

Solomon Islands (this was before any western political presence was established in these areas) for education and experience of the Christian life, to be sent back to their home villagers as teachers and, eventually, clergy' (Brown 2009b, p. 6). Upon their return, many graduates tried to change the lifestyle of the village and replicate that which they had experienced at the boarding school. Indeed, the mission activity of the Melanesian Mission (in contrast to that of the Roman Catholic mission) centred on local schools - not missionary stations. Whilst success was limited - given their age and lack of year-round presence of expatriate missionaries - this provision of education and health was important stepping stone towards more substantial services being available across the region. Indeed, without the presence of these young people, no basic welfare services would have existed at this time in these villages.

Political autonomy was also important to the Melanesian Mission. In addition to health and education, the Anglican mission also supported autonomy (in Church, culture and state), self-reliance, and health (including improved maternal and child health) (Brown 2009b). An annual gathering (vaukolo) of chiefs and teachers was established in 1887 by the Rev'd John Plant in Gela (in Solomon Islands) to aid decision-making that affected the local communities. 'Various subjects were discussed, concerning dancing parties, heathen marriages, burial-grounds, coco-nuts, guns and

dynamite, 'undesirables', the price of wives, and the abuse of tattooing' (Coombe 1911, p 315). This ability for 'power-sharing' between traditional leaders and Church leaders aided the 'localizing' of the Church. It also predated the established of the British Solomon Islands Protectorate by six years and thus served as a de-facto national assembly with participants often numbering more than 1000. Another important example of the self-autonomy practiced within the Melanesian Mission was the use of a local language as early as 1921 as the official language of the Synod. The role of the Church in providing social services also pre-dated any colonial presence. 'At this time the Church developed an industrial training school ("useful industry"), many new schools and the new theological college ("sound learning"), a Melanesian Liturgy and theological education resources ("true religion") and new clinics and hospitals (good health). It was assumed that all these activities would contribute to the increase of population (depopulation was still an issue) and prosperity of ordinary Melanesian Anglicans (Brown 2009b, p. 10-11). Indeed, the work of these missionaries laid the foundation for the social services that would follow. Given the early focus on autonomy - particularly within the Anglican missionary - much responsibility for this provision fell to local Church members.

Throughout this first 100 years of Christianity, local Church leaders assumed significant influence within Vanuatu society. It is not surprising therefore that these leaders and Church networks were an important aspect of the achievement of Vanuatu's Independence that occurred in 1980¹⁰. The Christian Church in Vanuatu provided four important opportunities to local leaders that facilitated the Independence movement within this region; 1) opportunities for higher education; 2) opportunities for leadership roles; 3) opportunities to utilize existing countrywide networks; and 4) opportunities to study and incorporate an evolving social justice theology into Church teaching and outreach. It is arguable that without recourse to these four important resources political Independence of Vanuatu would not have happen: either at the time it did or in the form that it took. Sethy Regenvanu - Minister of State in the first Government of the Republic of Vanuatu - provides a suitable illustration of how the Church assisted Pacific Islanders form and led Independence movements.

Whilst missionaries had provided education throughout Melanesia for over 100 years, access to upper secondary school education in the Pacific was quite limited during the 1950s and 1960s. Students were selected to

¹⁰ *The role of the Church was also integral to the successful Independence, with local bishops, assistant bishops, clergy, and Church administrators incorporated into the governance of the colonial rule leading up to Independence (Brown 2009a).*

attend higher secondary schools on a competitive basis and this usually involved leaving their home islands and moving to either a regional centre or the capital city. For many this was a very difficult move as their primary mode of self-identification was to their home village and island. There were few role models on which to base themselves with many being the first from their families, villages and islands to move away to continue their education. It was therefore a substantial break with the common experiences of their friends and communities. There was also a financial burden that were levied on these students' families. Not only did they have to pay fees and associated living costs, but there was also the opportunity costs of having a family member unable to contribute to a household because of their absence. (At this time many students at these high schools were in their late teens and even aged in their mid-twenties). In a traditionally cashless society, parents of students therefore had to undertake non-traditional farming tasks or work in order to enter the monetised economy - albeit in a limited manner - to be able to pay the fees and living costs with cash. As a result, not all those selected were therefore able to continue their studies - either having no family support or finding the experience of moving to the boarding school to alienating.

Such barriers to participation resulted in those who successfully completed their study to more often than not be individuals with strong

personalities and leadership abilities, such as Sethy Regenvanu. The majority of upper secondary school graduates returned to work in their home villages as school teachers. For a minority though, their education continued within post-secondary training institutes so that they might receive the necessary theological and pastoral training to allow them to work as pastors in their local Churches.

The experience of Regenvanu provides an insight into the consequences of the opportunities afforded to him for post-secondary education with the opportunities for further education not limited to training within Vanuatu. Regenvanu, for example, spent a year in Papua New Guinea at a youth leadership program run by the Methodist Church of Australia and New Zealand. The purpose of this course was to 'learn about leadership, to prepare and conduct group studies, to conduct worship services, and to preach' (Regenvanu 2004, p. 55). An (perhaps) unintended consequence was a political awakening. Mixing with fellow Pacific Islanders and discussing their own histories and political situation provide a new political perspective. 'As a result of my PNG experience, new meaning and purpose was added to my studies. I became more interested in national political and economic concerns, Church affairs, and matters of wider public interest. I acquired a new vision of the future of Vanuatu' (Regenvanu 2004, p. 57). It is reasonable to suggest that the opportunity afforded

to Regenvanu by the Church had direct consequences for Vanuatu's future Independence. This was further aided by his additional theological studies undertaken at the Pacific Theological College in Fiji. Again, this afforded not just the opportunity acquire theological knowledge, but also opportunities to mix with fellow Pacific Islanders and participate in political discussions, witness the gaining of Independence for Fiji and organise Pacific-wide cultural events. All of these experiences providing skills and knowledge that would assist with Vanuatu's future Independence movement. This personal opportunity for higher education also shaped Regenvanu's personal view of the importance of universal education across Vanuatu.

For his first Church-appointment - after 17 years of study - Regenvanu began working in the Education Office of the Presbyterian Church based in the capital city of Port Vila¹¹. Within this role, Regenvanu was able to direct education policy for the Presbyterian Church, but also utilize the networks established by these western Church leaders to participate in pre-nationalistic discussions and planning. These networks included contacts with 'key people in the government, private sector, the various local

¹¹ *Regenvanu's appointment as the first Ni-Vanuatu Director of Christian Education within the Presbyterian Church followed a year after the General Assembly (led by George Sokomanu - the first President of the Republic of Vanuatu) passed a motion - Declaration Concerning Independence - calling for the two colonial powers to cede power and prepare the country for self-determination.*

Churches, United Nations, Pacific Conference of Churches and the New Hebrides Christian Council... I was included in this network and was able to make some very important introductions and contacts. It was an effective introduction to what was soon to become my increasing involvement in the political affairs of the country and in the service of the government' (Regenvanu 2004, p. 88-89). While it was entirely possible that a Ni-Vanuatu man might be purposely be excluded from such networks by white men holding positions of power and influence, the willingness of certain leaders within the Presbyterian Church to provide an entry to these networks cannot be understated¹². (This is not true of all western missionaries though. The expatriate leadership of the Catholic Church long opposed Independence and ceding leadership to local Church leaders).

By working closely with local Presbyteries (equivalents to dioceses), Regenvanu was able to focus the Presbyterian Church's education program away from formal education (which the Churches had just recently given responsibility for to the government) and 'focus its attention on non-formal sectors: leadership development, vocational training, social justice and political awareness (Regenvanu 2004, p. 92). The approach taken within tasks was based on liberation theology emanating from Latin

¹² *Institutional inequality between expatriate and local Church leaders was still persistent at this time, which included provision of hot running water in their bathrooms, separate dining arrangements (and menus), better accommodation, etc. (Regenvanu 2004).*

America and the Tanzanian focus on self-reliance initiated by Nyerere. There is of course a long history of a social justice theology within the region (see Brown 2009b), with Bishop Baddeley (head of Melanesian Mission from 1932-1947) very focused on the "whole man":

is profoundly concerned with men's lives here and now. It is concerned with the whole man, his body and his mind as well as the spiritual part of him. What's the purpose--'tis a sham--to tell people of harps in heaven when they are coughing their lungs out with T.B.; when leprosy has eaten away the limbs of one or other of the family, when you know that 40 per cent of your babies will die within a few hours of birth, and no one seems to care! But the missionary does care--hospitals where all may come for healing; doctors and nurses moving about among the bush and saltwater people; picked lads sent away to be trained as doctors; girls trained in mothercraft and maternity work able to help their people as white folk cannot in that climate and under the conditions of island life. And missionary work involves schools where lads and girls receive education to fit them to go to a Medical Training School or to an Agricultural Institute from which they may return to make their own contribution to their people's daily life, to fit them for better

citizenship in a new world fast closing in upon them (Fox 1958, p. 95-96).

The Christian Churches of Vanuatu at this time also saw the value of working together and resenting a relatively common position on Independence - though the Catholic Church often stood outside of this inter-denominational co-operation. An unsurprising evolution of political parties occurred at this time, with the most influential being the New Hebrides National Party (NHNP) lead by Fr Walter Lini (an ordained Anglican priest). Quite soon the leadership of the NHNP consisted largely of Church leaders as few other Ni Vanuatu had secular opportunities of education and leadership. The history of Vanuatu's colonial period and Independence is worthy of much further discussion that space permits in this paper (see Miles 1998). However, an important aspect of this history is the role that Church leaders undertook within different denominations in garnering support at the local level for Independence, input into the drafting of the constitution and providing the on-the-ground organisation required for the ensuring political campaigns. Without the Christian Churches, Vanuatu 'would not have had the handful of educated indigenous people at the crucial stage to direct the country in its course towards political Independence' (Regenvanu 2004, p. 170). These included the ordained Anglican priests Fr Walter Lini and Fr John

Bani, Presbyterian pastors Sethy Regenvanue, Willie Korisa, Jack Hopa, Jack Taritonga, Presbyterian Elders George Sokomanu, Thomas Reuban, and John Naupa, Church of Christ pastor Samuel Bule, and Roman Catholic priest Fr Gerard Leymang¹³. The support of overseas Church partners - Pacific Conference of Churches, World Council of Churches, the Presbyterian Church of Australia, the Australian council of Churches and the General Synod of the Church of Melanesia - also aided the achievement of Independence for Vanuatu (Brown 2009a). Without opportunities of education, roles of leadership, access to national networks and acceptance of evolving theological teaching, it is quite likelihood the Republic of Vanuatu would not have been achieved in the time or manner it did.

Of course, the involvement of the Church as its leaders (and trained members) did not finish once Independence was achieved. It has continued to play a very important role since then. It has continued to provide social services, but also in advocating for good governance as well as supporting the development of a national identity within these countries.

Contemporary Role of Christianity on Social and Political Development

¹³ *A similar list of Church-trained leaders of the early Solomon Islands Government would include Francis Bugoto, Mostyn Habu, Will Betu, and Lily Poznanski (Brown 2009a).*

Since Independence, the role of the Christian Churches has remained significant across Vanuatu. While the Churches lent this new nation its first national leaders, they have continued to operate at the local leaders in the provision of education, health, advocacy and support for youth and women. Moreover, they have provided a 'home;' for much social and political development within the Church buildings themselves¹⁴.

Contemporary Christian Churches in Vanuatu continue their missionary legacy by focusing on building the whole person. 'The history of the Church in the Pacific, since the missionaries, has always been about schools and dispensaries and the idea of looking at the whole person: not just spiritual needs, but physical needs' (Interviewee G12). While the Church leaders do not deny the higher goal is to bring people to Christ, there is not an obvious or clearly demarcated goal between what they are doing in terms of devotional ministry and what they are doing in terms of social and political development. When Church leaders (both ordained and lay) exercise agency in this sphere, they themselves are not classifying their activities in a binary nature, but rather see a unity between worship and development. Thus the 'ministry' of the Churches in working with youth, women, health, education and advocacy naturally straddles both the religious and secular in this regard. The two acts are closely interwoven so

¹⁴ *This section draws on Clarke 2013 and interviews undertaken in 2012 as part of a period of academic study leave supported by Deakin University.*

that working to improve health and education becomes important as an opportunity to live the Gospel but also as an act in and of itself that has intrinsic value in improving the material well-being of individuals and communities. Across all the Church leaders interviewed - regardless of denomination - there was agreement that just as Jesus was not prepared to send away the multitudes who came to hear him preach, so too must the Churches work to improve the material well-being of the communities to whom they preach. 'After reading the word, it is the duty of the Church to give the people something' (Interviewee E10).

Thus there is near universal acceptance that religious ministry in Vanuatu can only be successful if it involves the development of the whole person. 'We need to consider the spiritual and the physical as this will affect the whole being' (Interviewee A13) and 'we do not see ourselves as monastic, divorced from the life of society. We have a prophetic role to root out injustice, corruption and that which does not promote justice in the lives of the people' (Interviewee C12). The In care of the spiritual and physical well-being of people are therefore two sides of the same coin. This closely resembles the purpose and approach of the early missionaries who saw physical and social well-being as being equal in value to spiritual development. So while not all the denominations in Vanuatu operate in an identical manner, there are clear similarities in their commitment to

outreach activities that focus on the material and physical well-being of their congregations (and communities they serve) that extends well beyond traditional spiritual and devotional activities. 'Part of the Good News is helping them get out of their poverty' (Interviewee G11). Therefore this contemporary interest in the social and political development of Vanuatu continues the Churches' missionary heritage. '

Youth

Christian Churches' ministry to young Ni Vanuatu generally occurs within four broad areas: devotion, education, recreation, and service. When interviewed, Church leaders identified all four domains as necessary in 'developing a young person to be whole' (Interviewee A11). This focus on being whole is in order that these young people can 'give to the community' (Interviewee A14). Church leaders view youth as being core to the future sustainability of their communities. Across the Christian Churches, youth ministry also involves a focus on practical skills that go help them improve their living condition (Interviewees E10 and F10). This training includes fishing, agriculture, farming, cattle projects, tree planting (cash crops) and carpentry. Some Churches also use sports as a means of

reaching young people in the rural areas to discuss both spiritual and physical well-being issues (Interviewee E11 and F10).

Women

The involvement of women within Christian ministry is clearly evident in all communities. Reflecting wider Vanuatu society, while it is not common to hold formal (ordained) leadership roles within Christian Churches, it is common for women to hold significant informal leadership roles. Not only are women the majority of those attending worship services, they are also very evident in the running of various other ministry. In addition to gender-specific specific devotional activities, all denominations provide specific activities for women. This is largely organised by Church-based Women's Unions, Women's Group, Women's Movement, etc. Training and capacity building covers a wide range of areas, including leadership roles, management, life training skills, income generation, and financial literacy. The social and political development activities being auspiced under these Churches focuses on increasing access to improved material well-being but also the provision of emotional support to women who head households or have been subject to domestic violence (Interviewee A17). For example, in the urban areas of Vanuatu, there are social problems associated with domestic violence, pregnancies of young women and unemployment. 'The government doesn't seem to have a handle on the problems and so the

Church tries to do what it can' (Interviewee A15). Women's groups from various Christian Churches seek to address these problems primarily through community-based outreach programs. These outreach programs are located within Church congregations but do not limit their support to members of their own denomination.

Health and Education

Just as the original missionaries in Vanuatu focused establishing schools and health posts, contemporary Christian Churches continue to focus on providing health care and education services across Vanuatu. 'It is our duty to help them to get education, good health and proper care' (Interviewee D10). Health clinics run by Churches can be found in regional and remote communities where the distance to Government run health clinics are too distant to be practical as well as in urban locations where Government run health clinics are too crowded. (Interviewees D11, F11 and A17). Churches continue to run such clinics because the physical well-being of an individual is equally important to the spiritual well-being. 'Inwardly and outwardly, development is needed in all areas' (Interviewee B10). 'Within our belief system, health is right hand of the gospel' (Interviewee F10). One senior Pastor drew on Genesis 2:15 The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of. The emphasis of taking 'care' suggests that a holistic approach is required when bringing people to

God. There are many examples across Vanuatu of such health ministry, including the provision by the Presbyterian Church of eye care and dental treatment to isolated communities (Interviewee C12), and the SDA running various health programs, such as the 'Clean Village' program that provides training and support for communities to focus on improving sanitation, water use and storage, rubbish disposal, and using mosquito nets (Interviewee F11).

As part of the move to Independence, the majority of Christian Churches¹⁵ in Vanuatu gifted their Schools to the new state as a display of national unity. However, in 2010, the Government of Vanuatu amended the Education Act to allow Church Educational Authorities to assume control of government-funded schools. This policy recognizes both the high regard Church Educational Authorities hold in civil society, but also recognizes that these Authorities have a track record of reaching smaller or more isolated communities. While the Government will fund these schools, they will be administered by the Churches. Because of the

¹⁵ *The Catholic Church though did not relinquish control of their schools as its political inclination at that time (in line with the French Colonial authorities) was not in favour of Independence. As a result, the Catholic Education Authority is second only to the national Government in terms of providing education services in Vanuatu and has over 9000 students (though not all are Catholic). The Catholic Church does utilise its school network for the provision of training in a range of community development initiatives, including basic hygiene and disaster management (Interviewee G12). This training is largely provided by the NGO Caritas. All but one of the Catholic schools use French as their language of instruction.*

reputation of Church Educational Authorities, many communities are requesting that schools that have been government schools since their inception be also given to the Churches to run in the future (Interviewee C14, F12). In addition, Churches operate large numbers of kindergartens and lower primary schools that are predominately located either in Churches or associated Church buildings. Certainly in rural and remote communities, it is the Church-operated schools that are the only educational facilities available to local communities. 'Our thinking is that when you have a Church, you have a school' (Interviewee F12). Churches are also involved running rural training centres for young adults (Interviewee A12). These rural training centres provide courses in carpentry, mechanics, home care, business, agriculture and tourism.

Advocacy

Active advocacy is culturally fraught within Melanesian contexts. It is therefore unusual to be overtly critical of a person or institution in authority. Yet, protecting the interests and rights of the most vulnerable is core to a social and political development agenda of Christian Churches in Vanuatu. As such, they do practice advocacy as a routine component of their ministry. Indeed, there is a long history of Christian Churches standing up for those most at risks, including against early sandalwood and slave traders (blackbirders) (Interviewee C12) and local leaders of the

Presbyterian, Anglican and Churches of Christ speaking against the inaction of the Condominium Government in working for the welfare of Ni-Vanuatu in the early 20th century (Mueller 1990). Currently, the Christian Churches (acting collectively through the Vanuatu Christian Council) advocate on a range of issues, international trade policies, corruption, HIV and AIDS, domestic violence and other issues around land tenure, human rights and lack of opportunities for young Ni-Vanuatu (Interviewee E10, C15, and A14). Vanuatu Christian Churches see advocacy as core to their ministry as they have a responsibility 'to be a voice of the people but to also be a help to the government' (Interviewee A14). While differences may exist between different denominations on certain issues, the 'very strong, fraternal relationship and shared understanding' (Interviewee G12) of the different denominations facilitates a position of solidarity on most issues.

Development Partnerships

Christian Churches in Vanuatu do not act in the social and political development sphere naively though. There is an explicit understanding of their dominant social role within civil society across the country and the responsibility that this bestows upon them. The Christian Churches are also acutely aware (and constrained) by the lack of resources that are available for Churches to facilitate community development activities. As

such they do rely heavily on leveraging funding or support through other parties. There is also an understanding that the Churches have unmatched networks across the country and the ability to access remote or small communities that the national or provincial government have difficulty accessing (Interviewee A10). 'Churches are the ones that make things grow in communities. The Government can assist later' (Interviewee A12). Thus different levels of government and secular aid agencies are also attracted to working with the Churches for the same reason: 'The reason why they are interested in partnering with the Anglican Church is because of the structure we have' (Interviewee A14). There is a complementarity between Churches and aid agencies that enhances social and political development activities. While aid agencies have financial expertise and financial resources, they do find it difficult to establish trust and connections with rural communities. 'People are more connected to the Church than they are to the nation. People belong to the Church, they are the Church' (Interviewee C14). The Churches can therefore act as a broker in bringing together NGOs and local communities (Interviewee A12). Sometimes these partnerships are very practical in that Church buildings with large roofs, for example, are connected to water tanks for the capture and storage of clean water (Interviewee G12) while at other times they are more significant. For example, a number of Christian Churches have recently been able to professionalise their community

development activities through their involvement with the Australian Aid funded Vanuatu Church Partnership Program (VCP)¹⁶. Involvement in this program has helped to strengthen Church administration and the capacity of a range of community leaders (including ordained and lay community leaders) to undertake larger community development initiatives. Working in formal partnership with Australian-based NGOs, the different member Churches in Vanuatu have been able to implement larger, long-term development activities that would be more likely to be undertaken by secular aid agencies in other countries.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to describe the historical and contemporary role of the (Christian) Churches in the social and political development of Vanuatu. Having had a presence that pre-dates colonial rule, Christian Churches within Vanuatu have provided social services (such as education and health) well beyond that provided by the nation state (or its colonial predecessor), have provided opportunities for leadership for local Ni Vanuatu within the Church hierarchy that subsequently supported Independence movements (including a theology of Independence), continued

¹⁶ Churches receiving funding through the VCP include, Presbyterian, Anglican, SDA, Assemblies of God, Apostolic, and Churches of Christ. The Catholic Church is not a participating member of the VCP but does work in close partnership with Caritas. See Clarke (2011) for a description of the PNG Church Partnership program upon which the VCP was based.

to play an important civil society role since Independence and worked closely with local communities to hold governments accountable, and initiate and support conflict resolution and reconciliation activities in times of civil unrest. Given the ongoing importance of Christian Churches in the social and political development within Vanuatu, it is important that these Christian Churches be recognised by researchers, policy planners, those implementing social and economic programs, donors and national governments as having both played and continuing to play a central role in this endeavour.

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