



The case for a theology of disaster risk management

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Abstract

Pacific Island communities are among the most disaster prone on earth. The churches in these communities have a pervasive social role and a wide geographic footprint, and it therefore makes good sense to engage them in better preparing their communities for disasters. That said, there are a variety of pre-existing religious beliefs about disasters, some of which are antithetical to proactive disaster risk management. Important theological research is being undertaken to map existing beliefs. This research will then help inform an indigenous and systematic theology of disaster risk management. The goal is to reduce death and destruction from foreseeable events, giving the research a special relevancy.

Key Words: Theology, disaster risk management, Pacific communities, climate change, church, social engagement.

Can theological research save lives? My suspicion is that most people think of theological research as being dry, academic, and fairly abstract, leading them to answer that question in the negative. The purpose of this article is to provide information about a unique piece of theological research that has life-saving implications to better prepare Pacific communities for natural disasters, reducing the death toll and other damage that can be associated with these events.

CAN DO Consortium

The Church Agencies Network Disaster Operations (CAN DO) is an ecumenical collaboration of eight Australian church-affiliated aid and development organisations and their respective partner churches across the Pacific.¹ These organisations have come together for the important humanitarian purpose of responding more effectively to natural disasters. This consortium has a strong emphasis on disaster risk reduction, that is, to engage with communities to proactively mitigate the impact

of foreseeable disasters through careful planning and training. The establishment of the CAN DO consortium was reported in Volume 4 of this journal as an initiative of major ecumenical significance.² The work of the consortium is largely funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade of the Australian government through its humanitarian partnerships program.

Pacific focus

The geographic focus of the consortium is the South Pacific covering the countries of Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji, and Papua New Guinea (PNG). This is significant for several reasons.

Firstly, the Christian churches play a central role in the culture of these island nations.³ They overwhelmingly identify as Christian in terms of their religious affiliation and are devout in the way that their faith is expressed. There are high rates of weekly church attendance,⁴ and the churches exercise a powerful and persuasive voice on matters of social policy.⁵ The churches have a wide geographic reach and have an



unrivalled footprint in terms of infrastructure and influence across island archipelagos. In many places, the church is the dominant institution within civil society.

Secondly, these nations are amongst the most disaster prone nations on earth. They rank from 1st (Vanuatu), 6th (Solomon Islands), 11th (PNG), to 15th (Fiji) in terms of disaster risk on the World Risk Index (out of 171 nations).⁶ Recent examples of disasters to which CAN DO agencies have responded include:

- Tropical Cyclone Pam in Vanuatu (2015), volcanic eruption on Ambae Island (2018),
- floods (2012, 2014), earthquake (2013), tsunami (2013), and cyclone (2015) in the Solomon Islands,
- floods (2012, 2014), drought (2015, 2015), and cyclones (2012, 2016) in Fiji, and
- El Niño drought (2015) and earthquake (2018) in PNG.

In terms of climate-related disasters, the seasonal warming of the vast waters of the Pacific gives birth to many typhoons and cyclones, which these nations will be the first to experience due to their geographic proximity. There is growing evidence, however, that climate change is having an increasingly major impact in the Pacific and this is reflected in the number, intensity, and spatial reach of these events.²

These factors — the reach and influence of the church, and the extremely high disaster risk profile of these countries — support and underpin the work of the CAN DO consortium in the Pacific.

Respect for the local voices

In 2017, the World Humanitarian Summit endorsed a commitment to localisation in the design and implementation of humanitarian programming. This is a very important shift, recognising the importance of building the capacity of local actors and respecting their voice and agency in times of emergency. The commitment of CAN DO to work through local

church partners is entirely consistent with this global agenda.

At a very practical level, churches are uniquely positioned grassroots organisations that are present before, during, and after disasters. They are often the first responders in time of humanitarian crises. The deeply embedded nature of the church in the Pacific “means that the theology and doctrine of the church is very influential in shaping beliefs and actions.”⁷ It is perhaps surprising, therefore, that the belief systems of the churches have rarely been engaged by governments or NGOs as part of their development programs.

One advantage offered by churches is that the language and idiom of their communication resonates more easily within local frames of reference. This is in sharp contrast to the language of the secular development discourse which may seem distancing and alien.⁸ It has been reported that, “One reason for the failure of external interventions for climate-change adaptation in Pacific Island communities is the wholly secular nature of their messages. Among spiritually engaged communities, these secular messages can be met with indifference or even hostility if they clash with the community’s spiritual agenda.”⁹ Against this background, working through the churches to better prepare communities for disasters seems like an obvious strategy. That said, it cannot be assumed that local theological convictions will always be consonant with a program of disaster preparedness.

Religious explanations for disaster

Religious explanations for disasters are highly important in non-Western contexts, including the Pacific. The CAN DO consortium has posited that greater impact will be achieved through partner churches in its disaster risk management work if prevailing beliefs are understood in a more systematic way. This will enable theologically-informed counter narratives to be developed where they are needed. This approach may seem strange to Western

sensibilities, where theological readings of natural disasters have been largely discounted since the 18th century.¹⁰ In contrast, in the Pacific there is strong anecdotal evidence, and some published research findings, which suggests a wide range of theologically-informed views at community level about natural disasters, many of which are antithetical to taking preventative action.

One reported theme is to understand disasters as a form of personal punishment.⁷ The recent Cyclone Pam (Vanuatu) was interpreted by some as God's judgement. Evangelical Christians regarded Cyclone Winston (Fiji) "as an act of chastisement from God,"¹⁰ with some pastors making the explicit link between personal sinfulness and this type of event. One account from Fiji notes, "It is forbidden to be a lesbian in my church and the pastor preaches against it. After Tropical Cyclone Winston, the church pastor said that Winston was caused by our sin, and I felt bad. It is not us who they should blame."¹¹ Consistently, Cox's research notes that the biblical story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah has provided some Fijian Christians with an analogue linking homosexual practice with judgment by way of natural disaster. There are also reports linking disaster with Sabbath observance and the excess of drinking alcohol. These are more localised and may reflect inter-village suspicions and rivalries rather than providing a general narrative.¹⁰

Conversely, an explicit link has been made between personal piety and the avoidance of calamity. In Vanuatu, it has been reported, "We survived because of how hard we prayed" (following Tropical Cyclone Pam).⁷ Similarly, in Fiji, a community representative noted, "We, in Suva, prayed harder than those in the North," resulting in Tropical Cyclone Winston diverting away from Suva at the last minute and impacting elsewhere.¹² Professor Nunn reports attending a church where, "The preacher told his congregation that... because they were pious, they had been spared the cyclone's wrath."⁹

A more sophisticated theological narrative has been essayed by Cox. This proposes the restoration of the true and paradisiacal Fijian national identity by the pursuit of faithfulness and piety. Under this thesis, indigenous Fijians, especially those from Methodist traditions, see themselves in a unique salvific relationship to God as a kind of "chosen people" or exemplar akin to ancient Israel. On this view, natural disasters are used by God to remind Fijians and their political leaders of their particular covenantal responsibility. A key text attached to this view is 2 Chronicles 7:14 (NIV), "If my people who are called by my name will humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn away from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land." A corollary to this line of thought is that rebuilding efforts following disasters are largely pointless unless accompanied by a genuine and widespread repentance.

Where the disaster in question is inundation by rising sea levels, another possible response is confusion. In the book of Genesis, God promised that "never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth."¹³ For communities living in low-lying atolls, inundation by rising sea levels represents an ongoing existential threat. Some communities are now facing the prospect of climate-related transmigration. For them, their world *is* ending by flood.

Another potential response to natural disasters, which is by no means unique to the Pacific, is to take refuge in divine inscrutability. A community may state, "If this [disaster] is God's will there is nothing we can do about it either way."¹² The risk with this kind of viewpoint is a kind of incipient fatalism which may preclude preventative actions.

There are also more positive views about disasters that stress compassion as well as personal and community responsibility as an aspect of Christian discipleship. This line of thought teaches that God made humans both as stewards or caretakers of the environment, and as mutually inter-dependent and caring. This thread

provides a stronger foundation to pursue programs designed to proactively mitigate the impacts of disaster.

Towards a systematic theology of disaster risk management

These brief reflections reveal a variety of views about why disasters happen. At times, these views are unhelpful in terms of the disaster risk reduction work of the CAN DO consortium. The response of the consortium has been to affirm its basic approach of working through local churches while developing a comprehensive theology of disaster risk management which is more facilitative of its work.

This theological work will focus on environmental stewardship, climate justice, and disaster preparedness. Implicit in this theological work “is the assumption that Biblical/theological beliefs underpin peoples’ responses to natural disasters,” and “that these beliefs can either hinder or motivate action.”⁷ One aspect will be mapping and countering less helpful views by presenting alternative theological narratives. Important in this regard will be a renewed appreciation that disasters are not caused by a person’s individual conduct.

It is proposed that this theological engagement will be ecumenical in its nature. This means that the materials and resources developed through this effort can be used by all church partners involved with the consortium ensuring a very broad coverage. The key messages will be reinforced not only among co-religionists but by the community more generally, which will be exposed to common materials through their respective denominations. The support of ecumenical bodies in each country will be sought. They are the PNG Council of Churches, the Fiji Council of Churches, the Solomon island Christian Association, and the Vanuatu Christian Council (including the Seventh Day Adventist Church as an observer).

Theologians from church partners in the Pacific have been engaged to review and produce materials. Their involvement is critical to ensure that local culture, traditions, and frames of reference are included. A major mistake is made when development programs are projected on to a community from the outside. When genuine participation is sacrificed, motivation and engagement may be quickly lost.¹³ Locally-produced resources will not only be more sensitive to local culture but will imbue a greater sense of community ownership.

Introducing counter narratives

Without being pre-emptive about the proposed research, there are a range of biblical narratives that concern disasters. Critically, disasters are not always associated with divine punishment and may be seen as a part of the ordinary course of life. There are verses that suggest that Jesus is seeking to break the causal link between sinfulness and weather conditions. For example, in Matthew 5:45 we are reminded that God “causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.” In Luke 13, Jesus refers to the Tower of Siloam that fell down and killed 18 people. Jesus comments that the victims of this tragedy were no worse than anyone else.¹⁴

In the Old Testament too, there are clear examples of people taking steps to avoid the effect of disaster, even when that disaster was God-induced. For example, Noah was instructed to take preventative measures to preserve his family. Later in Genesis 41, Joseph is enlisted to interpret Pharaoh’s dream. Joseph advised that it referred to an imminent period of seven years of abundant crops to be immediately followed by seven years of famine. Pharaoh was counselled to store up crops to prepare his nation for the future food shortage. The book of Proverbs also urges prudent action in the present as a bulwark against the future.¹⁵

At a more general level, there is ample biblical material to inform an approach to disaster risk management. Compassionate and

neighbourly action is commended by Jesus, and interdependence and strong communitarian values are clearly reflected in the earliest faith communities.¹⁶ Jesus gives us his example of speaking and acting prophetically in response to issues of justice. We are frequently reminded about our obligations to the vulnerable and are challenged to be more inclusive. There are broad biblical motifs about good stewardship and care for the environment.¹⁷ In short, there are many dimensions that could be explored, but how that material is best used should be left to local theologians.

Outline of research project

The initial step was to administer a comprehensive baseline survey. The survey instrument was designed to test local beliefs in relation to disasters and existing levels of disaster preparedness in communities across the four countries. It also gathered data about the ways in which women, children, and people with disabilities were included in disaster response. At the date of this writing, the survey results are yet to be analysed.

The analysis of the survey results will inform the work of Pacific theological specialists tasked with preparing resources on disaster preparedness for use in local partner churches. These resources will draw on Bible teachings and theological motifs that are contextually and culturally appropriate. These resources will then be socialised through national ecumenical bodies.

In the first year, high level support and participation of church leaders across denominations will be a priority. This will secure official buy-in at the highest levels and allow time for any further contextualisation to take place. In years 2-4, a program of training local clergy/pastors will be undertaken and materials will be disseminated for use at a grassroots level. Resources will start with a theological framework and bible studies, and may include other materials such as sermon outlines and workshops. The premise is that a change in

theological understanding about disaster risk management at the local level will result in increased community engagement and behaviour change.

A final step, in year 4, will be an end line survey to test attitudinal shifts.⁷

Implications

This particular piece of theological research has the potential to be lifesaving as communities reflect more deeply on their social responsibility in times of natural disaster. This reflection may involve positive elements such as exercising compassion, inclusion, and good stewardship but may also require the revisiting of existing beliefs that may be problematic.

This type of research program also puts into sharp relief the difference between eisegesis and exegesis. There is an obvious risk in taking Scripture and using it in an uncritical way to serve a particular social goal. No matter how worthy that goal might be, the focus should always be to draw out from Scripture its proper meaning within its own context, and not read other agendas into it. That said, there are a range of hermeneutical techniques to help bring Scripture to life, and alternative readings and meanings that can be established through critical engagement.

One example of this type of approach is World Vision's Channels of Hope Program. This development program is directed at communities with strongly Christian religious underpinnings. It aims to use alternative interpretations of Scripture to produce more inclusive and developmentally-friendly approach to gender relationships, and also for people living with HIV. This program has received strong community support and qualitative feedback. The theology of disaster risk management program takes this same kind of approach but in a very different scenario. One added feature of the present research is its strong emphasis on indigenised and contextual resources designed to enhance a sense of community ownership.

A final point worthy of specific commendation is the wisdom of the Australian government in committing funds to this kind of developmentally-orientated theological research. While the Australian government has a secular ethos, that outlook has not prevented it from supporting a well-designed program involving theological research, where conducive, to more effective outcomes. This kind of enlightened secularism is an example for other governments and multilateral funders to consider.¹⁸

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Peer reviewed: Submitted 18 Aug 2018, Accepted 25 Oct 2018, Published 8 Nov 2018

Competing Interests: None declared.

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Cite this article as: Mitchell R B. The case for a theology of disaster risk management. Christian Journal for Global Health. Nov 2018;5(3):47-53. <https://doi.org/10.15566/cjgh.v5i3.238>

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