

Talking Cents

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Talking Cents is an ecumenical group charged by the Anglican Diocesan Council to promote an alternative to current economic and political thought, and to encourage debate within the church. Ministry units are encouraged to distribute these articles. This article is contributed by Mary Betz from the Justice and Peace Office of the Catholic Diocese of Auckland.

In the Eye of the Storm: Pacific Climate Change

This month's title is borrowed from the name of the mid-February climate change conference at Victoria University. Two hundred people from around the South Pacific gathered, many from low-lying developing island nations – the first to feel the storm of climate change. The island nations of the Pacific have also consistently caused 'storms' of controversy by pushing the international community into action.

While conferences are often monochromatic in terms of ethnicity, profession, country of origin, denomination or age, this one broke the mould for diversity in all ways. Most island nations of the Pacific were represented, and ages ranged from 17 to 70s. Participants included the President of Kiribati, climate scientists from GNS (formerly Geological and Nuclear) Sciences, Victoria University professors, lawyers, activists, journalists, students, climate writer and 350.org founder Bill McGibbon (by video), and justice workers from various church organisations.

President Anote Tong is just finishing his three terms as President of Kiribati, and has been a tireless advocate for action on climate change – as he should be as head of state for a country which has only one or at most two generations left on the 33 islands which make up his home. His argument is a moral one: the world must solve climate change because it is destroying the homes, land and very existence of his country as a nation. Some adaptation – sea walls and building up the main islands – is possible. But the momentum of sea level rise set in motion by our use of fossil fuels over the last 150 years means that already king tides wash across the main island which is only two metres above sea level. Kiribati has purchased land in Fiji and many citizens have immigrated to New Zealand and elsewhere. President Tong would like his people to migrate as people with dignity, accepted by other nations for who they are as

people, not as 'climate refugees'. Kiribati is on the front line of climate change, but he reminds us that everyone will experience it – and soon.

Born in Vanuatu, Dr Pala Molissa lectures in accounting at Victoria University, but spoke about the importance of breaking the silence about climate change, facing the truth of its severity and analysing its systemic roots. He is critical of those who try to "balance economic growth with looking after the environment" because the underlying premise is that economics and environment *can* and *should* be balanced. He quotes philosopher Theodoro Adorno who says "The need to let the suffering speak is a condition of all truth", because our patterns of relentless economic growth need to be challenged: those who are suffering from climate change make clear its links with our continued cycle of unsustainable consumption.

Edwina Hughes of Peace Movement Aotearoa made links between climate change and militarism, noting the excessive consumption of fossil fuels by the military. The world's ten largest armed forces have 29,500 aircraft and 4,000 ships – and the US alone has more than 50,000 land vehicles, most used for training exercises if not for war. The world spends US\$1.7 trillion every year on the military: New Zealand spends NZ\$3.4 billion. All these expenditures divert money away from social and environmental spending.

Professors James Renwich and Tim Naish gave the latest updates on climate change science globally and for the South Pacific. Sea level rise can be expected to be 50cm to 1m by 2100 depending on whether we can cut greenhouse gas emissions sufficiently. With a sea level rise of 50cm, what have been 1 in 100 year flood events would become annual. If we do not stabilise the global temperature increase at 2°C, sea level rise

will continue to increase, and take millennia to decrease. The Western Antarctic ice shelves, which act as brakes on the land ice sheet melt, are nearly (or already) at their tipping point. The last time the CO₂ concentration was at today's level of 400ppm, sea level rose 17m!

The Paris COP21 climate talks late last year produced an agreement to keep temperature rise to 2°C, and to strive to keep it to 1.5°C. But the actual pledges that countries gave for reducing fossil fuel emissions only get us down to an increase of from 2.5 to 3°C. The way countries are emitting at present has the world on track for an increase of 4 to 5°C, which Will Stephan, from Australian National University's Climate Change Institute, says would be a **challenge to the existence of human life on earth**.

Professor Stephan also listed a number of tipping points which could push our climate system totally out of our control to change:

- a collapse of the Amazon rainforest which holds a large percentage of carbon in its biomass – such a collapse could be caused by a repetition of recent droughts;
- collapse of the West Antarctic or Greenland Ice Sheets;
- increased loss of Arctic sea ice which would cause decreased reflectivity and higher temperatures;
- sudden increases in methane emissions from permafrost melt in Canada, Alaska and Siberia.

His conclusion was a quote from Professor Katherine Richardson at the University of Copenhagen: “We should not be trying to manage the Earth System, but should focus instead to manage our *relationship* to the Earth System.”

Professor Tim Naish gives a window of action which is now only 10 years for the global community to reduce its carbon emissions. The question is not how, because we have the technology we need. Business commentator Rod Oram noted that the main obstacles to change are vested interests and the lack of political will. He quoted environmental advocate Gus Speth who, in 2007, addressed religious leaders in the US:

I used to think the top environmental problems facing the world were global warming, environmental degradation and eco-system collapse, and that we scientists could fix those problems with enough science. But I was wrong. The real problem is not those three items, but greed, selfishness and apathy. And for that we

need a spiritual and cultural transformation. And we scientists don't know how to do that. We need your help.

The same message is found in Catholic social teaching. In 2009, Pope Benedict wrote, in *Caritas in Veritate*:

Our present crises, be they economic, food-related, environmental or social – are ultimately also moral crises, and all of them are interrelated. They require us to rethink the path which we are travelling together.

Pope Francis calls for a diversity of many minds, hearts and gifts to combat climate change, “for everyone's talents and involvement are needed.” (*Laudato Si*, 2015)

This conference was unique in that many panellists and keynote speakers put their spirituality explicitly or implicitly into their presentations. They were not afraid to call the Earth a gift of God, talk about the resources and understandings their indigenous or Christian spiritualities bring to their work, or name climate change as a moral issue. Some spoke of their deep ties to the islands of their birth and ancestors, and the pain of dealing with loss of land, storms, and other effects of climate change.

Speakers from Kiribati to Samoa to Micronesia spoke of the projects underway to move villages back from the rising sea and other adaptations to give island people another generation or two to prepare for migration. They are calling on us, their sisters and brothers, to plead with our government and with other developed countries, both to help with aid to give them this extra time, and to stop using fossil fuels so that future generations on remaining Pacific islands do not also have to face the loss of their homelands. That means changing our lifestyles and convincing our governments to make economic policy changes to encourage and incentivise renewable energy and sustainable living – and to legislate where necessary to stop further coal, oil and gas exploration and extraction.

Sr Catherine Jones is the Chair of the NZ Catholic Bishops' Committee for Interfaith Relations. In the context of prayer at the conference, she said that if the eye of the storm is where we find ourselves, then we must use its relative and very temporary quiet to allow God to speak to us in this situation. Then, we must reflect on what must be done, and gather the strength, capacity and numbers to do it.