



Churches in the Clouds: Running a Pacific Island Church Online

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Introduction

- Pacific Island churches are among the last bastions of Pacific Island traditions and Religious Culture
- The manner of worship has not changed significantly over the decades and religious customs and Pacific culture have co-existed harmoniously with each nurturing the preservation of the other
- Developments in technology and the evolution of modern Anglo -American societies together has challenged many aspects of Pacific traditional communities with little impact on the manner and format of church activities and events
- This study explores the recent shift towards online church events brought about by the pandemic that closed national borders and many communities into a status of nationwide lockdown.



Research Design

- This qualitative study explores the experiences of one Pacific Island church with branches in New Zealand and Australia.
- The geographic coverage of the study is mainly New Zealand although interactions with church branches in Australia have also been included.
- The timeframe for the study begins with the initial lockdown in March 2020 followed by a period of relative ease for a period of one year followed by a further lockdown in August 2021 through to December 2021.
- Data was collected from the experiences of the church in relation to activities during this period.

Background

- **Pacific People are characterized with;**
 - Population 381,642 (2018 census)
 - Relatively young population 23.4 Years
- **Residence**
 - 63% live in Auckland
 - 75% of PI people have been here for more than 10 years
 - 66% New Zealand born
- **Language**
 - 92% speak English and 38% speak both
- **Religion**
 - 68% Christian 22% No religion (Drop from 80% and increase from 13% respectively in 2006 census)
- **Employment and Income**
 - 30% not in the workforce down from 37% in 2013
 - 49.7% in full employment up from 42% 2013
 - Under-represented in Managerial and professional positions
 - Median income \$24,300 with only 5.3% earning between 70K-100K
- **Education**
 - 24.5% no qualification and 7.7% have a bachelor's degree and level 7 qualification

Technology Uptake

- Internet late to arrive in the Pacific
- Facebook the most popular of the social media platforms
- Spread of smart phones and packaged deals encouraged the growth of social media uptake
- Take up of smart devices, access to the internet and subscribing to social media exploded among Pacific Peoples living in the USA, New Zealand and Australia
- These platforms became a cheaper alternative to the toll charges associated with the large telecommunication networks.
- Take up of social media by Pacific peoples became widespread as the sharing of ideas (factual or otherwise) including images appealed to those that were separated by geographic distance.
- These platforms also created new challenges as the take up of the technology was without the discipline and protocols as to how they should be used. Social media became a platform for online arguments and abuse.
- The exponential take-up of technology, particularly by the younger generation created an unexpected platform for the transition to online that would follow.

Pacific Island Churches Abroad

- Pacific Island churches in New Zealand, Australia and the United States were vehicles for not just preserving the faith but also for many Pacific cultural traditions.
- For the early migrants to New Zealand, these Pacific Churches became a beacon and reminder of Island life. (Tu'inukuafe, 1996)
- These churches were a place to meet regularly with members of your own society and culture united by their shared faith.
- But it was more than faith. It was a place for talanoa, gossiping, critiquing, sharing, displaying ones status , language and education of the young. Church events were carried out, but in a manner specific to the individual PI culture in which it was a part

The Last Bastion of Pacific Tradition

- Pacific Island churches abroad were still designed and operated as if they were located in the village setting. Members were locally based and could walk to the regular services.
- Face to face was preferred not only because Pacific people preferred this (Brown & Tower, 2002) but because that is the way fellowship was for the early Christians.
- Church buildings were a symbol of what men and women could physically do for their God. Even in the poorest villages in the Islands, the Church and often the Ministers house would be among the most elaborate and beautiful.
- Bringing parishioners to a spiritual high during which time they would be most incline to give all they had to the church was more effectively done face to face.
- Moving sermons that would bring those listening to tears and laughter is more easily done in a face-to-face situation where the reaction of those listening could be gauged

The Pandemic

- In late 2019 early discussion of a potentially dangerous virus begins
- By early 2020 the spread becomes more apparent, and countries begin to realise that this is more than another outbreak of sars
- National borders begin to close but for many countries all but too late
- New Zealand decides to close its borders and within two weeks announces a nationwide lockdown – an event that was new and unfamiliar to many
- The conditions of the lockdown begin to ease in late July 2020 with cases dropping and many isolated to those in mandatory isolation facilities (MIQ)
- In 2021 following a uncontrolled outbreak in parts of India and neighboring countries, a delta variant emerges that is more communicable.
- August 2021 New Zealand goes into lockdown

The Way forward

- Pacific Churches as with the rest of the country were given little warning as to how they would continue their operations. With no more mass gatherings allowed, church services and events were not able to continue
- While it would not be possible to continue all church programs including choir practice, youth events, sunday school, easter camps and other church meetings, the importance of having at least a Sunday service that would be broadcast to all church branches required a solution.
- Up to that point, the need to have a website and having an online platform and social media identity was non-existent as there was no need. Everything could be done through the well established and regular face to face meetings.
- Church leaders were already aware of the popularity of facebook as a social media platform as they had already encountered the conflicts and tensions through its abuse. Ironically, Facebook became the new platform to broadcast the all-important Sunday Service. The fact that this would be a departure from the traditional face to face was unavoidable.
- If you were not already on facebook, you now needed to register as this was the only way you could connect with the church.

A Church in the Clouds

- The early facebook livestreams of church services were associated with many teething problems with poor internet connectivity, inadequate equipment (many relied on their smart phone).
- Face to face was preferred not only because Pacific people preferred this (Brown & Tower, 2002) but because that is the way fellowship was for the early Christians.
- Access to the livestreams was often difficult to find and connect to.
- Time differences between Australia and New Zealand made the timing of the livestreams difficult.
- Although the livestreamed services were recorded and could be played back later it was unclear if church members were actually doing this.
- Because the platform was public there were no safeguards against random and potentially offensive comments being made.
- Apart from the live comments and memes that could be sent during the live stream sessions, communication was largely in one direction.
- The broadcaster of the sermon had little idea of who was attending apart from the number of those watching and the author of the comments posted.
- Online services were churchwide and after several months of lockdown, the sense of branch or parish identity was beginning to fade.
- The format of the church services in the first lockdown was a prototype that highlighted the improvements that needed to be made going forward. The pressure to implement these improvements had not disappeared with the lifting of restrictions in August and September and there was a significant appetite for a better online service that would not only address the Sunday services but all the other programs that the church and its branches had previously provided.

A different but acceptable dynamic

- Pacific Island churches are often home to Pacific people of multiple talents and knowledge. Those in the teaching profession had become familiar with the use of Microsoft teams, webinars and zoom as mechanisms for online teaching and learning became a catalyst for the improved online church platform
- The website for the church was fast tracked to become the controlled online hub for church material, and news and links to church services and events.
- The design of the church website was deliberately made to give those logging into the website the sense that they were coming into a church. Rather than having a picture of the church from the outside on the landing page, the view was as if you had walked into the chapel.
- Church meetings could now be done online with participants taking part in two-way dialog
- Zoom licenses were purchased for the various church branches and ministries to allow local branch activities to resume in place of the church wide broadcast
- Elections could be held online using the polling tool and the annual church conference provided an enhanced level of participation through the use of breakout rooms.
- Sunday School and Youth services and events were now able to be delivered online.

A different but acceptable dynamic

- Some activities have not been able to transition to an online platform. These include
 - Choir practice and band practice
 - Musical performances
 - White Sunday for the children
 - Youth camps
 - Large face to face gatherings for funerals, weddings and other cultural events.
 - Feasts and banquettes
- Some new activities have been introduced that were not able to be carried out previously
 - Chain prayers that go through the night and into the morning
 - Visiting preachers from other branches and overseas can join the services of any branch
 - Trust board meetings can be called at short notice given that members will not have transport problems
 - Communication between individuals and groups are transitioning to online video zoom meetings rather than telephone
 - Recordings of meetings is easier to do rather than relying on written minutes
 - Members who were not able to leave their homes can join the online services

The New Church Landscape

- Church leaders and members have quickly embraced the new church in the clouds initially because of lack of choice but now as a growing preference because of the convenience factor.
- Fundraising is still happening although online and the amounts collected are at the same level as previous years.
- Church events can be very costly to church members because of the associated travel and contribution to the feast. These costs have largely disappeared with the church in the clouds.
- The direct and indirect running cost of the church has decreased.
- Although the annual church fundraiser has been successful, the regular Sunday donation has not, resulting in an imbalance between the ongoing revenue and expenses.
- The church choir has been replaced with pre-recorded hymnals from choirs across the pacific.
- The church has approximately \$25 million in physical church properties and buildings. The 10 zoom licenses for a year representing the online church branches in the clouds cost less than \$3000.
- The church in the clouds has prompted church leaders and members to re-evaluate what is important in running a church. Is it the monumental chapels of the past or a place where members from where-ever they may be can join and fellowship?
- Youth have taken a more significant role in transitioning the church to an online platform as their knowledge and skill with technology is significantly greater than that of their parents.
- The new platform does however require additional investment in technology for both the church and its members. However, this is unlikely to be any where near the cost of the church properties and buildings of the past.

The New Church Landscape

- When the church started using the website and the zoom platform as their new church in the clouds (fale lotu he ope) the comment was made by the leading minister that this new church in the clouds is symbolic of the reality that it brings us a little closer to God in the heavens.
- While the comment was made in jest, there is much evidence to suggest that there is some truth and merit behind the transition.
- After all, the church is a relative late comer in this regard and education (University of the South Pacific), retail and, communication have made this same transition without the prompt of a pandemic.

The New Church in the Heavens

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Questions and Comments