



Submission by UnitingWorld

to

The Inquiry into strengthening Australia's relationships
with countries in the Pacific region

April 2020

FOR THE ATTENTION OF

Committee Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade
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Recommendation/Letter of Support

Parliamentary Inquiry into strengthening Australia's relationships with countries in the Pacific region

I write to endorse UnitingWorld's Submission to the above inquiry.

The Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) carries a legacy of international engagement that goes back more than 150 years, to when the three denominations that formed the UCA had strong overseas mission connections from the 1850s. We continue to hold close partnerships with the churches they planted – now independent, indigenous denominations.

We partner with churches across the Pacific and are the only Australian church that is a member of the Pacific Conference of Churches and the Methodist Consultative Council of the Pacific. Participation by our Pacific partners is a valued part of the Uniting Church's triennial Assembly.

The people of the Uniting Church are long-standing supporters of the Pacific, including through their donations to UnitingWorld, as the Church's aid and partnership agency, which works exclusively through church partners.

In the last few days, we have offered our prayers in the wake of Tropical Cyclone Harold, for partners in Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Fiji and Tonga. We stand by our partners as they face the multiple challenges of natural disasters and coronavirus.

I commend the recommendations in this submission to the Committee, as steps to improve and strengthen Australia's relationships throughout the Pacific.



Colleen Geyer,
General Secretary,
Uniting Church in Australia Assembly

Executive Summary

The Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) is the third largest mainline Christian denomination in Australia, uniquely the first to be created in and of Australia. Almost 900,000 Australians identify as our members and our network of agencies is one of the largest providers of community services in Australia.¹

UnitingWorld is the aid and partnerships agency of the Uniting Church in Australia, mandated to drive relationships and collaborations with churches overseas. UnitingWorld has program collaborations in seven Pacific countries and maintains diplomatic relationships with four more. Over 60% of UnitingWorld's program investment is in the Pacific.

The following recommendations are made based on our experience as an accredited aid and development agency, our identity as an agent of a significant body of Christian citizens in Australia, and above all, our long history of deep relationship with our Pacific partners. More on our credentials later.

RECOMMENDATIONS

TOR #2: Strengthening and broadening Australian engagement, through non-government and community-based linkages and leveraging interest groups such as the Pacific diaspora.

1. Engage with and through Christian churches in Pacific countries

- Christianity is the dominant paradigm in the Pacific, it is the language of life and culture.
- Churches are the most influential non-government community network in the Pacific.
- Existing church-led Australian engagement can be leveraged for growth and impact.
- Pacific diaspora embedded in Australian churches can be leveraged.

2. Engage with Pacific Regional Christian organisations

- Regional multi-church organisations such as the Pacific Conference of Churches, and similar bodies at national level, are places that draw together influential leadership from across the Pacific communities and provide a valuable space for high return on relational investment.

TOR #3: Ensure Step-up initiatives reflect the priority needs of the governments and people of Pacific island countries.

3. Deal with the issue of climate change with integrity

- This is the biggest existential issue in the Pacific, driving both rapid-onset disasters and slow-onset destruction of livelihoods. Acknowledge that this is not just an 'aid' issue but one that requires regional and global collaboration on a range of fronts.

4. Create space for alternative models of development

- Recognise that development and social flourishing for the Pacific people must be self-determined with due weight given to indigenous wisdom, culture and context. GDP and economic growth may not be the desired indicators.

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics Census 2016; and <https://unitingcare.org.au/about-us/>.

TOR #1: The Pacific Step-up is a whole-of-government effort to deepen and coordinate Australia's Pacific initiatives.

5. Address the Pacific societal impacts of the labour mobility scheme

- The current high rates of working age adults spending extended periods away from their partners and children is causing significant social dysfunction in Pacific communities. Increased remittance income is being offset by marriage breakdown, juvenile delinquency and addiction issues.

6. Align Australia's emission control policies to signal a clear commitment to climate change mitigation

- Australia's credibility in the Pacific is significantly contingent on a consistent policy approach to climate change. Offering aid-based solutions to the Pacific while signalling a lack of commitment to curbing fossil fuel emissions locally is counter-productive.

Rationale for our Recommendations

Why is it important to engage with and through Christian churches?

The Christian churches are the strongest non-government community network in the Pacific.

While population data varies across nations, over 90% of populations in most Pacific Island nations identify as Christian, and Christianity is central to the worldview and social fabric of life in the Pacific. Faith is the heart-language of its people.

With high levels of church attendance, and strong regard for church-based institutions, Churches hold significant social influence. This influence is augmented by churches being embedded across all strata of society. Politicians, police, farmers and market-stall owners, all attend church; a comprehensive cross-section of society can be found in the pews each Sunday. The church is also extensively geographically networked, being present from the nation's capital to the remotest village in far flung islands. The centrality of Churches and their role in society through families and communities provides access to the voices and participation of Pacific populations at all levels.

A long history of Australia-Pacific church led engagement can be leveraged and built upon.

According to information gathered by the Church Agencies Network (CAN), the eleven mainline Christian denominations represented at CAN hold between them relationships with 44 different major Pacific churches.

These relationships are based on over a century of connection, with many Pacific churches having been supported by their Australian denomination counterparts during their early years. Within the Australian church community of every stripe, there is a large cohort of teachers, nurses and health workers who have served in the Pacific either as volunteers or professionals. In recent times, these relationships have taken the form of exchange visits, exposure trips and significant aid and development collaborations targeted at addressing poverty and disadvantage in the Pacific.

Pacific Diaspora can be engaged through Australian Churches

A large portion of the Pacific Island diaspora communities in Australia maintain their high level of engagement with Church. They are members of mainline denominations, or have set up satellite branches of their parent church, with whom they commonly maintain a strong sense of identity and belonging. Australian churches are also places of refuge and care for workers from the labour mobility

programs, often advocating on their behalf when they face exploitation. Church based Pacific Step-up initiatives will have a natural conduit for both diaspora and wider community engagement.

There is a structured and organised national and regional leadership structure for Step-up to engage with.

In Australia, and in each Pacific nation, there exists a National body that bring together the different Christian churches. While not every church may be a member, the great majority of them are. Similarly, the Pacific Conference of Churches brings together the leaders of churches across the entire Pacific.

Any Pacific Step-up initiative that actively engages with the Pacific Conference of Churches, and the country level councils, will find itself able to access a highly influential group of leaders in the Pacific region, with deep roots in the community. Listening well to this group of leaders and allowing their perspectives to shape the nature of programs will increase the probability of the success and long-term impact considerably.

A good example of a successful pilot for this kind of engagement was when leaders of DFAT's Pacific Church Partnership Program (PCPP) attended a Pacific Conference of Churches (PCC) Pacific Church Leaders Meeting in Fiji in 2019, to gather input for their program design. As a result of the relationships developed there, they were able to respond rapidly to the impact of Tropical Cyclone Harold in April 2020 and offer a small grant of emergency relief funds via an existing relationship between Australian and Pacific churches, upon request from PCC.

Why is dealing with Climate Change important?

Because it is the single biggest existential threat to life in the Pacific.

If it hadn't been obviously beforehand, the 2019 Pacific Islands Forum in Tuvalu made it absolutely clear that this was the big issue for Pacific Islands.

Failing to engage with integrity on Climate Change risks undermining all other Pacific Step-up Initiatives.

At the 2019 Pacific Island Forum, Pacific Leaders publicly expressed their disappointment in Australia's response, and subsequent watering down of the Tuvalu Declaration agreed to by the Pacific Island nations. We were told of tears involved in the negotiations, when they pleaded with Australia to heed their concerns.

The priorities of the Pacific may not always align with Australia's priorities.

However, genuine relationship requires difficult conversations. An authentic engagement and response by Australia to Climate Change will go a long way to strengthen Australia's relationship with Pacific Counties. A failure to do so will significantly undermine relationships

Why consider alternative models of development?

Because there is an emerging initiative to develop a Pacific Framework for Development

The Pacific Theological College (PTC) and Pacific Conference of Churches (PCC) are facilitating a dialogue across the Pacific with churches and governments to develop a shared vision. An objective this project is a shared Ecological Framework for Development. It will include indicators for cultural, environmental and spiritual wellbeing. Several Australian churches have provided some seed funding through their aid agencies on request.

This ambitious region wide project, which bring together churches and government in dialog is called 'Reweaving the Ecological Mat' - a metaphor for the experience of life in the Pacific. One 'mat' woven of the strands of spiritual, cultural, traditional, economic, physical and environmental factors that support fullness of life. There is consensus that the Ecological Mat urgently needs repairing.

“Several distinct Pacific values have not been adequately reflected or are absent in the systems used today to govern many Pacific Island economies. The result has been governments driven by an economic system that neither delivers a fair or equitable distribution of resources, nor ensures that we respect the boundaries set by our natural environment. A collaborative initiative is demanded at this time that will require our governments and our civil societies, including businesses, to shift away from an endless growth development model towards a model that delivers the collective well-being needs of our people living on our lands and sea.”

-Jamie Tanguay, Vanuatu National Statistics Office 2019.

“It’s about reframing the narrative in the way we address the issue of life in the Pacific, holistic life. Looking at the way we learn things and the world, the influence of global structures and systems, recognising those, and offering alternatives so that people of the Pacific are able to live a truly sustainable life and we are able to grow into the future with a more healthy outlook, not just spiritually, physically, emotionally but also in the sense of how we thrive. We need to change the conversations around resilience in the context of climate change disaster from survival mode to thriving.”

- Rev James Bhagwan, General Secretary of the Pacific Conference of Churches.

Pacific Step-up has an opportunity to foster the success of a genuinely indigenous movement

A good-faith engagement in dialog with the ‘Reweaving the Ecological Mat’ movement, encouraging it without attempting to co-opt it, would give the Pacific Step-up the opportunity to accompany and nurture what could be a truly transformative phenomenon.

What’s wrong with labour mobility?

Repeated or long-term absence of working-age parent cohorts cause significant harm to families

Australia’s long experience with fly-in fly-out (FIFO) schemes in the mining sector has produced plenty of evidence of the high social and relational costs of income generation schemes that result in family separations.

Leaving aside the many challenges of both the Seasonal Worker Program and the Pacific Labour Mobility Scheme in terms of exploitative practices, the long-term harm of such schemes on the fabric of Pacific society must be confronted.

At UnitingWorld, we encountered a Tongan community organisation, seeking aid to support a youth mentoring and resilience program to address the high levels of juvenile delinquency and addiction to drugs, alcohol, porn and gambling. The local organisation claimed that the root cause of the problem was young people living with grandparents or extended family who are unable to provide the levels of care and oversight they need, where the absentee parents in these communities are migrant labourers in Australia.

Migrant labour schemes must be evaluated in terms social as well as economic impact

While access to labour and income from taxable remittances may be popular in bilateral negotiations, these schemes need to be evaluated carefully in terms of medium to long term social and community level impact.

Australian Aid fixing social problems caused by Australian labour programs would be unfortunate.

The social costs of migrant labour programs are already evident. The issue was raised with Minister Payne during a consultation visit from Pacific church leaders back in 2018. It is time for Pacific Step-up to consider moving to more sustainable models of partnering to address the development needs of the Pacific.

Why is Australia's approach to climate change and emissions relevant?

Australia's approach to the Pacific is perceived by the Pacific as self-serving.

In its international efforts to position itself in the Pacific *vis-à-vis* China, Australia has pivoted² to the Pacific, yet in a dismissive phrase, one former Minister described Chinese infrastructure as “roads to nowhere”. Rebutted by Vanuatu Daily Post's Don McGarry³, these “roads to nowhere” are the roads to Pacific Islanders' homes and the heart of Pacific communities.

Pacific leaders are dismayed and angered by Australia's current approach, which offers money to the Pacific for its national agenda while it rejects discussion of Pacific priorities.

Australian Aid to address climate change impact is not seen as a 'fair exchange'.

Pacific Islanders are watching their homes be destroyed by increasing cyclone action. Their subsistence gardens are ruined by king tides and their clean water contaminated by salination of the water table. Many now face being forced off their ancestral lands and whole Pacific Nations are in jeopardy.

They see Australia willing to let all of this happen rather than restructure its own economy to reduce reliance on fossil fuel intensive industries. Australia's domestic choices stand in stark contrast to its rhetoric of support to, and unity with, the Pacific. International assessments show Australia heading for an increase of 8% above 2005 levels by 2030.⁴

The Australian Deputy Prime Minister's quip that Pacific Islanders would survive climate change because they would come to Australia and pick our fruit (Aug 2019⁵) and live on Australian Aid ricocheted around the Pacific as typifying the Australian government's attitude to the Pacific.

During the flaming summer of 2019/20, many of our Pacific church partners raised money for bushfire affected Australians, and sent it to us, adding the hope that perhaps now, Australians would understand the true destructiveness of climate change.

An 'all-of-government' approach to climate change is necessary for Pacific Step Up to have credibility.

What we do at home is seen and judged by our neighbours in the Pacific. Our declared desire to engage broadly and deeply with the Pacific will be seen merely as a ploy to win political and economic influence in competition with China, with little respect or care for the people of the Pacific, unless our domestic actions align with our rhetoric.

Our Credentials

The Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) is the third largest mainline Christian denomination in Australia, uniquely the first to be created in and of Australia.

Almost 900,000 Australians identify as our members and our network of agencies is one of the largest providers of community services in Australia,⁶ reaching over 1.4 million Australians across 1,600 sites.⁷ The UCA has over 200 congregations with non-Anglo backgrounds, and services in more than 26 languages.

The UCA carries a legacy of Pacific engagement that goes back more than 150 years. The three

² <http://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/australias-pivot-to-the-pacific/>

³ https://dailypost.vu/news/postcard-from-the-road-to-nowhere/article_b269f52c-0a35-5196-8598-bdd9ef4e2c11.html

⁴ <https://climateactiontracker.org/countries/australia/>

⁵ <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/deputy-pm-says-pacific-islands-will-survive-climate-change-because-they-pick-our-fruit>

⁶ *Australian Bureau of Statistics Census 2016*; and <https://unitingcare.org.au/about-us/>.

⁷ <https://unitingcare.org.au/about-us/>.

denominations that formed the UCA (Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational) had strong overseas mission connections from the 1850s. Many of the Pacific churches of these denominations were supported in their early years by their Australian counterparts. The UCA continues to hold close partnerships with the churches they planted – now independent, indigenous denominations.

The UCA is home to large diaspora communities from across the Pacific who have made the UCA their home church since their settlement in Australia. Within the UCA, there are four 'National Conferences' from the Pacific (Tongan, Fijian, Samoan, Niue) who maintain their language and culture, and link back to their countries of origin through partnership agreements between the UCA and their church of origin.

UnitingWorld is the Aid and Partnerships agency of the Uniting Church in Australia, mandated to manage and grow the relationships and partnerships with our overseas Partner Churches in the Pacific, Asia and Africa.

UnitingWorld, on behalf of UCA, partners in aid programs with churches and their regional bodies across the Pacific. UnitingWorld has program collaborations in seven Pacific countries and maintains diplomatic relationships with four more. Over 60% of UnitingWorld's program investment is in the Pacific.

The UCA is institutionally networked into the Pacific as the only Australian church that is a member of the Pacific Conference of Churches and the Methodist Consultative Council of the Pacific.

UnitingWorld has significant relationships with Christian community organisations in the Pacific. UnitingWorld is a founding member of the Church Agencies Network (CAN), a group of eleven aid agencies connected to mainline Christian denominations who promote collaboration in community development and humanitarian endeavours between churches, particularly in the Pacific. UnitingWorld is also a member of the Pacific Forum for the ACT Alliance, a network of Christian humanitarian agencies. UnitingWorld works in PNG Church Partnership Program, where seven mainline churches, their corresponding Australian Church NGO partners, the Australian and PNG Government all work together to strengthen partnership, governance, community development outcomes and service delivery across PNG.

UnitingWorld has relationships and collaborations with civil society organisations in the Pacific through its aid program with Pacific Church partners. These include the Pacific Disability Forum, Fiji Women's Crisis Centre, Kiribati Women and Children Support Centre, Vanuatu Women's Centre, South Pacific Conference Regional Rights Resource Team (SPC RRRT) and the Melanesian Institute, just to name a few.

END OF SUBMISSION