

## BOOK REVIEW

# Navigating Troubled Waters: The Ecumenical Movement in the Pacific Islands since the 1980s

Hermann Mückler

A new book, edited by Manfred Ernst and Lydia Johnson, outlines the decline of cooperation among ecumenical churches in Oceania. Contributions by numerous authors shed light on the situation in the individual island states, point to causes and failures of the past and make recommendations for a future intensification of ecumenical cooperation. The book is both an inventory and a guide.

Across the Pacific Islands, different churches compete for membership. The region is considered to be the most dynamic in the world in terms of competition between churches, resulting in various effects on the political and social life on all Pacific islands. The dynamism, however, is increasingly not one of cooperation of churches, but of competition. This book, launched in July 2017, looks at the tendency of declining cooperation in ecumenical movements and the differences and similarities in the work of different churches. At 584 pages, the seven authors of this volume – edited by Manfred Ernst and Lydia Johnson – succeed in providing a comprehensive and polyphonic picture of ecumenical cooperation in the Pacific, and the relationships between individual churches as well as between churches, state institutions and communities across the region. The book is the result of a research project spanning several years, endorsed by the Assembly of the Pacific Conference of Churches (PCC) and implemented under the auspices of the Institute for Research and Social Analysis of the Pacific Theological College in Suva, Fiji. The trigger for the project and the resulting publication was the growing concern of Pacific Island Churches about the visible and increasing decline of ecumenical cooperation over the past three decades. The description and analysis of the history and current status of ecumenism in

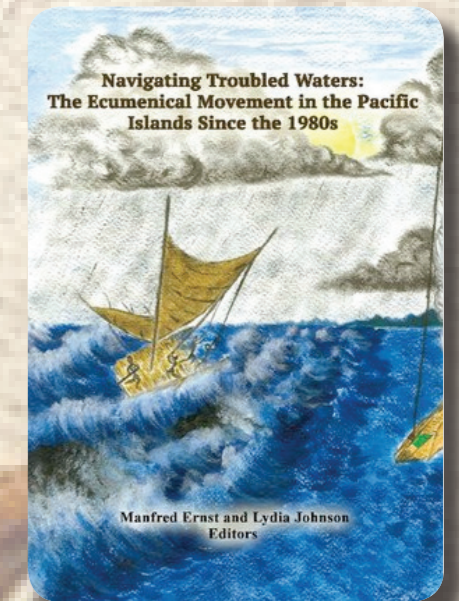
the Pacific Islands offers an important contribution to the global scholarship on the state of ecumenism. A strong ecumenical spirit emerged in the Pacific in the 1960s, but began to fade in the 1990s. Some of the mainline churches have quietly left the ecumenical movement and an increasing number of evangelical, fundamentalist, Pentecostal, charismatic and so-called ‘marginal Protestant’ churches have been growing at the expense of the established mainline Protestant and Catholic churches. This has contributed to the emergence of complex networks of transnational Pentecostal-charismatic-evangelical churches and so-called para-churches. They form together a renewal movement in which flows of people, money, ideas and images spread with increasing speed and intensity. The first contribution by Ann Anisi and Aisake Casimira highlight how this situation emerged; their work provides a historical overview of ecumenical formation and development, and addresses key turning points in church history, historical influences of the missionary period in the Pacific and the churches’ reaction to colonialism, but also the stimulus to become a global peace movement in the twentieth century and to act against the aberrations of rampant economic globalisation. Manfred Ernst gives an example with describing ecumenism in Fiji. Littered with tables and statistics, he highlights the impact

of the four coup d’etats and the dominant role of the PCC, which did not necessarily facilitate ecumenism. A survey confirmed the decline, but also provides recommendations such as to provide future church leaders training with skills and knowledge to perform fully their leadership tasks. Marana Gaston Taura’s contribution offers another example from French Polynesia. She describes the Maohi perception of ecumenism and is more positive, concluding that there is healthy ecumenical interaction and practical cooperation at the grassroots level, especially in the Tuamotu archipelago and in the Marquesas Islands. However, her interviews reveal that family instability is one of the most critical and challenging issues today, caused by a number of factors including working migration that fracture families. Aisake Casimira focuses on Kiribati, describing in her article how ecumenism is part of the curriculum at Tangintebu Theological College, the Kiribati Uniting Church’s (KUC) theological school. Eckart Garbe describes the situation in Papua New Guinea (PNG), conveying an image of a country that is marked by many major problems, as education, health and infrastructure have not coped with the needs of a growing population. In PNG faith-organisations have focused on dialogue, creating ‘one voice,’ and joining together in coordinated action. Recommendations from Garbe’s work include to train clergy and key

laypeople in technical areas such as administration, operations, finance and management. Two more examples from Polynesia are from Felelerika Nokise, who describes the situation in American Samoa and underlines the lack of funds for the National Council of Churches, (NCC), and from Aisake Casimira who focuses on Tonga and recommends investing in the formation and training of youth and women on ecumenism. Glenine Hamlyn focuses on the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, revealing similar problems as observed in PNG. All contributions follow the

same structure: background about history, land and people, analysis of field research, issues and challenges, successes and failures, perspectives, and – most important – conclusions and recommendations. All authors identify pressing social problems, especially experienced by youth, and highlight the need for a restructure and major overhaul of ecumenical leadership. Most of the authors recommend the need for honest dialogue to serve as a bridge for faith-organisations to modernise, but lead to a process for reconciliation and re-envisioning of ecumenism.

The book is easy to read even for those who have little knowledge of the Pacific region, as each article is preceded by an introductory section on the region and a brief outline of recent history. The basic tenor of all texts is courageous and thus this book guarantees significant added value: it attempts to point out ways of solving the problems at hand. This book is highly recommended as not only an inventory, but also as a series of concrete proposals for solutions to contemporary challenges facing the Pacific, and the future shape of ecumenism in the region.



### Bibliographic information

Manfred Ernst and Lydia Johnson (eds):  
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Hermann Mückler [hermann.mueckler@univie.ac.at] is Professor of Cultural Anthropology and Ethno-History at University of Vienna. His regional focuses are the Pacific Islands and Australia. He specializes in peace and conflict studies, colonialism and post-colonialism, geopolitics, history, visual anthropology and material culture. More info: [www.hermann-mueckler.com](http://www.hermann-mueckler.com).