

## ***Kāinga*: A Tongan Migrant Concept on Ecumenism**

Ecumenism is a concept found and developed by the church to address schism and division within itself. According to *Wikipedia* “ecumenism” refers to “efforts by Christians of different church traditions to develop closer relationships and better understandings.” The term is also often used to refer to “efforts towards the visible and organic unity of different Christian denominations in some form.” Ecumenism is a word that derived from the Greek *οἰκουμένη* (*oikoumene*), which means, “the whole inhabited world”, and was historically used with specific reference to the Roman Empire. The ecumenical vision comprises both the search for the whole visible unity of the church (Ephesians 4:3) and ‘the whole of the inhabited world’ (Matthew 24:14). With this understanding, ecumenism has a theological, sociological and historical significance for building church unity in our diversity. It means, the way ecumenism is understood in one context would surely be different in another context. Our cultural and theological contexts could enable us to create concepts and notions that might help to address the issue of division in our churches. Therefore, I would like to propose a Tongan concept that is not only pertinent to our quest to create church unity in Oceania but is also culturally appropriate and theologically meaningful to my context as a Tongan migrant.

The concept that I would like to propose herein is derived from a Tongan word ‘*kāinga*’. The definition of this word, according to Churchwood in his *Tongan Dictionary*, refers to ‘relatives, alike, common, or kin’. The word ‘*kāinga*’ is common among Pacific Island languages (*aiga* in Samoan, *ainga* in Maori, *kai* in Fijian). It certainly denotes a sense of belonging and connectedness in multilayers of relationships. Despite our diversity we all belong and are connected as one *kāinga*. This word is elusive and movable. It doesn’t confine to one place or context. It moves as people are moving from one place to another. When they arrive in their new destinations, they would be able to establish a new *kāinga* with the inhabitants of those places. This is part of the process of adapting to a new context. We call this attempt as ‘*fakahoko kāinga*’ (kinship inter-connecting). However, there is always an imminent challenge in building relationship in a new cultural and social context because of unforeseen issues that are contrary to expectations. Some can find it easy, but others can find it hard. Despite this challenge, most Tongans who are doing well in the diaspora are those who are able to easily adapt and connect with their communities through *kāinga* relationship.

Why do I choose *kāinga* concept as a paradigm for building ecumenical relationship within faith and church communities? A quote from my unpublished paper that I wrote in 2010, “The word *kāinga* denotes the significance of relationship. It is not just a mere relationship but a relationship that has real foundation based on mutual loyalty, [respect], and commitment. Whenever and wherever a genuine relationship is established a *kāinga* bond is developed. It is not confined to a particular social location because it can move across different boundaries and contexts, depending on where and how relationship is established. It moves beyond the boundless world of Oceania that knew neither confined boundaries nor created them until the nineteenth-century Western imperialism was introduced to the islands of the South Pacific Ocean.” (‘Eveli Hau’ofa, “Our Sea of Islands” in *Inside Out*, p. 33)

There are five important aspects or reasons that I have chosen *kāinga* as a concept for ecumenism. Firstly, it is Pasifika, secondly it is elusive, thirdly, it is diverse, fourthly, it is inclusive, and fifthly, it is collaborative.

### ***Kāinga* is Pasifika**

Building ecumenical relationship in the Pasifika is a new enterprise. Although it was started in the 60's, many churches in the Pacific are still coming to terms with its implication because of the competition for membership among denominations. Vasi Gadiki remarks on this matter by stating, "Although, up to the late 1950s, there was vigorous competition for membership and space among the churches, one should not deny the fact that the attitude continues to survive today, even in the midst of our attempts to understand and relate to one another." (p. 53) The concept that I propose herein is not only framed in the context of Pasifika, but I believe it's an appropriate approach to our diverse church traditions in any context. *Kāinga* is not an abstract idea but rather a way of life and living, which helps to create harmony in the multilayers of relationships. The *kāinga* is a common notion across Pasifika and therefore, I suggest that it should be effective to use as a paradigm to address ecumenism in our Pacific context. Over the years we adopted Eurocentric concepts and notions to address our ecumenical relationship. I suggest that it is about time we construct our own concepts and notions in the Pacific to critically view the validity of ecumenism. There are guiding principles according to *kāinga* that help to maintain good relationship and at the same time uphold our individual uniqueness and identity. These principles are faka'apa'apa (respect), loto-tō (humility), mamahi'ime'a (passionate), tauhi-vaha'a (keep in-between space). These four principles are known in the Tongan tradition as the 'four golden pillars' of the Tongan culture.

### ***Kāinga* is Elusive**

*Kāinga* can't be static for it can move as people move. Pacific people are known with their expertise in exploration and navigation in the Pacific Ocean. I mentioned on my unpublished paper 2010, "Our ancestors were navigators and explorers who crossed over vast ocean of the Pacific to other island nations to affirm and to build relationship through trade and inter-marriage." When they departed from their island nations and arrived in their new destinations, they would establish a new *kāinga* bond. The history of the past is very much alive today as our people migrate from one place to the other as we experience in Aotearoa. For instance, Pacific Island migrants (and other migrants) once they arrived in an area in Aotearoa where a Methodist Church (or any other church) is located, they would usually join that church and become members of this one faith community, although diverse in many ways. Despite their cultural differences, they joined together as one community through faith in Jesus Christ and their mutual love toward each other. We do things together as a Methodist family like Synod meetings and Annual Conferences. Evidently, we extend the *kāinga* bond from church to the wider community, which would include other churches and other ethnic groups. In that sense, *kāinga* is seen as an elusive enterprise for it doesn't have boundary or border. Ecumenism has no boundary or strict borderline for it moves from one place to the other to connect and to create unity in diversity. Ecumenism can damage when we allow one church tradition to dominate the conversation and dialogue. We must be elusive as the current and waves of the Pacific Ocean move.

### ***Kāinga* is Diverse**

There are different roles and responsibilities, which define and clarify the status of individuals in the structure of *kāinga*. Everyone is different in terms of gender, age, status, and responsibilities. Yet, each one is so unique and important to the whole operation of the *kāinga* structure. Furthermore, each one is not working separately or individually but rather communally. For instance, fathers have a different role from mothers, children have different role from parents, daughters have different role from sons, aunties (*kau fahu*) have different role from uncles and of course the role of the head of household (*'ulumotu 'a*) is different also. The roles are obviously diverse, but each one of them is designed to contribute to the wellbeing of the whole community (*kāinga*). Diversity is embraced and maintained for the smooth flowing of relationships and the fulfilment of obligation in the *kāinga* circle. Every role is special and unique in its own right. If diversity is hindered or prohibited, the *kāinga* bond can be hugely damaged and the structure will surely collapse. Ecumenism is a notion that embraces diversity while at the same time, encourages working toward unity. It is certainly not easy to work together in our diversity but that is a challenge that we must take up for it is truly a reflection of the nature of the Godhead. The inter-relationship of the triune God should be the way we relate in our diverse traditions among our churches.

### ***Kāinga* is Inclusive**

The structure of *kāinga* is framed to include everyone, both young and old, male and female, rich and poor, chiefs and commoners, employers and employees, refugees and the people of the land (*tagata whenua/ tangata 'i fonua*). No one is out of place because everyone in their role is not only connected to each other but also accountable to each other. *Kāinga* bond allows everyone to be included and to be counted. It is certainly a community that is intended to make everyone feel a sense of belonging and inclusion. Sometimes they can agree in a decision made but most of the time they won't agree but rather decide to agree to disagree. Usually, this might not satisfy everyone, but would be the most sensible decision for the sake of peace and harmony our relationship. For example, in the *kāinga* context, whenever a major issue is coming up, the head of the household would call a meeting. The mat will be unrolled for everyone to sit on. On that meeting, everyone is allowed to speak and every voice will be heard. Inclusivity is a vital component of ecumenism and therefore it must embrace and celebrate. It is damaging to a relationship when someone feels excluded or ignored, especially when his/her opinion is ignored because of gender, age, status, or sexuality, especially during a discussion of an important matter that would have an impact in the life of the whole community.

### ***Kāinga* is Collaborative**

Although responsibilities are diverse, they seek to work collaboratively to build harmony and strengthen the *kāinga* bond. Each responsibility, whether small or big, is expected to contribute to the welfare of the whole community. In that way, every responsibility is valued and acknowledged for it has a major contribution to the welfare of others. No one is out of touch because they are working together in unity. One of the strengths of the *kāinga* concept, is not only to value the contribution of everyone but also to encourage collaboration through action. Through collaboration the tasks and obligations can easily share and bear. Furthermore, no one individual would feel the pressure or burden. Collaboration is so important in ecumenical movement. Without the spirit of collaboration, it will collapse. It

means everyone must be valued and treated with dignity. There are so many examples of the church determination to work collaboratively in our region and around the world. The World Council of Churches is working really hard in our different cultural contexts to build mutual respect and understanding in our various church traditions. This is what is happening at the moment in our church. There are various dialogue groups that have been formed to enable talanoa/ conversation in our various church traditions, i.e. Methodist-Anglican Dialogue Group, Methodist-Catholic Dialogue Group, Methodist-Korean Dialogue Group, and Tri-lateral Discussion Group (Anglican, Methodist, and Roman Catholic). Collaboration is the strength of building *kāinga* and so a notion for strengthening our relationship with our sister churches.

## Conclusion

*Kāinga* concept is not an abstract idea but a living experience of people who would love to live daily on mutual respect and care for one another. Because *kāinga* concept promotes unity in our diversity, the four guiding principles already mentioned may help to maintain a harmonious relationship. These four principles are also known as virtues; *faka'apa'apa* (respect); *mamahi'ime'a* (passionate); *loto-tō* (humility); *tauhi-vaha'a* (maintain the in-between space/ maintain good relationship). *Kāinga* is a gathering of diverse people with diverse needs and these guidance principles are certainly aiming to maintain harmony in relationship. This is what ecumenism ought to be in order to be effective and relevant in our diverse world. It must be a living experience rather than an ideology for the purpose of studies and education. However, there are potential weaknesses that may occur in promoting such a concept. Because *kāinga* concept is determined to connect and include everyone, it might be assumed that everything will go smoothly. Another potential weakness is the inability to know the set boundaries and to avoid exploitation. For instance, one might take advantage of his/ role because we are obliged to maintain a good relationship and therefore, we keep quiet about important matters. Another weakness point is the assumption that everyone will agree to everything, especially around the producing of liturgies for worship. Our diversity of tradition would colour the producing of resources but I guess we have to be flexible around that and welcome it.

## Questions for discussion

How do you view ecumenism from your cultural context?

Can ecumenism effective in a pluralistic and secular society?

Is it possible to keep the harmony of our relationship (*tauhi-vā*) in the midst of our competition for membership?

How do you understand the words of Jesus in Matthew 12:46-50 in the light of *kāinga* concept?

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