

The Church in Papua New Guinea: A blessing or a curse? The pros and cons of religion in development

For the traveler in Papua New Guinea (PNG), the legacy of colonial power and its once favorite ally - the Church – is evident at every turn. As part of an Asia Pacific Alliance (APA) Parliamentary Study Tour to PNG focusing on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and sexual and reproductive health this April, I saw the impact of the Church and its influences everywhere I went, both positive and negative.

From squatter settlements and sex worker support projects to hospitals and Sexually Transmitted Infection (STI) clinics, from safe houses for battered women to primary schools, from the upper echelons of government to the NGO community, the offspring of religious doctrine – stigma and ignorance – can be observed in some form or another.

Taboos around sex and the body are still widespread in PNG, and even the most basic conversations to do with anatomy or pregnancy are rare; the social embarrassment too much to bear. While I found this kind of attitude more common with the older generation, general knowledge about sexual function was not widespread and people were clearly uncomfortable when asked about it.

In Lae, the Family Health Association (FHA) gives daily sex education – women and men from all around the Lae region come to sit through the talks and get condoms or sexual health check ups. Many of the mothers who come to the clinic already have four or five children and want to prevent further pregnancies. The PNG FHA nurses work long hours; such is the demand for their services, which emphasised to me that people do want access to information about sexual and reproductive health. Many were reluctant to be seen attending a clinic, because by the time a person gets home, their family has often already heard about the visit, which can lead to arguments.

Further compounding the damage of the stigma of visiting a clinic, having multiple sex partners is fairly common in PNG. The taboos around talking about sex can be detrimental in instances where men have extramarital sex, because wives don't always feel they can confront their husbands or negotiate how sex proceeds, including the use of condoms.

Religious stigma can also sadly affect those diagnosed as HIV positive, who are often abandoned by their families and as a consequence end up in the hospitals unattended by visitors, where they frequently die alone. In Ward 4B of Port Moresby Hospital – the Tuberculosis unit – many of the patients are dying of full-blown AIDS. On the wall at the entrance to the ward a poster promoting the use of condoms hangs directly above an image of Jesus Christ. The doctor showing us around smiled and pointed out that while they do not advocate condoms for contraception, they will promote them as STI and AIDS prevention.

Sex workers, wives and young girls are at high risk of rape in PNG, a country where women have become dangerously subordinate to men. Dame Carol Kidu, the only female Member of Parliament in PNG and the Minister for Social Development and Welfare, has said that women today are worse off than their grandmothers and even their great-grandmothers “who were protected by customs and traditional behaviour protocols that no longer exist today”¹. True enough, during my visit in PNG, every day I read horrific stories of rape in the local papers, often detailing the gang rape of young girls.

So what role does the Church have in all of this? For me, these tragedies seem to be the symptoms of a systemic breakdown of traditional culture and entrenched colonial religious dogma. I talked to many people who said it was common to hear preachers declare that using contraception was sinful. The evident low status of women, along with horrifying stories of policemen beating and raping sex workers – both because they were sex workers and because they were discovered to be in possession of condoms – made a frightening picture.

Papua New Guinea is a highly Christianised nation – at least 66% of the population belongs to a Christian denomination, the highest being Roman Catholic and the remainder practicing traditional indigenous beliefs². It comes as no surprise then that the church has enormous influence in PNG, and within the broader area of social development, including the importance of raising the status of women, its role becomes vital.

Yet in a weird balancing act, the Church seems to be both the cause and the remedy to so many of PNG’s woes. Indeed it is the Church in many instances who are taking the leading role advocating condom use and sexual health check ups. The National Health Department and its regional government’s health and awareness programmes seemed largely ineffectual.

In stark contrast, small faith-based community NGOs are pioneering effective initiatives in both awareness raising, STI testing and condom distribution. In other areas of social development, the Port Moresby City Mission is a good example of faith-based community leadership, running some very positive community programmes for battered women and young men who had previously been involved in the notorious street gangs of Port Moresby.

Haus Ruth at Ela Beach acts as an intermediary between husbands, police and the law courts. Battered women can bring their children to Haus Ruth while they try to get lawyers to fight their case. The shelter has been working at building better relationships with the police who are often more of a hindrance than a help, so that they will support Haus Ruth to protect the sheltered women instead of working on the husband’s behalf to try to get the wife to go home. There is a lack of rehabilitation programmes for violent men, but Haus Ruth has recently begun to use restorative justice techniques to re-unite families instead of turning to lawyers who tend not to be interested in small cases that don’t pay. Ben Gawi, the general manager of the City Mission says that restorative justice has so far proved to be successful due to similarities within the wantok system, and the mission has successfully reunited several families.

Similarly, the New Life Farm operating on the outskirts of Port Moresby takes on what are commonly called *raskols* – boys from the local street gangs, and products of urban drift. With the lack of employment opportunities in the city many young men turn to violent crime. The city mission takes on boys who want to change their lives for the better. The farm houses around 90 boys, who are usually between 17 and 22. They will stay at the farm for at least one year, depending on when they are ready to leave.

At the New Life Farm, youth are taught life skills which will stand them in good stead back in their villages, or wherever they choose to live. They learn carpentry and agriculture mainly, raising chickens, pigs and rabbits as well as running a nursery and growing rice crops. Andrew, one of the New Life boys, said life used to be a struggle but now he has gained the security of a family and the chance to make a real go at his life. Andrew says that most of the boys consider themselves blessed to be able to come to the New Life Farm, and very few ever leave to go back to the streets. And their happiness was evident – it was so hard to imagine these same boys being involved in car-jacking or similar violent offences.

The City mission is a Church based organisation fostering many small community initiatives that shone amidst the chaos of PNG's lack of infrastructure and support schemes. In PNG, the Church remains the backbone of society. While I believe the wantok system still holds the answers to many of the country's development problems and should be looked to more often in problem solving, it is undeniable that the Church is making headway where others can't or won't. For many of the poverty stricken and outcast, the Church is the only support they have.

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REFERENCES

1 PNG DEVNEWS UPDATE 11/03/2006, Dame Carol Kidu

2 CIA Website: The World Fact Book <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/pp.html>

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