

The Role of the Church in Development in Samoa: Does the Church do enough at the community level?

Tolu Muliaina

As trends of social problems - unemployment, crime and poverty levels – show signs of continuing, there are fresh calls for active participation of all stakeholders, the Church included, in community life and development. The significance of the Church in Samoa is well documented. It is reflected in the country's motto, *Samoa is founded on God*. All Samoans are affiliated to some form of church organisation. One's typical week involves several church-related activities – choir practice, pastor's school (*Aoga Faifeau*) and *Autalavou* (youth group). Then Sunday is the day of rest and prayer for all.

Additionally, the Church has been finely incorporated in the social system. Revered by all, it is the beneficiary of family resources, time as well as remittances from abroad. Families donate financially and materially to church activities and/or the daily livelihood of the Church minister. This ethic of sharing and reciprocal obligation is viewed by many as their *tautua* (service) to God through the Church, and it is a life-long one.

Church Involvement

Without doubt, the *Aoga Faifeau* (pastor's school) had a proud record in Samoa. Prior to formal education, the pastors' schools were the only opportunity for many to learn how to read, write, do sums and sew as well as simple carpentry work. The church hall was the school and the preacher on Sunday taught during the week. To date, several churches have also maintained a considerable stake in education. Their work at pre-school, primary, secondary and vocational education is commendable.

However, it appears that there is far more that can be done at the community level. Pastors command great respect. They could influence opinion from the pulpit and during the *Autalavou* to promote group action. It seems the Church has retreated into a narrowly defined spiritualism. Their work is limited to evangelism and prayer is seen as the 'answer' to all things. Church ministers also have a responsibility in the social development of the 'poorest', 'ignorant' and 'disadvantaged'. They can emerge as dynamic forces for social change at the community level. With their privileged positions, they could address issues such as poor or non-attendance at school, parenting and how to value education.

In the village of Fusi, like many in Samoa, the Church is financed by people locally, but more so from overseas. The church could help fundraise for the education of school children and help resolve some of the social problems identified in this article. Since church ministers do not undertake other paid employment, they could teach literacy and numeracy, life skills training (lifestyle diseases, small business) programmes in partnership with NGOs and other government organisations to assist and empower the community.

The sizes of church buildings suggest that ministers have the ability to host some programmes. Too often, the buildings are reserved for religious matters and for certain functions that are often unrelated to the types of 'development' programmes needed for youth and other groups. Since churches were built by the people, using these buildings to develop our communities through these types of initiatives might be a worthwhile investment.

The Church may, whenever necessary, redistribute some of the wealth – food or mats – it receives to the needy families. The Church should encourage households to re-arrange priorities and limit excessive monetary contributions to what is required rather than an amount based on one's status and competition. When excess funds are collected, redirecting these resources to the education of children, savings and other 'productive' investments would be a better use of money, which in turn could bring long term returns and contribute to poverty alleviation. If some of these church activities are met by overseas remittances, perhaps this is one way where remittances could be made sustainable.

If community development is the responsibility of all stakeholders as many would agree, then the Church plays a part too. Perhaps Samoa has not fully utilised or explored the potential of the Church in the development process. The church ministers hold influential positions in society and they could assist in a range of 'developmental' programmes. This also calls for a desire to rekindle the spirit of volunteerism, which Jesus has freely advocated. If this is the case, then the Church is the place – or one of the places - to begin this life-long worthwhile journey towards prosperous sustainable communities for tomorrow.

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References

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