

Sisters see their Homeland Threatened

a companion to **Rising Seas - Raising Voices**



*Since 1845 the Missionary Sisters
of the Society of Mary have been
in the Pacific.*

**Today they still live and work
on Bougainville, the Solomon
Islands, Fiji, Tonga, Samoa,
New Caledonia, Vanuatu,
Wallis, New Zealand and
Australia .**



“Let us rejoice that our loving Creator sustains our humble efforts to care for the earth, which is also God’s home ...”



Sisters from Kiribati & Sr. Emanita of Tonga

These closing lines of Pope Francis’ Message for the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation have led us to ask our Sisters to share with us here in Australia some of the concerns, challenges and efforts to cope with CLIMATE CHANGE taking place in their island homes. While we no longer have a community in Kiribati, we have several Sisters from Kiribati who are acutely aware of the drastic effects Climate Change is having on the country. The Kiribati people and their Government leaders, past and present, have been struggling to get us to understand that if the ocean level keeps on rising along with the continued warming of the sea their country will be inundated very soon, forcing them to flee elsewhere. The recent Bush fires in Australia have awakened us to the possible loss of many of our flora and fauna species. We need to open our eyes to the much greater loss faced by peoples across the Pacific. Not only are people facing the possibility of being displaced from their island homes because of the effects of climate change but the rest of the world will also suffer the incalculable losses of these people's richly diverse Polynesian, Melanesian and Micronesian Cultures , their history of survival over centuries and their depth of knowledge of the ocean itself, their home.



Some sharings from our Sisters in the Pacific about life today:

Sr. Denise McMahon with two other members of her community -Sr. Mere and Sr. Filo.

FIJI and Outer Islands — Sr. Denise McMahon has shared

A sign of the times in Fiji concerning climate change – 14/07/2020 We have just had a visit from two members of Caritas Fiji Disaster Preparedness and two young men from the Baptist Church. They are part of a group representing the different Christian Churches working together, gathering information on Natural Disasters. Some recent disasters have been exacerbated by the effects of climate change. There will be more Natural Disasters in the years to come with the reality of Climate Change

Climate Change is becoming more evident in Fiji

There is a term in Fijian called “bogi walu” in traditional knowledge which means 8 days or 8 nights, and refers to 8 days of heavy rain and strong winds. These winds come from the South and elders would know the time of year when this phenomenon would come. However, they can't be predicted now and come at any time of the year with flash floods and wet, wet weather.

Positive outcomes of more frequent rain:

Rising sea levels means that sea water is creeping further along the rivers and reef fish can be found at the mouth of rivers instead of having to go to the reef. Crops such as yaqona (the kava root) can be planted lower down now because there is heavier and more frequent rain.

But the negative outcomes are far greater:

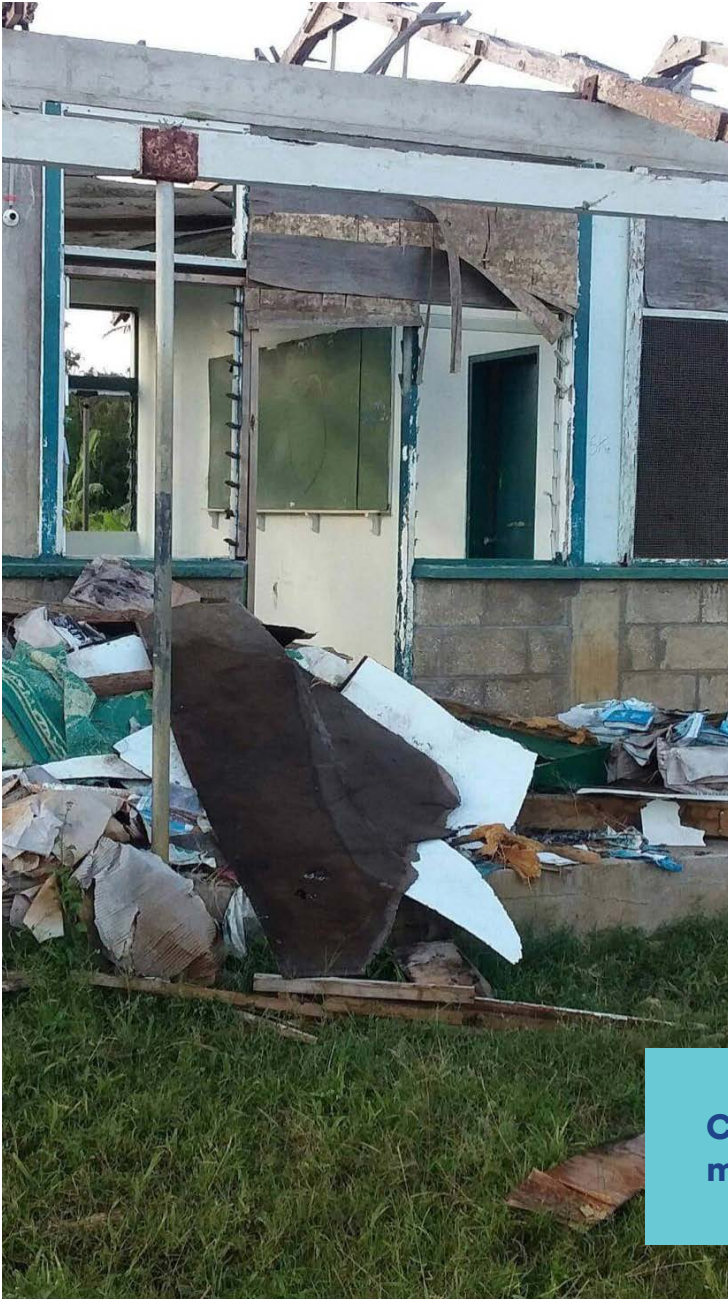
Many villages have and are relocating to higher ground and all along the coastlines of the Islands the sea is encroaching and there are dead trees, abandoned buildings, tombstones which can now be seen underwater. Land near the coast is becoming saline with the encroaching waters and the land can't be used for gardens and crops to sell. In these areas there is now malnutrition.

Because of the rains there is flash flooding and more landslides. The Catechist Centre just outside Suva recently had a landslide and the mud has gone right through the building causing extensive damage.

The cyclones which come now are much more powerful being Category 5 whereas before they were usually 2 or 3. In May 2020 Cyclone Harold hit Fiji and caused great damage to parts of the country.

There is a rise in typhoid, leptospirosis and dengue fever due to Climate Change, as well as infestations of ants which kill some plants and invade buildings.

In areas where the sea water is encroaching on the land people are now resorting to planting their basic staple food (cassava) on the side of roads as the land is higher there.



Cyclone damage to school in Tonga means school is now in tents





Mangrove planting helps protect coast from rising sea level



Cyclone Harold in May 2020

Cyclone Harold mentioned by Sr. Denise greatly affected not only Fiji but also the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu where our Sisters had their homes and places of work badly damaged. All say that the Strong Cyclones are now coming so frequently that there is no chance to rebuild homes, schools, Churches, markets and even more importantly to replant the coconut trees and other crops and let them bear fruit before another Cyclone arrives. This is affecting the health of the people as well as their livelihood.



Effects of Climate Change in Tonga — Sr. M. Nive Kepu shares

Climate Change is a very important issue for us here in TONGA, a low-lying Pacific Island. The coastal erosion and the rising sea levels are very obvious effects due to Climate Change. Off season Cyclones have also caused a lot of damage to crops as well as flooding. A few families have already had to relocate inland because of the changing conditions. However, Tonga has no really high ground.

The people are trying to prevent some of these effects by planting mangroves to hold onto the coastal land and beaches. There is also a Government-run programme with the people to raise awareness of the effect Climate Change is having on the Islands of Tonga. The people are aware of the problem of rubbish polluting the sea and are participating in removing rubbish and keeping all areas clean and free of debris so none of it gets into the sea.



Sr. Jacinta Fidow

Effects of Climate Change in Samoa — Sr. Jacinta Fidow shares

Besides the changes in the Weather Patterns the Sea Changes are affecting life in Samoa.

For some time the experts here have spoken about the rising temperature of the sea water as well as its greater acidity. This in turn has been affecting and in some cases killing off the corals as well as reducing the classes of fish that can now be found in the sea around Samoa. Naturally the people are being impacted by these changes in the sea as the fish and other sea life they are used to catching is diminishing around their shores along with land loss from the rising sea levels.

In Samoa the schools are trying to prepare the younger people to think about the changes that Climate Change is bringing to their lives. In 2019 the 7 Year students at St. Mary's College – Vaimoso, won 2nd Prize at the National Science Fair for their Project titled "Floating Island Using Solar and Sea Water as Power Supply". Conscious already of coastal land that is being lost today around their island home they presented a way to create artificial floating islands attached firmly to the main island by bridges thus expanding the living space on the island as the sea levels rise. They did admit such a Project is too expensive for now. The young people in Samoa do not want to leave their island home.

Effects of Climate Change on Wallis — Sr. Telesia Talalua shares

The Warming Sea Temperature means that many of the kinds of fish formerly caught around the reefs and in the sea close by have disappeared. Local fishermen do not have large boats to go far out to sea after the fish and fishing boats from other countries are moving in close to Wallis taking what fish still remains.

The King Tides are now more frequent around the islands and are washing away the smaller islands' beaches, breaking up the protective reefs and much of the coral is actually dying off. Many of these now unprotected smaller islands are cut in two by the sea and cannot serve the people as before as places for holidaying, fishing and collecting sea food. A number of families that lived in houses on the beach line of the main island have had to rebuild their homes further inland.

The People are worried about what will happen in the future as food from the sea becomes scarcer. Here, as in Samoa, the schools are helping prepare the children and younger people to face the reality of Climate Change. In the schools they are teaching the students how to plant and tend new faster growing crops which will help maintain a nutritious healthy diet in the future – e.g. tomatoes and beans as well as others. The students are sharing these new ideas with their parents and the families are beginning to grow these crops on their own land and are enjoying them.



Sr. Telesia Talalua



Effects of Climate Change in the Solomon Islands — Sr. Jennifer Laku shares

DIVIT school gardens after Cyclone Harold

In Avuavu on the Weather Coast of South East Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands, where I come from the majority of people were living along the coastal areas. Due to the impact of Climate Change, particularly by the rising sea levels or tidal waves the people had no choice but to move inland onto higher grounds and into the mountain areas in more recent years. They built houses on the land or grounds that were normally used and kept specifically for gardening to provide food for the families. Some of the sacred places or spaces that were given to them by their ancestors and which they need to interact and maintain their identity and values are also now being used by families as plots on which to build homes. The flooding which now occurs also causes a lot of damage to the family homes and gardens.

Challenges that are being faced by the people

The shortage of land for gardening means shortage of food for many families. The population is increasing as the young people are marrying at an earlier age.

It is difficult to find suitable places in the mountain areas for sports grounds for the young people to play games such as volleyball, soccer or football.

The people now have to travel distances from the mountain areas to the sea for their fishing.

Families and clans are now separated into what is known as little villages.

Their communal life of sharing and socializing is limited.

Human activities such as cutting down trees to build houses and do gardening have disturbed and destroyed many wildlife species.

There is soil erosion from the cutting down of trees for gardening and timber.

The flooding of rivers has destroyed many family homes and gardens.

Streams from which they collect drinking water have been destroyed as well as some lakes.

The sacred places and spaces are occupied by people.

The young ones and the elderly are unsettled by the lifestyle changes – from the beach and sea environment to the mountain/ bush environment.

The people have great concern for the future of their children with the shortage of land as well as natural and financial resources.

There is fear of losing their ancestors' graves down on the coastal areas: their minds are disturbed over whether to uncover the graves and remove the bones to elsewhere which is totally against their cultural beliefs and practices. Some graves have already been washed out to sea.



Srs. M. Marietta Parsons and Bertha both worked around the Pacific Islands before returning to New Zealand.

Sr. Bertha worked both in Samoa and Fiji as a missionary. She taught at secondary level for 7 years in Samoa. In Fiji she enjoyed being with the Indian community there, living in that country for almost 10 years. Sr. M. Marietta taught in Samoa for 30 years. She then went to the Solomon Islands teaching in secondary school for 10 years. Since 2008 Srs. Bertha and M. Marietta have been involved in Pastoral work and leading Inter-faith Dialogue in Christchurch New Zealand.

**Effects of Climate Change in New Zealand
- Sr. M. Marietta Parsons shares**

Rising Sea Levels and High Tides are also affecting New Zealand.

In response to the news of coastal beaches on the East Coast of Australia being washed away between the 19th – 24th July 2020 she wrote of similar coastal areas being washed away in New Zealand, with one case at Selwyn Huts, a small settlement of about 100 people near to where the Sisters live. The people there are mainly elderly retirees living in simple basic housing and they have few resources. There is now water and drainage problems and the Waimakairi river is nearby. There is the possibility of the settlement going underwater with the rising sea levels and these elderly people would lose their homes.



