



*Milika Tovi knows what it is like to survive a major cyclone. Along with other residents of the Ha'apai Islands, she endured the worst storm to make landfall in Tonga. More severe weather patterns are a product of climate change. Pacific peoples have taken to the world stage, urging much deeper action to keep the temperature rise below 1.5 degrees celsius. The Pacific Conference of Churches (PCC) has been an important player educating its people about climate change, helping with resettlement, and talking about its impact outside the region. In the same way, PCC is bringing together Pacific churches to look at gender based violence, self-determination for New Caledonia (Kanak), Tahiti (Maohi Nui) and West Papua as matters of faith. The Christmas Appeal will support PCC in its work across the "Oceania" continent.*

### **OUR STORY IS MORE THAN SURVIVAL**

Every day people living on the coast of the Pacific look out on an ocean that is slowly rising. At peak times its waters lap at the edges of their homes. In the worst, they flood.

Milika (pictured) endured high winds and heavy rains when Cyclone Ian battered Tonga's Ha'apai islands in 2014. The worst recorded storm to hit Tonga claimed one person's life, injured 14 more and destroyed over 50% of homes in the northeast. Tents were distributed to many families as part of the emergency response. Most now have new or repaired homes.

In other parts of the Pacific, communities have already relocated because of climate change. Carteret Islanders [began](#) moving from their homes in Papua New Guinea in 2006 after the community established its own relocation programme. In 2014, Vunidogoloa on Fiji's Vanua Levu island [was relocated](#) two kilometres inland when the sea killed food crops and flooded their homes on a daily basis.

Churches have been supporting communities faced with some uncomfortable choices. They have helped with coastal protection and discussions about what will happen next.

Part of the community, many are aware of how culture and tradition are bound up with the land and coast. Some people worry about what will happen to their community when they move from their customary land.



*PCC's Frances Namoumou meets Scotland's First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon at the 2017 Climate Change Conference  
Photo: WCC/Sean Hawkey*

Speaking in Germany for the 2017 climate change negotiation, Frances Namoumou from PCC [said](#), "This is a matter of survival. Losing our land to the sea means losing our identity as a people". It is important that people affected can make the decisions about their future and are given adequate resources to retain their livelihoods and dignity in the process.

At meeting after meeting, Pacific peoples have raised their fears for the future. They have found ways to share stories of danger and offer the world a path out of destruction. Church leaders have united in their concern for families who are losing land and livelihoods and fear for the future of their culture and tradition. They worry about what is happening to their *moana* and are exploring ways to support the rights of climate migrants, people who have lost their homes.

Those living close to the water are doing all they can: planting sea resistant crops, organising evacuation procedures and protecting their homes and livelihoods. Long term they need food, water and safety that comes with climate justice. Only global action can stop the rising temperatures, make sure those who must be resettled flourish, and provide funds needed to help the most vulnerable families. PCC stands between the local and the global. When it speaks for the climate, it advocates for us all.

**Donations to the Christmas Appeal will train local people and give them the resources they need to improve their livelihoods and become more resilient.**

## **PACIFIC CONFERENCE OF CHURCHES**

Formed in 1966, the Pacific Conference of Churches brings together 27 member churches from 17 island states. It is a place where Pacific people can make decisions

about their own future, develop their own theologies and actions, and work together for justice. Programmatic decisions are made at its five yearly Assembly.

The current priorities of PCC are:

- social justice with gender based violence as the priority,
- engaging churches to make sure their governments and regional institutions take account of community experiences in climate mitigation,
- encouraging churches to contribute to governance and economic frameworks, and speak out in favour of political self-determination for territories and colonies in the region.

With the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre, PCC ran the first male advocacy training for members of the Fiji Council of Churches to address gender based violence. The plan is to run similar training events in the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Samoa and Kiribati.



*PCC attended 160th anniversary celebrations of GKI church in West Papua in 2015. Photo:PCC*

The plight of West Papua has been on high on the PCC agenda. PCC along with PIANGO (Pacific Island Association of NGOs) and PANG (Pacific Network on Globalisation) held a week long campaign on West Papua, culminating in a vigil where the Morning Star flag of West Papua was raised before being confiscated from PCC land by the Central Police Station in Suva. In October 2016, PCC participated in an interfaith conference in Papua New

Guinea involving 32 church leaders and 6 West Papuans, which developed the Goroka Statement on West Papua. Churches are advocating for West Papua with their governments. PCC has played a leading role in raising the situation of West Papua with Pacific governments, resulting in growing support for self-determination.

**Note:** *Three weeks after West Papua was granted independence, Indonesia's President Sukarno launched a military invasion. Indonesia's occupation was later approved in a UN-sponsored process, backed by the United States and former colonists the Netherlands without West Papuan involvement. As part of the 1962 New York Agreement, Indonesia conducted a referendum among 1,025 hand-picked representatives, known as the Act of Free Choice. More than 700,000 Papuans were excluded and many of the representatives were coerced into voting in favour of the 1969 agreement.*

A year ago PCC General Secretary François Pihaatae, Sirino Rakabi and Neanette Pene, organised the Fiji Wansolwara [Rebirth production](#) involving 54 young people of various of ethnicities, ages, genders and religious groups in drama and choir. The production highlighted people's responsibility as custodians and

protectors of the land and stories. Its central focus was on

self-determination for West Papua and the urgency of climate justice for the Pacific.



*West Papuans have been beaten and jailed for flying their independence flag in West Papua. Here it was flown in Fiji. Photo: PCC*

PCC has continued its research and discussions on human rights in relation to climate change-forced relocation. Workshops on climate change, disaster risk reduction and resilience were run in the Solomon Islands and Maohi Nui, Tahiti. In Fiji regional workshops were held for young people, and a second for church leaders resulted in the Tokatoka Declaration.

In and at meetings around November's [COP23](#) climate negotiations on the implementation of the Paris Agreement, Pacific voices pushed hard for limiting global temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius.

**[YouTube video](#): "WCC member churches from the Pacific at COP23: "We are not drowning, we are fighting"**

**[You tube video](#): "Talk to your Government" Frances Namoumou sums up.**

## INTERFAITH STATEMENT TO THE PLENARY OF THE HIGH LEVEL MINISTERIAL SEGMENT OF COP23 - 16 NOVEMBER 2017

An [excerpt](#) from the speech presented by Frances Namoumou:

*“As communities of faith we see the Earth as a blessing. “She supports life and is the basis of all our economies. She conveys beauty and evokes our recognition of something greater than ourselves. She is our temple, our mosque, our sanctuary, our cathedral. Our home.”*

“Climate change is threatening our only home. Perhaps nowhere is this more striking than in Oceania. Already many islands are struggling with recurrent, powerful storms that take lives and destroy livelihoods and sources of sustenance. As sea levels rise, oceans acidify and corals wither, our sisters and brothers in the Pacific region are increasingly confronted with the prospect of displacement and forced migration as well as the erosion of territories, identities and cultures.

“In the face of such suffering and loss, many of our religious teachings call us to bear witness and do justice to the impoverished and vulnerable. As the message of the Pacific Conference of Churches to COP 23 states, *“We exercise our prophetic voice as churches and believers...to amplify the cries of our people and Moana who are directly or indirectly affected by climate change and encourage the spirit of stewardship among ourselves as custodians of God’s creation.”*

“People living in the Pacific contribute least to greenhouse gas emissions that cause climate change. It is therefore a matter of justice that wealthy nations responsible for the bulk of global emissions provide financial and other forms of support to income-poor, vulnerable countries, enabling the latter to adapt and build resilience to a warming climate as well as compensating for loss and damage.”

**Working together with people from the communities, we can make the love of Christmas our story.**