



Intercultural Church Conference

Terry Pouono (Laidlaw College)
Beyond Cultural captivity

Core question of my presentation:
Why are NZ-born Samoans leaving the Samoan church for multi-ethnic churches?



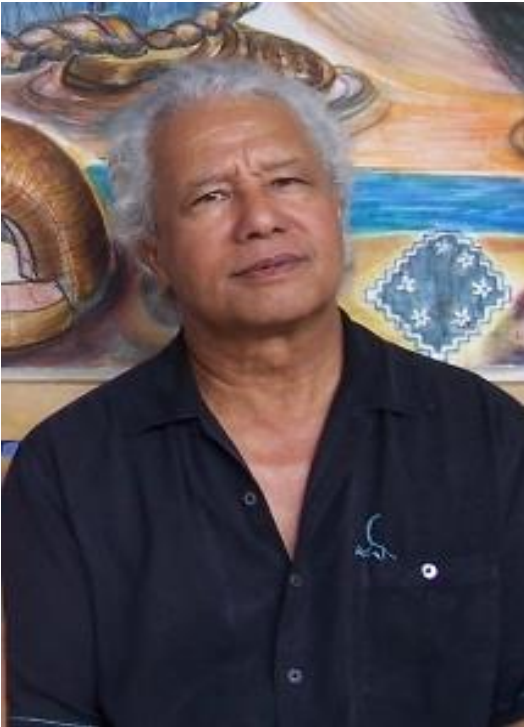
- It is an issue largely ignored by my church, the Congregational Christian Church Samoa (CCCS).
- It has affected a large number of 1st and 2nd generation NZ-born Samoans. There are signs that indicate that the next generation will follow suit because of the shared social experiences they have with previous generations.
- It is a fact that Samoan migrants are filling prominent roles as church ministers and deacons of the diaspora church.
- A large number of NZ-born Samoans have prominent roles in many multi-ethnic churches in the South Auckland area.
- The multi-ethnic churches I have observed are Pentecostal, Charismatic, Presbyterian and Baptist churches.

FOUR KEY AREAS IN MY PRESENTATION

1. To articulate the Samoan worldview using the concept of the *Vā* (relational spaces)
2. From a basic understanding of the *Vā*, we will identify why the *Vā* is important in preserving a Samoan Christian identity.
3. Identify challenges that New Zealand-born Samoans face within the Samoan church
4. How is the *Vā* re-articulated by Samoans, and to an extent, by Pacific Islanders who now fellowship at various multi-ethnic churches?



VA AS RELATIONAL SPACES



“Vā is the space between, the betweenness, not empty space, not space that separates but space that relates, that holds separate entities and things together in the Unity-that-is-All, the space that is context, giving meaning to things.”

(Albert Wendt)

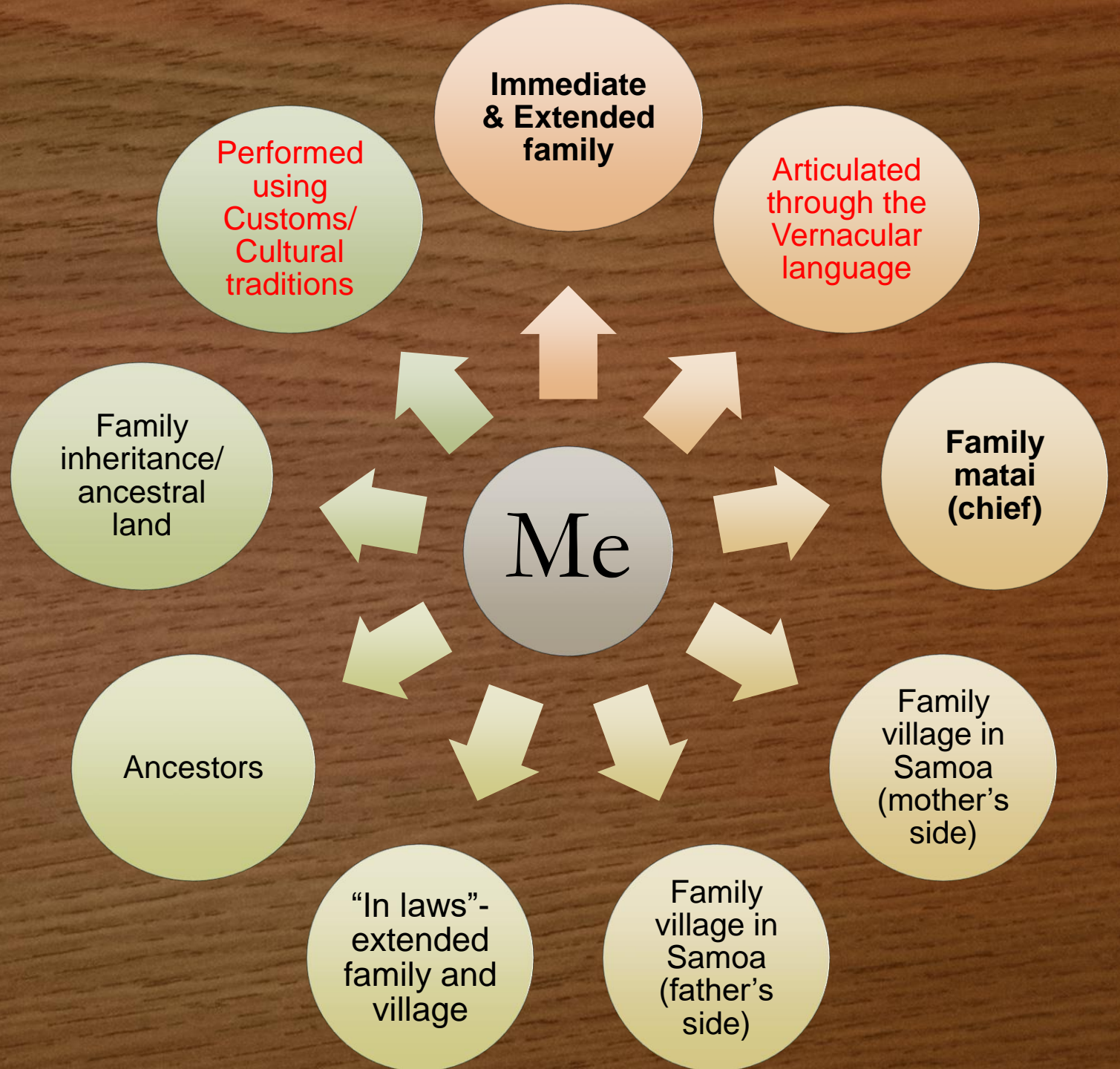
Albert Wendt, *Tatauing the Post-Colonial Body*. In *Inside Out: Literature, Cultural Politics, and Identity in the New Pacific*, edited by Vilsoni Hereniko and Rob Wilson. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1992), 402.

“Respect, reciprocal love and other values in Vā relations

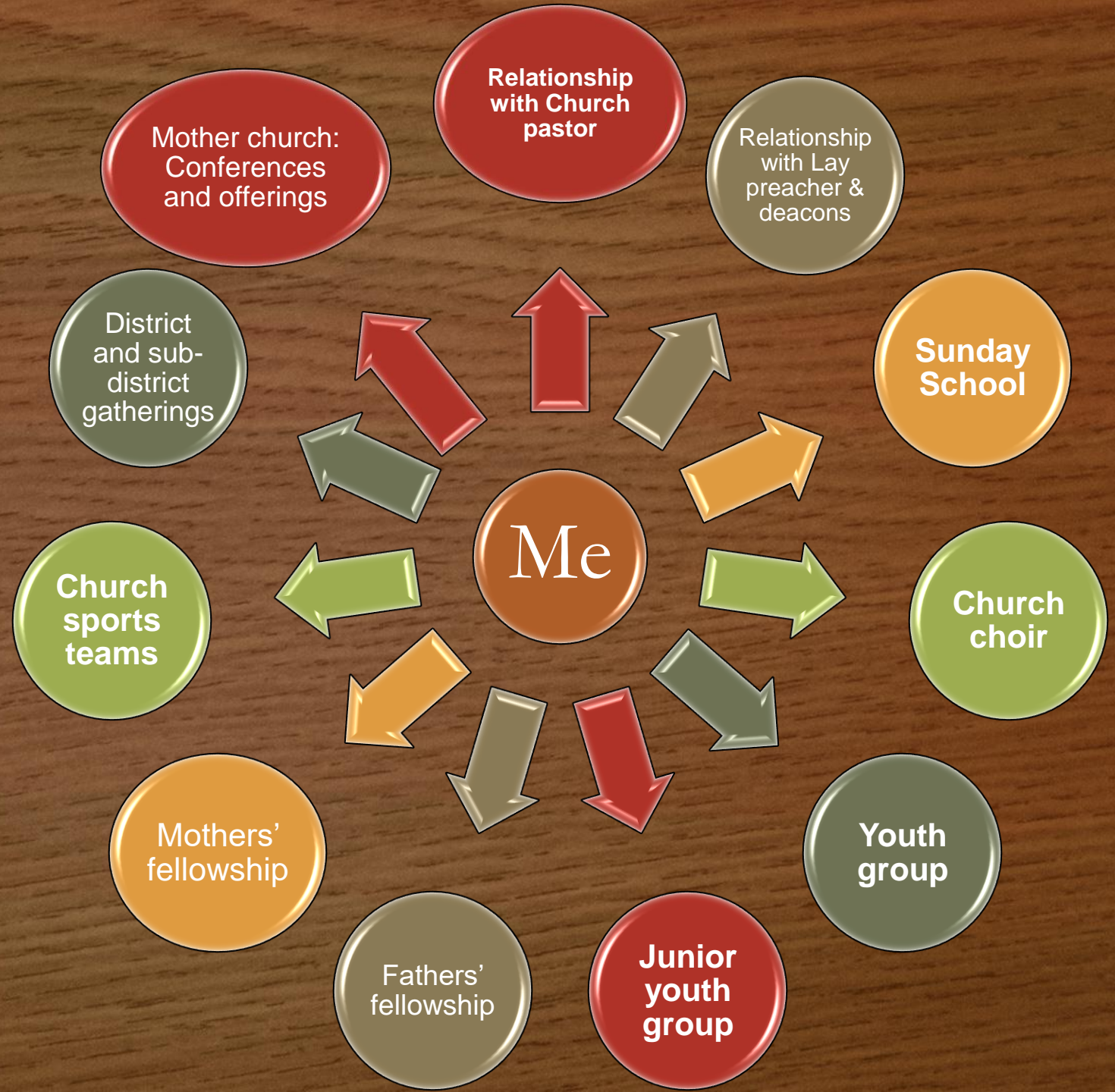
- Holistically, the *vā* indicates a relationship or **union with other people, family, village, land, titles, status, customs, traditions, inheritance, Pacific myths, personal stories, history, ancestors and sacred objects.**
- Harmony is sought when the *vā* is treated with the utmost respect. **Social cohesion is promoted at different levels:** within the family, village/church, the wider community and the whole cosmos.



Vā within my family context



Vā within the Samoan church



DIASPORA CHURCHES: PRESERVING THE VA

The pioneers of the diaspora church are committed to preserving the core features of the cultural church; language, church & cultural traditions.

The migrants see the Samoan church as their village beyond the homeland. The sacred commodities that defined one's Samoan identity, the family, culture and Christian beliefs, were recaptured, memories refreshed and a new purpose of life invigorated.

Church worship in the diaspora church replicates many aspects of the village church.

It was imperative that the migrants ensured that the younger generations were nurtured in these core values, for we are perceived as the future of the church.

Samoan language is the medium language for preserving the Vā relations within church and family structures.

The Sunday School system, programs for prayer meetings and Christian Endeavour for Samoan churches in NZ are all arranged and administered by the mother church in Samoa.

PRESERVING THE VILLAGE CHURCH MODEL

A CHURCH
SETTING IN SAMOA
& TE ATATU,
AUCKLAND



IMAGE PORTRAYS THE *VA* IN PRACTICE,

Annual general meeting at Malua Theological College. Your seating within the church gathering was determined by your status.



A family reunion






New Zealand-born Samoans face many challenges in the church. Why?

- Obviously, we do not live in a village context, but we are exposed to two different worlds, we find ourselves oscillating in ambivalent spaces between the Samoan community and the complex, multi-faceted world.
- The idea of preserving the *Vā* is the stronghold for Samoan Christianity dependent on a culture or tradition that strives for continuity and coherence, while facets of our multi-cultural world are fluid and the parameters of our Christian identity are continually renewed and transformed.
- For New Zealand-born Samoans, exposure to these two different worlds can either be advantageous or harmful. The circumstances of an open engagement may be assumed as favourable and beneficial. However, if the two worlds repel each other, then the negative energy within that space can create tension.



Va intra-cultural Pacific
worldview (Christianity,
cultural traditions,
language, customs, family,
village...)



Western world
School, work, social
services, government
policies, media, technology,
capitalism, other churches
or religions, secularism,
global forces...



WHAT ARE SOME OF THE CHALLENGES NEW ZEALAND-BORN SAMOANS FACE WITHIN THE *VA*?

Churches preserve mono-lingualism- NZ-born cohort are bi-lingual speakers/ Is the gospel message articulated and understood?

Gospel and Samoan culture go side by side: We feel that the gospel message is to an extent compromised by cultural traditions.

Schreiter “Re-traditionalization” “traditions are not returned and re-enacted in pre-modern ways but are enlightened and translated in the postmodern context.”

Families face socio-economic pressures from ‘sacrificial monetary giving to the church’. The church is self-sufficient & self-governing and there is a strong sense of pride (family & church), and thus there is a great expectation for families to meet these expectations.

Generally, mission is centri-petal and social issues are usually not a priority and swept under the carpet

Robert J, Schreiter, “Globalization, Postmodernity, and the New Catholicity.” In *For all people: Global Theologies in Contexts. Essays in Honor of Viggo Mortensen*, edited by Elsie Marie Wiberg Perdersen, Holger Lam and Peter Lodberg, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002), 29.



WHY MULTI-ETHNIC CHURCHES?

By transitioning our faith to a multi-ethnic church, I believe we are not disregarding our Samoan or Pacific Christian identity. This is impossible because we have an inherent interconnectedness with our ancestral heritage. Instead, we are re-articulating this identity and renewing our witness in a world foreign to the village context.

* Four of the main reasons for the relocation are: (i) Less social-economic pressures (ii) The language barrier because many New Zealand-born Samoans are not articulate in the formal Samoan language (iii) Seeking spiritual renewal (iv) Looking for a church that is, in a sense, connected to the changing world

* In some of the multi-ethnic churches today, there is recognition and respect of the increasing diversity within church communities. We have the freedom to express our cultural identity by wearing our Samoan attire to our new church.

Photo: Life Church Manurewa (Facebook page)



ACKNOWLEDGING DIVERSITY

On Samoan language week at Manukau City Baptist Church, my sister in law prayed in Samoan. Many of the bilingual speakers pray in both their native tongue and in English.

* Life church in Manurewa have a gathering for elderly, retired Pasifika women. They go for walks, sing songs, share the Word and enjoy the comradery as Pasifika women.

* At St Andrews Presbyterian Manurewa, we celebrate 'cultural week' through cultural performances and a cultural feast. The elders of our church are Pakeha, Niuean, Fijian Indian, Philippines, and Samoan.

*** It is such a wonderful experience when we share our stories of faith with people from different cultural backgrounds.**

*** Photo: St Andrews Presbyterian Manurewa**



TO CONCLUDE MY PRESENTATION...



My re-articulation of the *Vā* denotes that it is not an identity confined within fixed boundaries, but it is an inherent gift from God. We take the core values of our culture where-ever we go, and we grow spiritually by sharing and receiving those gifts through intercultural dialogue and engagement.

At St Andrews Presbyterian, my family are on the morning tea roster, my wife does the flower arrangements, and we have a desire to serve more. This heart to serve comes from our Samoan-ness.

I mentioned earlier that the *vā* is fully realized when there is peace with oneself, harmony with the other person (or people), harmony with the environment and with the cosmos. As a Samoan living in a multi-faceted society, I feel that harmony serving God's Kingdom in a multi-ethnic church.

Photo: My children participate in the St Andrews Christmas production 2017