

World Day of Prayer Service

Christ Church South Yarra – 6 March 2009

Address by Dr Jon Ritchie, Alfred Deakin Post-doctoral Research Fellow in the School of History, Heritage and Society (Faculty of Arts and Education), Deakin University

Professor David de Kretser and Mrs de Kretser, ladies, gentlemen, girls and boys,

This is a bilum.

It has been chosen as the symbol for this World Day of Prayer by the women of Papua New Guinea. You will see it on the back page of your order of service, hanging on the cross.

If you go to Papua New Guinea (or PNG, as it is commonly called) one day, you will very likely return with, among your collection of photos, memories, and souvenirs, one – or more – of these contraptions. You will see them everywhere: for sale outside the hotels foreign tourists stay at; and used by men and women to carry a whole variety of items.

People in this country use bilums to carry their shopping; they pack them with vegetables like sweet potato, yams, corn, pineapples, bananas; sometimes you will see them being used to carry piglets! And they are commonly used by women in villages as a convenient way of carrying little babies.

I like to think that the bilum has been chosen for this World Day of Prayer to represent the country of Papua New Guinea itself.

Just as many things are carried in bilums, there are many peoples contained within the nation of Papua New Guinea. In fact there are more than six million and the population is growing rapidly. People there speak more than 800 languages – think about it, eight hundred! And there are many, many more different types of groupings – villages, clans, tribes, and so on.

The theme for today's World Day of Prayer talks about the diversity of this country when it says that 'In Christ we are many members, yet one body'. All of the many different people can be seen as fitting into one, enormous, bilum – that is the nation of Papua New Guinea. They are members of the one body.

Let's take this analogy a little bit further.

All of these people are, to some extent, working together on a shared project. Not all the time, of course! Sometimes it seems as if they are working against each other, and this can be seen when you read in the newspapers about some of the crime and violence going on in PNG. But in the main, they want to work together to make the country rich and prosperous, and the people healthy and happy. This is especially so with the children and young people, for whom the future is very important.

Working together and sharing the tasks is a very common feature of PNG's way of life. In traditional times, people shared their work. They dug and weeded their gardens together. They caught, netted, or trapped enough fish for the whole village to eat. They came together to build their houses, and later, their churches.

Now, working together is even more important. PNG is a very rich country – or at least, it should be. It has enormous reserves of valuable minerals like gold, and of energy resources like natural gas. In these days of climate change and carbon trading, its abundant forests can play an important role in helping the world find answers to global warming.

But to achieve the prosperity that awaits it, a whole host of problems and challenges needs to be met – if you like, another bilum, filled this time with nasty things. These include such terrible things as crime, domestic and tribal violence, corruption, environmental damage, low standards of living and education, and scourges like HIV-AIDS and other diseases. All of these require action, yes, by all Papua New Guineans but also by others – including us, here in Australia.

Why, you may ask, should PNG's problems be particularly more important to us than, say, the similar challenges facing other developing countries in many other places around the world?

There are three ways of answering this question.

The first is one that you might read in the newspapers or hear on the TV or radio from time to time. This goes along the lines of the dangers to this country that will be caused by PNG sliding into the kind of conditions you might see in, say, an

African country like Zimbabwe or Congo. We need to help Papua New Guinea to protect ourselves, some say – this is the argument of self-interest and fear.

The second response is linked to the first. We need to participate in PNG's future because of its very real and great assets – its gold, its copper, its natural gas, and all of the other types of resources that are there. This reason is all about Australia's self-interest, yes. But if correctly thought through, an outcome might be possible whereby both Australia and Papua New Guinea are able to benefit from the mineral wealth locked up beneath its jungles, mountains, and seas. Increasingly, Australian resource companies are learning from past mistakes and are paying attention, for example, to making sure that mining doesn't cause major environmental problems through pollution, and that the owners of the land are properly compensated.

The third reason lies not in Australia's self-interest but in our responsibility.

For nearly a hundred years, Australia and the country that became Papua New Guinea were very closely linked indeed. From 1884 to 1975, we administered PNG either directly as an Australian territory or on behalf of the world community. These were years when we Australians sat in the same bilum as the Papua New Guinean people – two babies together. When we shared the enterprise of the country. The education of its young people. The work of economic development through farming, mining, roads, and aviation. The dramatic improvement in the health of its people through western medicine. And for a few years in the 1940s, the savage and bitter fighting as World War Two swept its way across the land and its people.

In so many ways, the nation of Papua New Guinea owes much of its character and make-up to the Australians who lived and worked there. This is a fact that is widely understood in that country; but it is not really that well known here in Australia, sadly.

So what?, some may ask. That's an old story, isn't it? Water under the bridge! Something that happened in the past, of no concern to the present or still less, the future.

I would like to conclude by suggesting that the opposite of this is true.

Just as we were all in the same bilum before, our close relationship continues, even though now we are both more grown up, not babies any more. In the time before PNG became independent, the people of our two countries worked together closely to create the institutions, the towns, the roads, the schools, the universities and the hospitals. With independence, Papua New Guinea has the right to go its own way and lead its own life – just as you will, one day too! – but just as your brother or sister will always be there with you as you grow older, so too should we be available to help PNG as it handles the ups and downs of its life as an independent nation.

This is the message that I want you to take from my talk. As a rich nation, Australia of course needs to play its part in helping people in all of the world's developing countries. But the case of Papua New Guinea is special. We grew up, and we will grow old, together. We are members of the one body, and it is our responsibility to take care of each other.