

## ***Feau*: A Theological Response to the Impact of Covid-19**

Since the outbreak of Covid-19, the world and certainly our nation, Aotearoa, New Zealand will never be the same. We have heard familiar words and phrases on social media to describe the transition and changes we have encountered. For instance, words like “bubble, lockdown, restriction levels, etc” and phrases like, “new normal, be kind, redundancy of employees, closed borders, etc”. The frequent utterance of these words and phrases in the social media indicate that we are in a period of transition. Usually in any transition, there are always questions and enquiries by individuals as a sign of fear, worry and frustration. These are some of the questions; Are we and our family safe to be in the public arena? Can I still have my job? Can my business still survive in this situation? Can we gather again in our church buildings? Will my children perform well in their education in this type of restriction? Where is God in all these sufferings? Just to name a few of the questions and enquiries are in the minds of many people in the context of Covid-19.

Some would perceive this transition as part of God’s plan and action. God created this universe and therefore, God is involved in any incident that causes any transition. Furthermore, they would interpret the outbreak of Covid-19 as God’s work or God’s retribution to sinful actions that presumably have been committed by individuals or a nation. Of course, this view would be supported by Biblical texts and Biblical scholars who would interpret these texts to convey God as an angry, judgmental, omnipotent, controlling divine and supreme being. The difficulty and the challenge with such a viewpoint is that the God who revealed himself in person and in the ministry of Jesus Christ, is a loving, compassionate, and merciful God. How can we reconcile these two images in our understanding of God?

However, there are others who would view the outbreak of Covid-19 as an impact of human activity and exploitation in the natural world. God created this world and he saw it was perfect according to the creation story in the book of Genesis. Our world or may I say, the mother earth is in groaning. The mother earth, our *fonua* (*whenua, fanau, vanua*) is weeping for the hostility she endured over these years of exploitation by powerful nations and companies for their selfish ambition to the expense of the poor and the weak. Theologian Richard J. Plantinga is right remarking about human behaviour when he states, “On the one hand, we consider ourselves basically good and have proven that we are capable of great virtue, but at the same time we have perpetrated the greatest evils and acts of barbarity – the paradox of our virtue” (*An Introduction to Christian Theology*, p. 181). Covid-19 is one example, dare I say, which included climate change as an impact of careless human activities in the world, our home. We face the consequences of such short-sighted and power-hungry people. But the Gospel of John reminds us that we live in a world that God loves and even gave his only Son to die for it (John 3:16). Our mother earth needs comfort and that’s why I propose the Tongan concept of *feau* as a response to Covid-19 impact.

*Feau*, means ‘to comfort, to care, to nourish, and to lift the burden.’ There is no one English word to capture the full meaning of “*feau*”. *Feau* can express both in words and actions. When we speak loving and kindly words to someone whose loved one has passed away, *feau* is offered. When those who have more are willing to share their possessions with those who have none, *feau* is expressed. When we minimize pollution and avoid the exploitation of our environment, *feau* is visually seen. When we sit beside a child or a woman who has been

abused and comfort, *feau* is demonstrated. And when we mourn together with families whose loved ones died as a result of Covid-19, we are engaging in the process of *feau*. Therefore, *feau* is not a once and for all action, but a journey of constant attention to those who need comfort and support, which reflects Christ's love.

The opposite of *feau* is *hoha'a* and *lotomo'ua* (worry and anxiety). When a loved one is passing away we are worried and anxious. When we lose our jobs, we are stressed and depressed. When the outbreak of Covid-19 was announced in our nation, everyone felt fearful and anxious. We are worried and anxious because life is at risk. It is at risk because the person who has passed away is either a father or mother whom their children are dependant on for their survival. Life is at risk because the person whose job is lost is the main income earner of a family. Life is at risk because we know thousands of lives died as the result of Covid-19 pandemic. Anxiety and worry are part of human nature when life is in danger. They can react and become out of control when the issue is too much to bear and unable to control. *Feau* can be a mode of response to ease and manage anxiety and worry in individuals and families.

Our faith tradition and gospel imperative call us to be compassionate and act in a timely manner to either make a difference or form part of a positive solution. We must not only intervene but do it immediately and constantly. It is our pastoral response to any need in our community, especially to those on the margin of our society. By involving in such action reflects our true identity as followers of Jesus Christ. It is certainly a vital part of our Christian mission and core value of our Methodist tradition to do good in such situations. Jesus says, "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets." (Matthew 7:12). John Wesley remarks in a similar way, "Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as you ever can." We are part of both traditions (Christ's tradition and Methodist's tradition) and that's why *feau* in my opinion is vital in our endeavor to create harmony and wholeness in our community. *Feau* is a notion that encourages community to work as a team to bring healing and restoration.

A core part of the work of Mission Resourcing in the Methodist Church of New Zealand is "to resource parishes, synods and leaders for contemporary mission and ministry"<sup>1</sup>. An important role of the Mission Resourcing Board is "to approve and regularly review the strategic direction and vision for Mission Resourcing".<sup>2</sup> These two statements have strong emphasis on people, local context, time, and vision. Without vision there is no direction, without people, no one to implement the vision, and not knowing the context or being ignorant of the change of time our practice of mission will be out of context and therefore lead us into failure. It is vital to know our contemporary situation and respond with a vision and a mission that are suitable. It means that we must aware the current social issues that we face in our community and the feeling we experience in our church and among our colleagues in ministry. As a church, we have to pay attention to the issues we face today. By identifying the issues, we ask these questions; Do we have the skills and expertise to address these issues? Are we ready to meet these changes? Alan J. Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk in their book state, "...missional leadership is about creating an environment within which the

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<sup>1</sup> *The Methodist Church of New Zealand Laws and Regulations*, Section 5. 3. 2

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, Section 5. 3. 3. 1. 1

people of God in a particular location may thrive.”<sup>3</sup> If we don’t know what is happening in the location where we practice our mission, then we might do something which is out of context. As a church, we evolve all the time to meet the need of its generations and their contexts.

At the meantime, we face two major social issues and they are both serious to the survival of our people in the wider community and in the church. The first issue we encounter, is the threat of Covid-19 and its detrimental effect upon individuals and families. Loved ones died and families are still mourning for their loss. Businesses are closing down and employees have lost their jobs, which cause anxiety and depression. In addition, domestic violence is increasing because of stress and frustration caused by various factors, including Covid-19. The second issue is racism and its devastating impact on individuals and communities. We know that this is a serious issue in any community and I think there is no community innocent for we all have racial biases and prejudices. But it’s becoming a serious concern when George Floyd, an Afro-American killed under the custody of a white policeman in America. He was killed in broad daylight, was videoed, and broadcast around the world on social media. That triggered a world outcry for justice for the black community. The result was the establishment of the “Black Lives Matter” movement across the world. The question for us as a church, What kind of vision that we should have in this type of context? How can we do mission in a way that is relevant to our church but at the same time addressing these issues? Obviously, we can’t have a vision and a mission that is contrary to the demand of the wider community and our church. I believe this is very much part of our Christian theology and our Methodist tradition. When we are acting in promoting such a vision and a mission that meet the needs in our contemporary context we are slowly engaging in the *feau* process. It means that we are not and cannot be satisfied until everything is addressed.

### **Some practical steps to implement a vision of *feau***

- Identify a current issue that affects individuals, families, and communities. For instance; Covid-19, racial prejudice, poverty, child abuse, etc
- Create a theology that would address the issue honestly
- Build and write resources that would help explore the issue for education purposes
- Share with the wider connexion for other opinions that address the issues
- Implement and address those issues through workshops and seminars
- Consult with the local community or church to find their own way of resolving those issues in their own way in relation to their own context

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I would say that *feau* is a process. It requires patient, participation, understanding, flexibility, compromise, and perseverance. Furthermore, because it is a process, everyone must involve in the *talanoa* (talk/ dialogue) in order for the *feau* process to implement smoothly. Normally, a decision can be made to ease the situation but can only happen when everyone feels satisfied and comfortable. But how can we ensure everyone is satisfied or in a sense of wholeness? We can do that by being present and listening carefully to each other. Listening and being present are core parts of providing effective pastoral care to everyone in need. Eugene H. Peterson, a Professor of Spiritual Theology states, “It also

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<sup>3</sup> Alan J. Roxborough and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader*, p. 6

accounts for the fact that most church members value visitation more highly, for in that pastoral act they are singled out for special attention and recognized as important...”<sup>4</sup> Mission Resourcing should take part in this conversation to ensure that the resources they produce are definitely meeting the need of our church. In order to do that, there should be a conversation with the wider church.

From the view point of resourcing this process, I would like to see the whole team in the Mission Resourcing office work together with the idea that everyone can contribute. In addition, the Board members have to be supportive of this initiative. Our Methodist tradition reminds us that everyone is a minister and therefore, everyone’s contribution is important and valued. As we align ourselves with the changes that happen currently in our local contexts, we must apply the same consideration to our traditions. We cannot fully divorce ourselves from our history for that is part of our identity. Our tradition still provides us with ideas that we might use as foundational frameworks for the ministries we practice in our contexts.

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<sup>4</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work*, p. 90