restorative justice in the solomon islands

Father Norman Arkwright
is currently parish priest in Tanagai, West Guadalcanal,
having served in different parts of the
Solomon Islands since the 1960s.

A Mixed Bag

Most inhabitants of this multilingual and multicultural country which is the Solomon Islands are familiar with the concept of compensation for offending behaviour. Customary payments of fines in the form of traditional shell or feather money (worked into decorative strings or belts or bands), dolphin teeth, pigs, yams or betel nut and such, have been strained to the utmost as a result of the recent conflict.

One of the longstanding sources of tension among these islands peoples has been the rivalry between Guadalcanal and Malaita. On Guadalcanal, with its vast empty areas, lies the national capital Honiara, the main centre of economic development. The densely populated island of Malaita lies sixty miles to the east. It is home to a variety of tribes, many of whose members have been anxious to get underway and seize opportunities in other parts of the Solomon Islands. Honiara, with its economic, commercial and political opportunities, has been an attractive destination for Malaitan migrants since it became the capital after the departure of the American GIs at the end of World War II.

Cultural Relations

Long before the invasion of overseas influences, local customs provided the framework for personal and communal relationships, including those established through marriage and tribal alliances. Relationships between people, and between people and possessions, are central to the societies and communities of the Solomon Islands. The form that these take varies between different areas. Relationships between persons have always figured more highly, with the value of material goods usually being subservient to the value of persons you know. This has only changed in recent years because of the relatively late arrival in Melanesian society of material goods and wealth measured in cash.

In South Malaita, the celebration of marriages or anniversaries of deaths often involved huge quantities of food, pigs and shell money that had been grown or worked for months or years for the occasion. Nothing was left for planting or breeding or investing for future needs. That part of life would look after itself in spite of hungry times ahead. Solomon Islanders are not strong on saving or anticipating the hard times — there are always friends and relations for that.

In recent years, the Solomon Islands dollar has assumed a bigger role in the establishment of new relationships and affirming the dignity or status of people. At the presentation of an elaborate bride price by the bridegroom's family to the bride's family, the normal thing in the past was for the party offering the bride price to emphasise its relative worthlessness in comparison to the munificence of the new bride and her family.

As parish priest in Buma, West Koio, Malaita, in 1967, I followed the bishop's directive to put a limit of ten 'strings' of shell money on the price of the bride in order to control the tendency to inflation. The quality, style and fineness of each 'string' had ramifications for the number of pigs and amount of food anticipated. A massive affair could be a positive hindrance to the wedding. The accepted alternative for the poor or the brave was to elope with the girl and return after three days for the punishment from her family and the shame from the eloper's

family. Such high importance is attached to the rectitude of the occasion that any previous 'scandal' causes a diminution in value. If there has been any sexual failing on the part of the bride, then her family will not get the full price. Any shortfall in the bride price should be covered by the compensation paid by the party that offended.

In 1969 a young Malaitan man that I was teaching at St. Paul's Secondary in Aruligo (Guadalcanal) fell in love with a Malaita girl and began a relationship with her. His father was angry because he had already paid half the bride price for another girl. Now he had to pay half the bride price for the new one. He decided to complete the bride price on both and the young man found himself with two wives. This situation only lasted for a few years before it all became too much for him.

Custom weddings, payment requirements, and their ramifications for relationships, vary enormously between different cultural groups in the Solomon Islands. Values and motives are also subject to emotions and outsiders are especially vulnerable to intimidating appeals to 'our custom'. There are innumerable pitfalls in negotiations over bride prices between the Langalanga and Koio people, neighbours on Malaita. Negotiations among peoples of Malaita are intense and demanding. Church affiliations are also significant in this context. SSEC (South Seas Evangelical Church) and SDA (Seventh Day Adventist) churches do not allow bride prices or compensation, while Catholics will bless occasions for setting out the different kinds of currency. Guadalcanal custom money transactions tend to be more laid back and the respect element is more important than the monetary value. From the beginning of the current ethnic tensions, the most significant of the demands on the Guadalcanal side was to be shown more respect by Malaitan people.

There may well be a sliding scale for people who are known to be wealthier and can 'afford' to give more or who are presumed not to need debts returned. Issues of status, respect or occasion will be more significant than matters of amounts or currency value. However, even in optimum conditions, there will be vigorous haggling by the customary specialists.

Traditional Worries

Minor frictions and irritations have always been with us and quarrels in family circles have often resulted in a husband having to pay SI\$10 to his wife and she \$12 to him — or thereabouts. I recall the story of two workmen, both Catholics, employed in Buma sawmill, West Koio, Malaita. Old man Lada had been provided with a young wife. A young man, Notofanabo, formed a relationship with her for a short time and had no defence. He was fined five strings of shell money. He paid three over straightaway and was collecting the other two. The delay in payment went on and on but the rift didn't appear serious. Then one day when Notofanabo was bent down working on a trailer wheel, Lada suddenly took a big screwdriver and tried to drive it into his neck, fortunately missing the mark. In the local court case that followed it became clear that Lada had been angered not because of the extra-marital activity between his wife and Notofanabo but because the latter had failed to pay the compensation. The strings of money had more significance than the offence of adultery.

An unrelated event in the same district involved a Christian man whose daughter had been spirited off by Salefera. 'Bugger Salefera' was the vocal response of the father. In no time at all a handful of men from the bush hot-footed it to the girl's father and demanded \$30 compensation for abusing the name of one of their ancestors. The father asked me what I thought he should do. I replied that he should refer it to the police in Auki, the government station. Eventually he had to pay the compensation after the group threatened to burn down his property. What protection did the police or the court provide against the threat being carried out?

About thirty-four years later at the White River Malaita Eagle Force bunker, near my house in Tanagai, West Guadalcanal, another Koio man, cradling his high powered machine gun, wanted to shake my hand as one 'holy' man to another. His religious calling, so he said, was threefold — to clear the land, (he pretended to spray with his gun), to impose peace and order (he straightened his back in imperious fashion) and then to pray with the populace (he piously joined his hands).

Expectations of Restitution

At Vura village in my parish at Tanagai, people know that if they steal someone else's pig, chicken, betel nut or cocoa, they must return it. People know clearly what they should do but while they confidently expect others to respect their values, they often have insufficient regard for others' rights. Perhaps they recognise them but don't feel obligated.

'Father, put a curse on these coconuts of mine so people will be afraid to steal them.' 'Here's money, father, to say mass for me to find out who has been setting charms against me ... or has stolen my pig.' I get tired of dismissing their pagan requests.

When a thief broke into my workshop and house and stole a generator, woodwork tools, CD players (on two occasions) and cash, my concerned parishioners advised me to go and report it to the Tasiu, the Melanesian Brothers of the Church of Melanesia. 'They know how to get your property back through spiritual means. Better still, use some catholic church powers to get back at the offenders — if you don't, people will lose respect for our church and go and join the other churches with more power.'

There is a common understanding that stolen or damaged goods should be returned or replaced. In addition, there is also compensation. Compensation is a word that comes with a vast variety of meanings and ramifications. Mainly it has something to do with restoration or recognition of injured dignity or status. It is what is due to the person, not in material possessions but to restore a relationship, whether between husband and wife, brothers and sisters, or others at the village level.

The Present Conflict

The conflict of the last three years has its roots in the migration of Malaitan labourers over the decades into the commercial coconut plantations on Guadalcanal. The also came for employment as dock workers in the port of Honiara. As the capital grew, this migration resulted in the gradual takeover of business and civil administration by the Malaitans. They were keen to learn and pursue new opportunities, and settle into the more laid-back atmosphere of Guadalcanal.

Malaitan initiative took them to most rural areas round the Guadalcanal coastline, working in same-language teams. As opportunities in town grew and attracted more Malaitans, Guadalcanal people turned back into themselves. The more isolated people in the inaccessible and economically disadvantaged villages on the Weather Coast became resentful. Guadalcanal landowners, especially around the borders of Honiara, began selling the best sites to Malaitan families. This, in turn, encouraged their relatives to squat and settle illegally in the vicinity. However, it was in the more isolated rural areas that local resentment against Malaitans was concentrated.

Guale Attack

Things started to come to a head in 1998 when groups of young Guadalcanal men, especially on the Weather Coast, started to drive out the Malaitans who lived in the Tangarare area. What began as a small trickle of displaced Malaitans turned over six months into a river of refugees flowing through Visale, Aruligo, and Kakabona along the coast of West Guadalcanal and into Honiara.

A similar stream began in the south-east corner of Guadalcanal, sweeping from Marau Sound, the easternmost point, through Rere, Aola and Ruavatu plantations and across the Guadalcanal Plains heading for Tenaru and the Lunga River, on the outskirts of Honiara. The Marau area was somewhat special. Areare tribes from South Malaita had settled in Marau in the distant past with their language and customs but they were restricted to the lagoons and coastal villages. The Birao people from the bush were swept up in the unrest and the confrontation remains unresolved. The Commonwealth Development Corporation (later the Solomon Islands Plantations Limited — SIPL) had been growing for the past twenty-five years with its huge oil palm holdings and refinery. Most of the labour force was Malaitan.

Neighbouring areas of rich land lead to the agricultural development centres near Red Beach and Koli Point. While coconut plantations have had their day, palm oil was coming on stream. The idealists of the Guadalcanal Revolutionary Army

(GRA) were determined to have the benefit of their own land resources and wanted government and outsiders to observe their rights. The original Guadalcanal Demands centred on the recognition of their rights to resources like gold, timber and oil palm. They wanted the transfer of land leases from Government control all over Guadalcanal and they claimed the reef at Point Cruz, Honiara. They wanted more autonomy and rejected the subservient and hospitable role attributed to them by many others. It was time to make a stand. At the same time, their ranks were beset by hooliganism. They burned and looted, and intimidated everyone in their path, giving rise to stories of unimagined cruelty, rape and violence. Later they wanted to be known as the Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM) in an effort to emphasise the patriotism of their motives.

The Eye of the Storm

In the early months of 2000, the IFM stopped short of Honiara, though the threats of invasion were still frightening. In Honiara, the Malaitans were determined to make their own stand and some elements began to pinpoint, harass, kidnap and behead Guadalcanal people living within the town. Twenty thousand Malaitans were alleged to have gone back home to Malaita and now they wanted revenge. Rumours about the formation of the Malaita Eagle Force (MEF) began to spread though no-one seemed to know who they were. Andrew Nori acted as their public spokesperson. Incredibly some innocents from the Weather Coast thought that with the Malaitans now gone from their island, everything would settle down again. In the eye of the storm, many of us wondered how the Malaitans would retaliate. In spite of ceremonies and promises of reconciliation, it was only a matter of time before something happened.

As people were licking their wounds, they were also thinking of compensation for lives and property lost. In their list of demands, Guadalcanal people enumerated compensation for the families of twenty-five people who had allegedly been killed by Malaitans over the past fifty years. They also demanded land reform for all Guadalcanal land that had been leased for

commercial ventures and investments. A major demand was for more respect from the migrants from Malaita and an end to harassment by the police force. On all sides demands were made of the government, the target of anyone looking for redress. Malaitan people wanted to be compensated for property lost and emphasised the restoration of their pride and paying back for their shame. To people of other countries it must seem strange to blame everything on the government and demand that the big man of tradition settle the problem.

Mala Retaliation

Malaitan groups who had been driven out from the Guadalcanal Plains soon set out for vengeance. These were mainly the Kwara'ae people, and North Malaitan groups such as the Toobaita, the Fataleka, and the Lau Baelelea people. The Langalanga people had been severely affected by the forcible expulsions but were less intent on vengeance. It is the Guadalcanal people's land, they said, so we can't complain too much. The Koio, Kware'kwareo, Areare and the Small Malaita people also didn't get involved. Only the ports of Auki and Maluu were affected directly in the passage of ships from Honiara.

Young men from those northern tribes began to head for Honiara like crusaders coming to preserve the capital from the pagan threats. To our eyes it looked as though they were coming to town on the pretext of defending it but they soon became the most threatening element to the safety of the town. Very quickly it seemed that the Malaitans were going to sack the city and then go home.

The Malaita Eagles were formed to retaliate and were thorough in their planning and strategy. They also had strong representation in the Royal Solomon Islands Police and the Police Field Force. It was not completely surprising when they mounted the coup on 5 June 2000 and determined to widen the borders away from the town, talking about creating a buffer zone. They pushed east and west until a cease fire was agreed and peace negotiations commenced. In the process of cease fire negotiations at Tanavasa Bridge, Kakabona, two men were shot

and killed and both sides went back into defence mode. That incident led to Eagle Force raiding parties sweeping down another twenty miles, using boats and an armoured bulldozer to destroy and kill.

Present Problems

After four years of tensions, the Solomon Islands are in a terrible mess. There is no-one in this island nation that has not been affected in some way. Lives, housing, property and gardens of people in Guadalcanal, Malaita and other islands have been damaged or destroyed by the IFM and MEF, and by looters and chancers of every tribe. Professional people in government ministries, like Police and Works, have stolen guns, vehicles and earth moving equipment, even though some claim to have receipts for their ill-gotten acquisitions.

Lawyers, ministers, public servants and police (especially special constables) have plundered government finances by exacting fees and wages. Compensation payments have reached astronomical levels causing the outside world to hold its breath in horrified amazement at Solomon stupidity. While cash has never before been so abundant, there is not enough to pay a living wage to public servants in the medical, educational and law and order services. Investments in the country and foreign reserves have virtually dried up.

SIPL, Gold Ridge, the Livestock Development Authority and a host of small plantations, cattle herds and prawn farms have been ruthlessly vandalised by local populations. Logging and fishing resources contribute little to the national economy because of security threats. The tourist industry is destroyed and businessmen, traders and craftsmen are leaving the country because of danger and dishonesty. Vehicle hijackings and the burning of buildings by criminals are commonplace. Guadalcanal Province lost its HQ in Honiara as a result of MEF activities but had provincial centres, schools and vehicles destroyed by the IFM. Church schools and rural training centres to the east and west of Honiara have been vandalised and some destroyed.

Perhaps the greatest damage has been to the attitude, the common sense and the hopes of the populace at large. People on all sides are demanding compensation from innocent bystanders, including bumping vehicles and asking for damages. How on earth has it come about that almost everyone expects the government to repay the losses that citizens have inflicted on each other? Even the highest public servants and those elected to public office have been ceaselessly quarrying the common wealth of this country for private gain. The selfish and bullying attitude evident among some drivers on Honiara roads serves as the temperature gauge of a mentality that has drastically transformed this country from the Happy Isles we were once justly reputed to be.

Two years after the Townsville Peace Agreement things are little different. Three-ton trucks and four-wheel drive hiluxes are taken over in Honiara by simply ejecting the driver and taking the ignition key. When the thieves are apprehended and the vehicles recovered by the police, the owners are told how many thousands of dollars they must pay the miscreants for the safe return of the vehicles or to cover the expenses of certain repairs.

A Kakabona man bought a brand new hilux for Christmas 2001 from compensation money paid him for burned property. It was probably resentment that a Kakabona man was given so much money that led him to be targeted. He was ejected from the driver seat and the vehicle was shipped over to Malaita the same day. Although the police and one of Honiara's most notorious warlords knew it was in Bitama and promised to have it returned, it has never been brought back to Guadalcanal.

The illegal dismantling of buildings is still going on and can be seen daily in and around Honiara. As work proceeds on Tanavasa (Kakabona) kindergarten with AusAid assistance, 3-ton trucks pass by nightly with roofing iron, water pipes and heavy wooden trusses, stripped from the Livestock Development Association two miles away.

Seeking Reconciliation

Traditional concepts and symbols of reconciliation are quite inadequate when faced with demands for huge sums of money in a society that has only recently become conscious of material goods and possessions. The destruction of leaf houses, canoes, gardens, trees and reefs are the least of people's concerns today. Thousands of dollars become millions of dollars as the term 'compensation' is invested with a new and non-traditional numerical value. The old forms of compensation — betel nut, shell money, and pigs — have lost their meaning.

A landmark in the compensation racket was the Malaitan demand for compensation from the Guadalcanal people after an IFM leader made an extremely derogatory remark about Malaitans and a reporter repeated it in the international media. People on both sides found it offensive and Guadalcanal people accepted some blame. Five million dollars (Solomon Islands) was the figure set for negotiations. Public opinion was that the appropriate traditional resolution should involve payment of shell money, pigs, yams and presentation of betel nut and speeches of apology. However, the Malaita Eagle Force were adamant that a fixed amount of \$5m be handed over. One of the chief negotiators on the Guadalcanal side pointed out that this figure was forty-five times the amount of a similar claim approved by former Prime Minister Solomon Mamaloni eighteen months previously. That case was a response to a claim by Malaita Province for 'swearing' against Malaita by a Bellona man, consisting of something offensive allegedly written on a wall in the Central Market.

The issue of compensation for purposes of reconciliation has become a minefield. While complicated enough at a person-to-person, or family-to-family, level, it has now become an income-generating opportunity in a cash-strapped economy. At the political level, it has lost all trace of authenticity and become a weapon to hunt prey for purposes of greed and power. The Committee for Compensation for Swearing of Guadalcanal against Malaita People was a farce from the moment I was asked to chair it. I was invited to appear with the Guadalcanal

delegation because of my position as parish priest at Tanagai on the border between the MEF and IFM. The government-appointed chairman, the SSEC Pastor from Malaita, did not turn up because his Church does not approve of the custom compensation process. Owing to my familiarity with the people of Guadalcanal and Malaita, I was press-ganged into the job. The whole exercise was a determined bid to extract \$5m from Guadalcanal people and the Malaita delegation itself was operating under the intimidation of the Malaita Eagles who were hovering by the outside gates.

The demand for compensation for the swearing was a preliminary matter prior to attending to some of the bigger issues. Restitution of lost property entailed working out the replacement value for property lost as a result of the tensions. The conditions for reconciliation between the Malaitans and people of Guadalcanal involved different claims. For the Malaitans these entailed restitution for loss of property and pride. For the people of Guadalcanal they entailed restitution for the takeover of their land. As yet, only the Malaitan claims have been addressed.

The emphasis on monetary compensation as the standard form of redress was reinforced when the government issued printed claim forms for aggrieved parties to fill out. A new trade was born. What had always been seen as an income-generating opportunity in parts of rural Malaita, now became a major source of income. Simply fill out the form and claim the amount you need.

Claims were accompanied by threats and intimidation making life unbearable for the office workers expected to process claims. Accounting accuracy meant nothing anymore. Unconditional funding support from Taiwan fuelled further claims. Compensation has lost its traditional meaning and become a quantifiable cash opportunity and the sky, no concern for custom, is now the limit.

Underwriting this development is the national government's acceptance of responsibility for compensation. If compensation were to be paid by Malaita Province to Guadalcanal Province and vice versa it might make more sense.

Compensation is supposed to be a process of negotiation and customary exchange. Unlike bride price, the government's approach is more like a commercial joint-venture (with Taiwan?). It leads to massive impersonal profits and losses as on the stock market — some have inveigled millions while others with no influence are still waiting. The people who write the cheques in the office make arbitrary decisions. A genuine claim for \$65,000 is summarily reduced to \$700, while the claimant with the high-powered gun will receive what he demands. What price custom compensation now? People lined up outside government offices waiting for days to get their cheques before going to the bank to see if there was any money left.

Value of Cash

When commercial logging and fishing started, large quantities of cash became available and with it all kinds of sophisticated goods. Cash was channelled through favoured individuals, chiefs, landowners and opportunists and the imbalance between work and reward grew. Numeracy, literacy and proper accounting procedures meant little. Education became a smart opening to material wealth and employment with its access to easy money.

So it hasn't been a big surprise to see a new way of reconciling differences emerging in the recent social upheaval, leading to the skyrocketing of monetary compensation claims. Compensation traditionally meant the ceremonial payment of customary fines in local currency, from dolphin teeth, shell money, to pigs and betel nut, as a way of redressing the insult to people. Compensation for property damaged or destroyed has taken on a meaning that it didn't have before. Now it's more of an attempt to set the amount for lost possessions at their replacement value. What is different too, is that the parties who have burned each other's property now blame the government and demand compensation from it. Government has been forced to accept the responsibility for repaying lost property and invite people to submit claims. This has opened the floodgates to abuse. Compensation has become a corrupted bureaucratic process and is no longer a traditional tool for settling quarrels.

Commercial ways of redressing injustices between people will inevitably increase national debt and all the other risks that modern economies are visiting on poorer nations. While there are customary checks and balances at work in the village, the ravenous demands of the commercial money-maker have no limits.

Complications

Compensation, especially in today's monetary and inflated terms, has exacerbated bitterness and jealousy among those who have received, as well as among those who have never submitted a claim. One thousand dollars (Solomon Islands) compensation is the current going rate for a killing. The distribution of such a sum can stir up enmities in families, suspicion of leaders, threats, and further depredations against property in order to get even. In the Kakabona district exaggerated claims have turned householders against each other. Even where their families have lost nothing, young militants are still expected to get some benefit from compensation payments. If they don't, genuine claimants who have lost everything are unlikely to be recompensed.

In at least four villages in the district — Tanavasa, Vatukola, Kauvare and Kolotoha — the community held their own compensation ceremonies between the youth and the elders. The elders held fundraising barbecues to raise money to have a party for their own boys. This obliged the latter to come home and leave their other IFM companions to return to their own villages — in some cases two-days, walk away in the Weather Coast. When the government started paying shipping passages in order to get the young militants to leave Honiara and return home to Malaita or rural Guadalcanal, the money tap was truly turned on. Without even attempting to give balanced assistance to both sides, the government created another opportunity for abuse and some ex-militants began making multiple trips, going home then returning for more.

Corporate Compensation

Since Melanesian ways of redress are inadequate for dealing with abuses and extravagant claims, it would be preferable if the whole

community got provided with a new water supply, clinic, school, or rural training centre. In such a case, individuals would benefit gradually from personal initiatives, rather than being shattered by a sudden wealth that invites all neighbours to help spend it. Quick fix compensation solutions can have deeply divisive effects.

Customary negotiations have their rules and accepted ways but they need the moral backing of the church to ensure a balance. Christian forms of redress are the real way to restore broken relationships in this country because there is greater insistence upon the spirit of reconciliation leading to the healing of relationships. At the very least they should set the tone with an emphasis that is more aligned with customary justice. Isn't this what we mean by restorative justice? It isn't simply concerned with replacing all the things we have lost or taken from each other. While not an easy lesson to learn, Christian persuasion does not come from laying down the law with a heavy hand. Rather, it comes from an appeal to commitment, sympathy and the single-mindedness of the parties concerned.

Biblical Approaches

In the area of Christian concepts there is already a difference in values and thinking. There is no way in which the church can deal with defined amounts of money, as does custom. The sum of \$100,000 for a life has become a quasi-legal, almost a magical, figure. But who knows how that amount is arrived at or distributed? Are we talking about popular expectations, legal rights or conscience and the negotiations that might arise within these areas? There's no doubt that money adds further complications and accusations of injustice.

There is a clear need to set forth the balance of responsibilities on the part of the participants, the give and take that will ensure the stability of the relationship. The goodwill of the two parties should be the basic requirement before negotiations can get under way. In Melanesia, anger or dissatisfaction still rankles when goodwill is not forthcoming. In that case, money is called for in order to soothe (or bribe). For Christians this is only a stopgap measure.

As we move further into the area of conscience, it brings us face-to-face with personal values and commitment, choosing truth and love to guide our behaviour. This is the good fight and much of the struggle, wearing and painful as it may be, comes from the training and the discovering of our conscience. It's hard enough to cultivate insights and train our own conscience but guiding that of others and being sensitive to their personalities is a daunting task.

'Justice' is not just an individual matter but is also a balance between injured parties. It is a condition in a society, clan or community. Though there may often be unreasonable expectations, it cannot be reduced to a numbers game. It is about reaching a resolution that is acceptable to the majority of reasonable parties. It is motivated by a concern for reconciling differences, leading to future growth. A Christian attitude will put the emphasis on reconciliation with God (Old Testament), reconciliation with other believers (Old Testament) and reconciliation with the Body of Christ (New Testament), envisioning the Resurrection. That is an evangelisation process.

The first step towards justice is real dialogue with a view to reconciliation. Reconciliation is like a cease-fire, the opening up of a negotiable relationship once more. Dialogue points the way to righting wrongs and sets the tone for repairing damage. Harmony begins to grow between the parties and justice is seen as something to be shared. Justice is not an individual's prerogative. It is a common sharing in truth, forgiveness and love. Justice can never be absolute — it shifts to allow forgiveness and blame to cancel each other out in love.

Real justice is concerned with the repairing of relationships between all kinds of Solomon Islanders on every island, at all levels and among grassroots people. It is not sufficient to restore us to what we were before — God save us from returning to what it was like before. All the damage and loss must be a guarantee of the determination to see the standard of living increase and, along with it, the building of a people-centred commonwealth of tribes.

Church means the Way

Given the number of religious affiliations in the Solomon Islands, the 'church' has different meanings for people. Moreover, the conviction with which someone calls themselves a Catholic, Anglican, South Seas Evangelical Church, Seventh Day Adventist, United, or any other, will vary. At one extreme, it may be just a label. At the other extreme, it may amount to fanaticism. Each one of us is balancing between our faith and our common sense as Christian citizens. In our daily lives we are struggling for authenticity in our search for the Kingdom of God and, as in the case of restorative justice, the real importance is the commitment to an ideal in life.

Casual Presumptions

To me there appears to be a great casualness in the approach of many present well known figures in the Solomons and their public talk of repentance often appears hollow and disturbing. How can a former militant spokesperson make a public apology for his wrongdoing without any attention to details? How can a senior government minister and former militant leader shout out his regrets on the stage of parliament and expect people to believe him? Surely there has to be a better public process of witness and testimony for dealing with the events that have had such a tragic impact on this country's welfare?

Why should these two individuals be singled out? They are both well known, not for their personal espousal of violence but for their histories of manipulation on the political and economics scene. Both claim to have repented for their actions. It is certainly not impossible for either of them to be convinced of the error of their ways, as each claim. However, the continuous manipulation of truth over recent months and years demands a far greater authenticity than they have so far shown. The massive incitement to take over the reins of political and economic power based on dubious principles needs a public assessment in the interests not so much of punishment but of national justice.

Moving On

We nevertheless have to move on and cannot wait for ideal conditions to happen or for people to repent. I wish we could begin to imagine what our standards and values will be in the next millennium. We who are serious about life and living in the Solomon Islands as our final destiny need to look back on the previous thousands of millennia at where we have come from. It is truly great to be alive (and I feel healthier when I have someone to thank for it!).

When we look back to this troubled time we will marvel at the amount of stumbling before we finally got our act in order. It took us far too long to realise that the only way to cope with this challenge was to respect the differences between the opposing parties and to engage with their talents and qualities and reach out to every grassroots person in the land and help to invest them with appropriate skills. It is now the appropriate time to capitalise on our resources and recognise our extraordinary common wealth (and the foolishness of struggling at the money-trough on our own).