

Free-thinking in the Kiribati Protestant Church
A critical study on the effects of an enlightenment and liberalism in the Kiribati
Protestant Church (KPC)

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Bachelor of Divinity

By

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Declaration

I declare that this work has not without due acknowledgment of any material that has been previously submitted for a degree or diploma in another institution. I also declare that the work has not used any material, heard or read, without proper acknowledgment of the source.

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my late father, Reete Bokai who inspired me to become a Minister, also my mother Teaotara Taikone. I also dedicate this work to my wife Pelise and my daughter Marie.

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Studying in Malua Theological College from 2009-2010 would not have been possible without the support of the Kiribati Protestant Church (KPC). I am grateful for the financial support and also for the words of encouragement and prayers for the last two years. This undertaking would also not have been possible without the financial support of the Council for World Mission,[CWM] we are truly grateful for this support which will be of useful assistance to the KPC.

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Abstract

This paper shall explore the concept of free-thinking and the affects this has on the Kiribati Protestant Church (KPC). Liberalism and a period of enlightenment are presently occurring in the Kiribati. This has been the cause of change in people's attitudes and thoughts towards KPC traditions and practices. The result of this is that people seem to be disillusioned by the Church and are beginning to join other churches such as the Catholic Church and also New Religious Movements. This paper shall explore the concept of enlightenment, liberalism and free thinking and the motivating factors of KPC decline over the past 50 years.

Introduction

Free-thinking in the Kiribati Protestant Church

Today the people of the Kiribati Protestant Church (KPC) are beginning to raise many questions about the validity of the church. Kiribati although isolated is not immune to the rapid changes of the world. These changes seem to have altered people's attitudes towards the church and the result which has been recognised is a decline in church membership. The question raised, what is the cause for members to move away from the KPC? Why have people begun to join other churches? Why do the people now question the authority, commitment, and decisions of the KPC in which they did not do in the past?

The difficulty with this situation is that some Pastors and officers of the KPC are also involved in this change of people's attitudes. Some Pastors have implemented new practices in the liturgy, as an example, which have never been used by the KPC in the past. They have argued for the validity of these changes through their own theological understanding without consulting church members.

Being a student in Malua Theological College in Samoa has given me an opportunity to reflect on the current situation of my home church. Studying in Malua has encouraged me to write on this serious issue which the KPC face. As an ordained minister for over six years in the KPC, my experiences confirm the change in attitude towards the church and the decline in church membership. My experiences have also exposed the unhappiness and lack of satisfaction by the clergy and the lay people in light of their experiences with the current problems facing the KPC.

What has also been witnessed through my experience is the change in theological attitudes in Kiribati. These attitudes have rapidly shifted from traditional and cultural beliefs to a more contemporary western outlook on the world. For example, heaven and hell were once thought of as realms which exist above and below. Heaven was thought to be somewhere very high above the earth, and hell somewhere down below. Today, what a person understands of heaven and hell is that no longer the same. The ways in which people think are different because people's understandings have also changed.

The rationale for the thesis.

This thesis wishes to explore the primary concern of change currently taking place in Kiribati and its effects on the KPC. Change has been both positive and negative; some people have been defiant to changes while some are readily receptive. The thesis topic "Free thinking in the KPC" asserts that the change in attitudes from the cultural-traditional understanding to a more liberal perspective is the main cause for the problems the church now faces.

The prevailing theme of this thesis is to address a concern about liberal, open minded and free thinking ideas as being a danger to the KPC. Although free thinking and liberalism should always be encouraged, it can be a stumbling block to the very fragile and traditional society in which Kiribati is founded upon.

Chapter Divisions

The first chapter shall discuss a brief history and explanation of the Kiribati Islands. It shall also explore the history of the KPC and the arrival of the different mission societies, a summary of the present situation of the KPC shall also be discussed, the introduction discussion on the use of the term 'enlightenment' within this paper shall be explained at the end of the chapter.

Chapter Two will explore the concept and my definition of an “enlightenment” that is occurring Kiribati today. This enlightenment or rapid change of people’s perspectives in my view is the cause of the rapid decline in church membership of the KPC.

Chapter Three is an in-depth discussion about the social issues which are occurring in with the members of the KPC. Examples are given through the many interviews which were conducted over the past two years.

Chapter Four, shall discuss my belief that what is happening in Kiribati, namely the KPC, is similar to Protestant Liberalism of 17th Century Europe. It seems that there is a close connection between the issues which caused Liberal Protestantism in Europe and the present situation in the KPC. Liberalism can be defined as “free thinking”. This concept will be expanded further within this chapter.

Following chapter four, there will be a conclusion along with some final recommendations.

Methodology: Interviews & literature & other sources

This thesis will utilise a random population sampling of church members of the KPC in Kiribati. Individual interviews will be conducted on these members from various backgrounds: age, socio-economic status, and occupation. The random sampling technique is to ensure that the data is reflective of the total population and not a localised region of Kiribati. The clergy who have also been used in the interviews vary in their duration of

service to the KPC; some have served many years in the ministry while others have not spent a great deal of time in the ministry. These interviews are the basis of evidence and claims made within this paper. This thesis shall also be utilising a large range of different books, journals, and internet sources to strengthen the arguments found within the thesis.

Chapter One. The Kiribati Protestant Church.

1. Introduction.

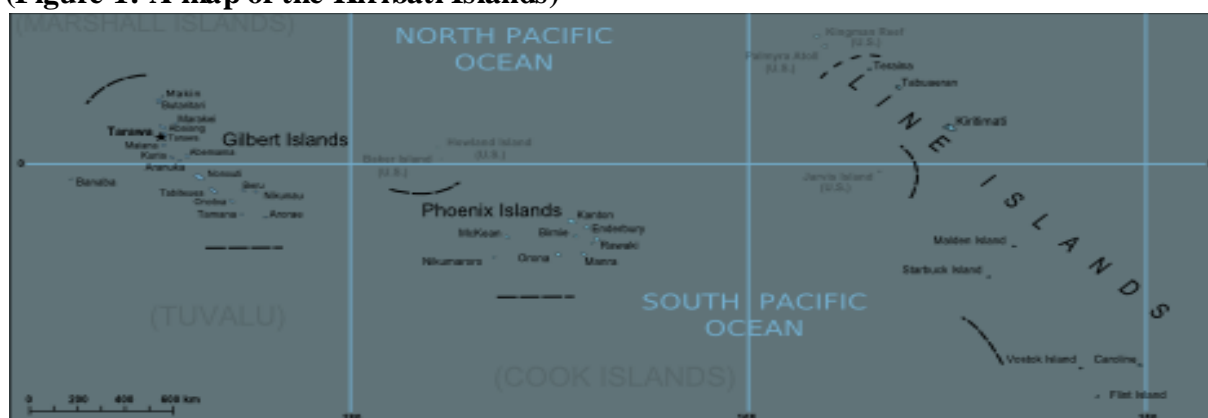
This chapter discusses the significant factors impacting the evolvement of the Kiribati Protestant Church. It is divided in three parts. The first is a brief geographical detail of Kiribati Islands. The second part is a brief history of the Kiribati Protestant Church especially how it became established on the island. The third part will look at the present situation of the Kiribati Protestant Church.

2. Brief geographical details of Kiribati Islands¹.

The independent republic of Kiribati consists of a chain of 33 islands in the Pacific Ocean across the equator, about one-half of the way from Hawaii to Australia. It is dispersed over more than 3,500,000 square kilometres of ocean. It includes three major island groups – Gilbert Islands, Line Islands, and Phoenix Islands [See figure 1]. From 1892 the Gilbert Islands formed part of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Protectorate [of Great Britain], which became the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony in 1917. In 1979 it became the independent Republic of Kiribati, without the Ellice Islands, which had become the Dominion of Tuvalu the previous year. The Gilbertese formerly called themselves I-Tungaru but now usually known as I-Kiribati [Kiribati being a transliteration of Gilbert]. The island's population speaks Gilbertese and English.

¹ Arthur, G. 1987, *Tungaru Traditions*, [University of Hawaii Press], p. xvii.

(Figure 1: A map of the Kiribati Islands)



3. Brief history of the Kiribati Protestant Church.

Before we can look at the problems which the KPC is facing, we first need to understand the history of the mission societies which brought Christianity to the shores of the Kiribati. It was believed that Christianity arrived in *Kiribati* in two waves. First, in the Northern district of the Island, it was brought by the ABCFM², The second time it was brought to the southern part of the Island by the LMS³. These two missions were not alike when they arrived on the Island. However, Christianity did spread rapidly, and almost the entire population belongs to a Christian denomination. We will further discuss these two missions.

3.1 The ABCFM in Kiribati.⁴

The Christian God was introduced into the country by white men and followers of a faith.⁵ The ABCFM was the first mission to arrive in Kiribati [see fig.1]. in the year 1852 on the Island of *Butaritari*⁶ and in 1855 on the two Islands of *Abaiang*⁷ and *Abemama*⁸. Upon

² ABCFM stands for American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Mission.

³ LMS stands for London Missionary Society.

⁴ T. Toakai and others, 2006, *"The Development Plan for the Kiribati Protestant Church 2007 – 20012*, [Printed at the Levett Print Antebuka, Tarawa], p. 2-3.

⁵ Mauna, I. 1973, The transmission of the Christian God conception from one culture to another, BD, Thesis, Pacific Theological College, p.13

⁶ One of the islands from the northern district of Kiribati .

arrival they sought the approval of the chiefs, those that ruled the islands to accept the Gospel or not. The first mission to Kiribati was under the supervision of Dr. George and his wife from the LMS and they were accompanied by Kanoa a Pastor from Hawaii. It was said that after viewing all the Islands in Kiribati they selected **Abaiang** and returned to it. It was unknown why the **Imatang**⁹ chose **Abaiang** as the gate to convey the Gospel into Kiribati.

However a theory which is offered by **Baitika**¹⁰ is that the arrival of the Gospel in **Abaiang**, is related to the meaning of the Kiribati word **Abaiang** which is literally translated to mean “the Point of the Rock.” The European missionaries, he believes, made a connection between Jesus’ sayings to Peter about “building the church on this rock” and their decision to choose **Abaiang** as the gateway to convey the Gospel. Therefore it might be that it is the fulfilment of Jesus’ statement to the Apostle Peter.

When the time was ready for the departure Rev. Dr Hiram Bingham¹¹ and his wife Minerva Clarissa sailed on the first Morning Star 1 from Boston in America to Kiribati on the 2nd of December 1856. They stopped at Hawaii, the base and main port of the ABCFM in the Pacific. They stayed in Hawaii for a month before departing Hawaii for Kiribati, sometime in the beginning of 1857.

During their journey to Kiribati they first stopped at all the islands where the ABCFM Pastors worked just to pay them a visit. They stopped at Kurae to take J.W. Kanoa and his wife Kahoho to be their companion to Kiribati. But on the Island of Kurae there was one of the

⁷ Abaiang is also one of the islands from the northern district.

⁸ Abemama one of the islands from the central district.

⁹ ‘Imatang’ is the Kiribati translation for white people.

¹⁰ Baitika, T. 2010, Interview with the author, Lotopa, 21 June.

¹¹ The first Minister of the ABCFM sent to Kiribati to introduce the Christian God.

Kiribati natives who had been there for a long time and had wanted to return to Kiribati with them. So they took him back to Kiribati as their interpreter to the Kiribati people.

They arrived in ***Abaiang*** on the 13th of November in the same year and they anchored at the eastern side of ***Teirio***¹². When they received the permission from the Chief of the Island, they entered the Lagoon and invited King ***Temaui*** for consultation. This meeting ended to their entry via the beautiful beach of ***Abaiang*** on the 18th of November 1857. This was the precise date when Christianity first arrived on the Island of Kiribati.

The party lived in the village of ***Koinawa***. Besides the chief's house, Bingham and his wife and the Kanoa's built their houses.¹³ Their homes and all their needs were provided and constructed by the people of ***Koinawa***. The village gave their hands to help them. What was surprising was that Bingham brought with him his own timbers from Hawaii for his house. And the house was called, "Happy Home". They lived happily and peacefully on the island. The missionaries admired the custom of the island and the happy people. Not until that peace was destroyed within a year as a result of invasion from Tarawa Island.¹⁴

The mission of the ABCFM was carried out especially in the Northern district. ABCFM sent missionaries to the northern islands of Kiribati, and many to the rest of Micronesia. The mission was started from ***Abaiang*** and gradually extended to other Island of ***Kiribati*** and was particularly helped by the Hawaiian missionaries sent from Hawaii to support the mission work. The ABCFM mission served mostly the northern and central part of ***Kiribati*** and it established the ***Te Baba n Aine***¹⁵ today known as ***te RAK***¹⁶ and as well as the Sunday school.

¹² The name of the village in one of the island called Abaiang, where Christianity first arrived..

¹³ Jonh, G. 1992, *Footsteps in the Sea*, [Printed in Fiji, Oceania Printers Ltd, Suva], p. 262.

¹⁴ Tarawa is the capital of Kiribati, but in the past is one of the islands with a chief that invaded other islands also with a chief for political purposes.

¹⁵ ***Te Baba n Aine*** is the name given to the Women's association of the Church in Kiribati. It is the translation of the English word, "the Women's Board". Every woman of the church is expected to join this body.

The mission of the ABCFM had served in *Kiribati* from 1857 to 1917. It was a total of 13 years before the advent of the LMS mission in the Southern district. This meant that the Southern part of Kiribati remained un-Christianised for another 13 years, before the LMS mission came to the island.

3.2 The Arrival of the LMS in Kiribati.¹⁷

The LMS mission ship known as the John Williams sailed to Kiribati in 1870. And with it on board was the Rev. S.J Withmee from the London Missionary Society in Britain. The ship was bound first for Samoa, to pick up the missionaries from there who had completed their theological studies from Malua Theological College, and were ready to serve on the missions.¹⁸ Whitmee had placed the first Samoan missionaries in southern Kiribati in 1870.¹⁹ They then were bound straight for Tahiti where *Katokamatana* boarded the ship to Kiribati. *Katokamatana* was a Kiribati man who once helped the *Imatang* to kidnap people from *Tabiang*²⁰ village on *Beru*²¹ to be slaves and labour workers in different parts of the Pacific and the world.

However he was Christianised by missionaries and was a committed Christian when he began his work with the LMS to help them Christianise the people of Kiribati. His name also changed to *Tanre*²² to mark the beginning of his new life. And since he was converted on Sunday, his baptismal name was Matthew.

¹⁶ RAK stands for Reitan Aine ni Kamatu, the KPC women association.

¹⁷ T, Toom and others, 2006, *The Development Plan for the Kiribati Protestant Church 2007-2012*, [Printed at the Levett Print Antebuka, Tarawa], p.4-6.

¹⁸ John, G. 1998, *To Live Among the Stars*, [Printed in Fiji, Oceania Printers Ltd, Suva, Fiji], p 154

¹⁹ J, Garrett. 1992, *Footstep in the Sea*, [Printed in Fiji, Oceania Printers Ltd, Suva], p. 262.

²⁰ The name of the village in one of the islands called Beru from the western part.

²¹ One of the islands from the southern district where the LMS mission first arrived.

²² Tanre means Sunday the name for Katokamatana after he converted. When Tanre returned to the Beru people, they did not know him because of his name change.

The LMS mission worked in Kiribati especially on the Islands which were not visited by the ABCFM especially the Southern part like *Beru, Nikunau, Onotoa, Tamana and Arorae*. The main port of the mission in the Southern district of Kiribati was located in *Rongorongo*²³ at *Beru*.

Another group was Rev. William Goward and his companion Iupeli, and his wife Sela from Samoa who arrived in *Rongorongo*²⁴ 1900. Goward spent nineteen years on Beru, creating a mission station called Rongorongo which was a piece of land with a printing press, a school church²⁵ and residences. The boys from this school, who gained good grades, were taken to continue their studies in the theological college, and trained to be Pastors. Goward began to train I-Kiribati²⁶ pastors and deacons on Beru as he visited the dominant Samoan missionaries on the southern islands.²⁷

In 1917, after the ABCFM and the LMS made their agreement; the ABCFM left the country and assigned the LMS to look after the Protestant Church in the Southern, Central and Northern district. And this was about 51 years before the Protestant Church in Kiribati gained its Independence in 1968. In this time the Protestant Church of Kiribati was based in *Rongorongo* in the Southern district and also in *Morikao* in the Northern part. So the Church was directed from *Rongorongo* under the school principal and the teachers.²⁸ The Protestant Church in Kiribati was well developed under the direction of the LMS after the ABCFM left

²³ Rongorongo is one of the villages in Beru Island. According to the Church history in Kiribati this village played a significant role. It was the first headquarters of the Church in Kiribati under the LMS supervision.

²⁴ Rongorongo is one of the villages in Beru Island known as the location of one of the Church's secondary school Hiram Bingham High School.

²⁵ J. Garrett, op. Ct., p.262.

²⁶ I-Kiribati means the Kiribati native, the pure Kiribati citizenship.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 262.

²⁸ Toom, T. 2010, Interview with the author, Antebuka, 7 May.

the country. The LMS was then responsible for Christianising all the islands of Kiribati; northern, central, and the southern.

4. The transition from missionary church to independence.

The GIPC²⁹ the former name of the church before it changed to the Kiribati Protestant Church KPC up until its independence in 1968 was under the control of the LMS. The LMS changed its name to the CCWM³⁰ and afterward to CWM³¹ the name which it uses today.

The Church gained its independence from the LMS in 1968. In the same year the Church's first synod was held at *Eita* in *Tarawa* on the 29th of February. This time the name of the Church was changed to the Gilbert Island Protestant Church. After church independence, it was given the opportunity to run itself in terms of money and employers.

The Church had received yearly grants from the LMS especially for the budget of the General Assembly of the Church held once every two years. The Church constitution was drafted during the first General Assembly, and subsequently published, to implement control of the Church administration and management.

The church name was changed to Kiribati Protestant Church in 1979, when the Gilbert Islands – the largest part of the British Gilbert and Ellice Islands colony became independent as the Republic of Kiribati. This is the current name used today, the Kiribati Protestant Church [KPC].

²⁹ GIPC stands for Gilbert Islands Protestant Church.

³⁰ CCWM stands for Church Council for World Mission based In London.

³¹ CWM stands for Council for World Mission the new name.

4.1 The Church structure today.

The Kiribati Protestant Church is rooted mainly in the past work of the ABCFM and the LMS.³² The Kiribati Protestant Church describes itself as an “Independent Church” and a United Church.³³

Recently the largest set up of the Church structure, the General Assembly, had become the legislature, the authority responsible for church policy and decision-making. The General Assembly meets every two years. All Island Church Council are represented by at least the Pastor, one deacon, one RAK³⁴, and one youth. All of them participate in decision making.

Second to the General Assembly, is the Executive Council which meets once a year. Thirdly, the Church Officers Meeting – a meeting of senior officers at headquarters. They generally meet every two weeks. Under these officers is the Financial Committee, the Development Committee, the Ministerial Committee the Education Committee and Church and Society. All these committees function according to their own job descriptions. Refers to figure 2 below;

³² Rev. Thomas, S. n.d., *The Kiribati Protestant Church* [online], Available: <http://www.janesocenia.com/Kiribatikpc/index.htm> [2010, Jun. 8].

³³ Rev. Thomas, S. n.d., op.ct., *The Kiribati Protestant Church* [online].

³⁴ RAK stands for Reitan Aine Kiribati.

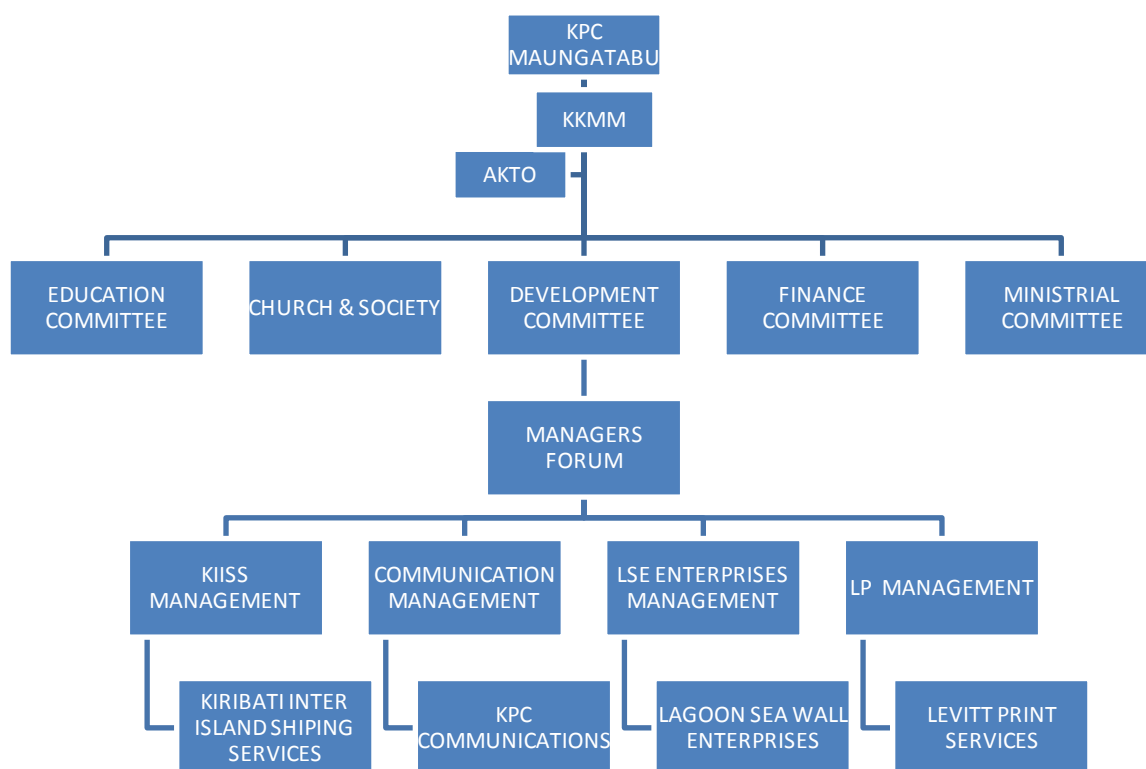


Figure 2 KPC Business organisational chart.

Subsequently, the existence of the ABCFM, LMS with the help of the Hawaiian and Samoan pastors in the Gilbert must not be ignored because they contributed a lot to the shape and type of Christianity now found in the group.³⁵ The fact that the British missionary J. Whitmee of the London Missionary Society working in the South with the Samoan pastors, and the Hawaiian and their missionary leader of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions evangelising the Northern group, led to the establishment of Protestant Christianity in the Gilberts.³⁶ Until now the Samoan missionaries influence is still obvious in the Protestant Christianity in the south, especially in the islands of *Arorae* and *Tamana*.³⁷

³⁵ Mauna, I. 1973, *The transmission of the Christian God from one culture to the other*, BD,thesis, Pacific Theological College, p. 13.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 13.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 13.

5. The Enlightenment and its connection to Kiribati and the KPC.

Looking at the history of Christianity in Kiribati from the beginning until now many things have developed and changed throughout time. The Church has been on Kiribati for more than 140 years now, what we can see is the rapid development of people's ideas and thoughts within this time period. The decline of church membership from the KPC into the Catholic Church³⁸ and modern religious movements has raised many questions as to what the possible causes are?

It is my belief that one of the main factors of this decline is a period of "enlightenment" which is presently occurring in Kiribati. Other factors that may contribute to the decline but are beyond the scope of this paper are: the affects of globalisation, westernised curriculum taught in schools, and the affects of western media on our traditional society. The main focus of this paper as mentioned above is the belief that Kiribati is going through a period of enlightenment.

My study on the "enlightenment" which I believe is occurring in Kiribati will be based on *Tarawa* which is the capital of Kiribati; the rationale behind this is that the majority of the population resides on this island. Our Church headquarters are also based here.

6. The recent situation and the present context of the Kiribati Protestant Church.

The present attitudes of the members of the KPC are more liberal and free thinking in comparison to the once conservative and traditional ways of thinking in the past. Liberalism and free thinking is defined as, one who forms opinions on the basis of reason independently

³⁸ Since Vatican Two the Catholic Church has made many reforms to liturgy which has made the liturgy more vibrant and inclusive in comparison to the traditional ways of the KPC. Catholic liturgy has taken into consideration the spiritual needs of the Kiribati people and has implemented this into their services. The use of musical instruments for example is something which is attracting the youth.

of authority: especially one who doubts or denies religious dogma,³⁹ or inclined to form one's own opinions rather than depend upon authority, especially about social and religious issues, unwilling to accept authority or dogma.⁴⁰ In the church conception, it is the intent of the people to free themselves from any set of rules or policy based on different reasons.

In my own personal experience as a Pastor for the past six years, I have witnessed a rapid change in people's attitudes towards the KPC. Although, Kiribati is an isolated country in the Pacific, people are rapidly beginning to turn their back on our traditions and cultural values which were once enshrined within our identity. My personal experiences, observations and interviews with both church members and ex-members confirm this shift of attitude being discussed.

What has been seen in my observations is that Church members no longer wish to conform to the KPC traditional practices of the past for example, the pastors when they preached before, they used the coat but most of the ministers today they wear the priest dress. The members prefer new and modern changes and trends to the traditional practices or the usual way in which the church has operated for many years. This has been the basis for confusion for both the clergy and the people involved. In addition, questions are being raised about the real meaning of God's will and how the Church should carry out her responsibilities.

Consequently, the confusion I believe has caused a sharp decline in the overall membership of the KPC. People have moved towards the Catholic Church and the new modern religious movements, abandoning Kiribati's once predominant church, the KPC. I also believe that

³⁹ Http: definition of freethinking by the Online Dictionary, Available: [http://www.thefreedictionary.com/free thinking](http://www.thefreedictionary.com/free+thinking)

⁴⁰ Http: definition of freethinking by the Online Dictionary, Available: [http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/free thinking](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/free+thinking)

pastors and church leaders are another cause of the confusion through their theological disputes on this issue. Many pastors' for example, without notifying church members will change the Sunday service times from 10am to 11am. Other pastors' would revoke the mid-week church service and also Sunday afternoon service without the permission and prior knowledge of the Church members. I interviewed a church deacon about her response to the actions of some of the Pastors and this was her response:

"I'm very surprised because we have no knowledge about these changes. And I have no idea about the pastor regarding the change he makes. I'm still confused."⁴¹

In my own experience of the Ministry when I served as a Pastor, I once made a change to Sunday morning worship. Instead of having a Church service on Sunday morning at the church building, I decided to conduct a different service at every home. It started at 10am and finished at 3pm. What happened was that I was faced with much criticism and questions from the church members for not consulting them before I made the changes.

7. The opinions of Clergy and Lay People about the Enlightenment in the KPC.

Concerning the differing views of Church members I was able to ask some members of the Clergy for their opinions. Bishop Teretio stated that,

"I truly believe that the Church today is faced with new ways of thinking. From my district I am faced with lots of critical questions which confirm to me that people in the Church now respond strongly to any Church decisions and traditions."⁴²

The Bishop confirms that in his district he has witnessed new trends and attitudes in thinking which has become a stumbling block to the Churches decisions and traditions. Pastor Metutera claims,

⁴¹ Tiooti, K. 2010, Interview with the author, Betio, 9 May.

⁴² Rev. Teretio, T. 2010. Interview with the author, Antebuka, 9 May.

“From my parish, one of the motions in this coming *Maungatabu* is the notice of no confidence because people note that senior officers in the church are starting to quarrel against each other in some cases.”⁴³

Pastor Moamarawa has served the KPC for thirty five years, from 1956 to 1991. In his observations and experience he noticed a rapid shift in people’s ideas and attitudes towards the church. According to him there is definitely a difference in people’s perceptions. Early on in his ministry from the period of 1956 to 1967 he claims that this was a period where there weren’t many problems or conflicts amongst church members. However, he states that from 1973 onwards a change in people’s views and perceptions have begun to seriously shape the issues that are occurring in the present time. He strongly affirms that the church today faces different problems than what they did in the past. His findings are based on his comparison of the past and present. Moamara states, today pastors and people are more intelligent. They have gained more education overseas to increase their personal knowledge. So in their society they are leaders or master minds of anything. In the past, pastors have had the reversed understanding because of their lack of education and/or training.

8. The opinion of Church members about enlightenment.

One of the church members Teatoti Takene in *Betio* discusses his own experiences in the different changes of people’s attitudes towards the Church, he states,

“I was in the Church for more than thirty years. The Church today in *Betio* is very different than before, and I want to state those differences which are the problem for the Church. From the seventies to the nineties pastors in *Betio* usually received more than five hundred dollars per week. The money was collected among the Church members as their gifts to the pastor. However, pastors today in various villages in *Betio* received only twenty dollars or less than twenty dollars per week. I was surprised and question myself about this, what has happened now in the Church? Another interesting issue when members of the BCC⁴⁴ rejected the “Team Ministry” to work with their pastors on *Betio*. The main mission of the team ministry is to help

⁴³ Metutera, T. 2010, Interview with the author, Bairiki, 19 May.

⁴⁴ BCC stand for Betio Council of Churches.

the pastors in their pastoral ministry. I could not believe that this was the case, why would they reject a team who would help to strengthen the church ministers? Again I started to question myself, why? Why did the members of the BCC reach this decision? There might be a change.”⁴⁵

Teaotai Takene confirms that there exists a rapid change in people’s attitudes towards the KPC. He discusses his concerns of the rate of pay in which the ministers were receiving in *Beito* in the past and what they are receiving now. With the cost of living so high it is difficult to think that any pastor could live comfortably with such pay conditions. It is also interesting to note how the BCC was able to block a ministry team from coming into the island to work with the pastors of the local churches. What has been noticed by this church member is that people’s change in attitudes towards the church is widespread, and that Kiribati could be experiencing an ‘enlightenment’ period.

9. Chapter Conclusion.

This chapter has outlined the history and also the present situation in the Kiribati Protestant Church. What has been outlined is the change in both the clergy and lay peoples’ attitudes towards the KPC. People and pastors are moving away from their usual way of thinking and action and have formed their own opinions on the basis of their own “enlightenment” (personal observation, ideas and ability). It appears that they are attempting to liberate themselves from the traditional and religious practices of the KPC.

⁴⁵ Teaotai, T. 2010, Interview with the author, Betio, 19 May.

Chapter Two. The Impact of the Kiribati Enlightenment.

1. Introduction.

The Kiribati enlightenment as defined in this thesis is the turning point for Kiribati, from what it was before to what it has become now. Contact with the Europeans and their influences have been the main cause for this change. A discussion on what is meant by the Kiribati Enlightenment is important, since it has had a great impact on the situation of the people: culture, life styles, ability and ideas. It is believed that Kiribati started to change with the introduction of foreign ideas, lifestyle and habits when the Europeans arrived on the island.

I would like to discuss briefly the three significant periods of the Enlightenment in Kiribati before and after the arrival of Christianity so as to trace how the island and the people at large acquired the new foreign habits. The first significant period began with the arrival of the first Europeans with their influences and impressions impacting the natives. Secondly, the arrival and impact of the different denominational missionaries. Thirdly, we will view the current period of changes such as: the effects of globalisation, new teachings, approach and technology. This will be done as an attempt to define what brought radical changes to the people as the channel of liberalism or free thinking, and finally the social problems they have caused within the Kiribati Protestant Church.

2. The European Enlightenment.

It was said that there were Europeans sightings around Kiribati waters before the first official landing of the Europeans on Kiribati soil.⁴⁶ This was the beginning of the period of the Enlightenment for Kiribati. From 1823 till 1870, Kiribati waters were rich with marine life good whaling ground. Europeans began to reside in the Kiribati Island around about 1837 and 1838, and from that time onwards the number increased.⁴⁷ The geographical knowledge of the Gilbertese people in those early days was very limited.⁴⁸ They knew there were islands in the north, south, east, and west but they did not know of a wider world with completely different peoples and cultures.⁴⁹

The people of Kiribati had begun to engage with many Europeans. New things were brought by the Europeans which the Kiribati people never saw before. Some of the incidents are very humorous about the natives, yet some of the stories are a disgrace to the people at large. The items which the Europeans brought with them were exchanged for local goods. It was the first time in which the Kiribati people saw European goods and products. Because of this most of their lands were lost to the Europeans. The land was the heart of the I-Kiribati, thus losing their land was like having their hearts taken from them. By 1850 the island of ***Tabiteuea*** was regularly visited by traders, and apparently some stayed and married native women. Since then, the desire for European goods was predominant, things like tobacco, tools, foods, and their lifestyle. It was the beginning of regular trading where local foods and

⁴⁶ Mauna, I. 1973, *The transmission of the Christian concept of God from one culture to the other*, BD thesis, Pacific Theological College, p. 1.

⁴⁷ Biennial Report. 1966 – 1967, *Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony*, [Fiji Times & Herald Ltd, Suva], p. 81.

⁴⁸ Sister Alaima, T and others. 1979, *Kiribati Aspects of History*, Published by the Institute of Pacific Studies and Extension Services, University of the South, Printed by Fiji Times & Herald Ltd, Suva, Fiji], p.29.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 29.

handicrafts were sold to the Europeans. And likewise, the natives bought the European goods they needed. Local stores were soon integrated into everyday life on the island.⁵⁰

The Kiribati people learnt a lot about the white man, from the traders who lived with them, together with castaways and sailors who settled on the islands. To a considerable extent these few white men exercised great European influence on the natives in many ways. The long term stays of the traders, the escaped convicts, and the stowaways together with the visits of trading vessels made for increased contact with the European world, materials, ideas, influences and the Christian God who was proclaimed in the islands by the missionaries who came after the early traders and a few other groups. There developed an exchange of ideas and cross-fertilization of cultures at that stage.”⁵¹

The two groups began to learn more from each other about new things and they strived to adapt to the different challenges of the encounter. Europeans learned from the Kiribati, and on the other hand, the I-Kiribati also learned greater things from the Europeans. Acculturation then began to take shape while the white man tried to immerse himself harmoniously into the local situation and custom. Seeking to learn the local language in order to see and understand through the eyes of the Kiribati native. The Kiribati likewise did the same, to adjust to the changes brought in by the white man.”⁵²

⁵⁰ T, Toakai, 1980, *A study of the two denominations in Tbituea*: Kiribati Protestant Church and Roman Catholic Churches, BD, thesis, Pacific Theological College, p. 6.

⁵¹ Mauna, I. 1973, *The transmission of the Christian concept of God from one culture to the other*, BD thesis, Pacific Theological College, p. 2.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 2.

It was believed that the traders, whalers, beach combers, and others present in the Gilberts during this period, formed tight-knit community groups.⁵³ Yet the most evil of these groups were the blackbirders and the beachcombers who were⁵⁴ the worst character”, “designingmen”, “outrageous in conduct” and more subtly, as being responsible for prejudicing the High chief’s [of *Abemama*] perception against the missionaries”.⁵⁵

In the Biennial Report, the black birders attacked and took away the inhabitants of the Gilberts and Ellice to work in distant parts of the world.⁵⁶ From about 1860 through 1870, the black birders raided many of the islands in the Gilberts and Ellice, carrying away islanders to South American mining and coffee plantation, and to Fiji, Tahiti, Hawaii, and Queensland”.⁵⁷ The attitude of the Europeans was very bad toward the natives.

Europeans treated the people harshly. Some returned home when their term expired, whereas the others died as the result of over work.⁵⁸ On the other hand, labour trade was also a tremendous benefit to some of the recruits; exposing them to the outside world and to bring back with them foreign goods, ideas, and cultures they acquired while working overseas.⁵⁹

Another offensive practice introduced by the European was the selling of goods to natives not for trade or money, but for sexual favors. They used their goods to pay women, especially the *nikiranroro* [single women who were not virgins] for sex. Sexual favors were also sought by the whalers. On some islands the women, most probably the *nikranroro*, and married women

⁵³ Mauna, I. 1973, *The transmission of the Christian conception of God from one culture to the other*, BD thesis, Pacific Theological College, p. 2.

⁵⁴ Mauna, I. 1979, op, ct., p. 2.

⁵⁵ David and Scarr, 1970, *Pacific Island Potrait*, [Fiji Times & Herald Limited, Suva, Fiji], p. 207.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 2.

⁵⁷ Biennial Report, 1966-1967, *Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony*, [Fiji Times & Herald Limited, Suva, Fiji], p. 821.

⁵⁸ T, Toakai, 1980, *A Study of the two denominations in Tabiteuea: Kiribati Protestant Church and Roman Catholic Churches*, BD, thesis, Pacific Theological College, p. 7.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 7.

who were not living with their husbands were made available for tobacco which was in high demand”.⁶⁰

Even though European conduct brought good changes in terms of ability, knowledge, and skills, they also introduced delinquent habits and practices for the Kiribati people.

3. Religious Enlightenment from 1857 onwards.

The arrival of the missionaries with their Christian God to Kiribati was another route by which European contact was introduced to the island, and at the same time it brought the great changes especially to the belief and behaviour of the people. It was said that Christianity shaped and amended the lifestyle of the people from paganism to Christianity. Their mindset gradually changed to a new way of thinking. Before the arrival of the Christian missionaries, the natives had their own native beliefs. They believed in their own god. This had a powerful impact on Kiribati society.

The white men brought the gospel to the island and destroyed all the pagan practices of the Kiribati people. Their native religious practices and gods were also destroyed. The white missionaries assimilated Kiribati with their own European culture and traditions, without regards for the natives beliefs. One of the traditional beliefs they completely destroyed is the *bangota*.⁶¹

Te bangota played a very important role for each Kiribati family, which the missionaries failed to see. It was a living sign of family unity of the departed and living members. For the

⁶⁰ Sister Alaima, T and others. 1979, *Kiribati Aspects of History*, p. 32.

⁶¹ The Kiribati word for shrine, a small figure of something decorated with stones.

bangota was a physical symbol of the warm love between the living and the dead. Because of this special link symbolised in every *bangota*, the Gilbertese gave it high veneration. One of the writers stated, “if the missionaries had known this fully, they would not have allowed the complete destruction of all the *bangota*”.⁶²

The LMS was the first to put the Kiribati language into writing and to establish education. For instance, the church founded village schools which were run by pastors. In those days most people could not read and write. In order to get the message of the Gospel, the children were to attend the church schools in the village, to learn how to read and write. It was a most welcoming contribution of Christianity to the people at large.

Therefore, the period of 1857 to 1870 witnessed a positive thrust in the history of Kiribati. Christianity completely changed the beliefs, attitudes, understanding, and life style of the people, from paganism to Christianity. It brought the light to life in order to enlighten the people about the Christian God. It was a dynamic process, powerful enough to overcome the power of evil amongst the natives. In 1947 the new religious movements began to arrive on the island and also brought further new teachings and approaches to the people.

4. The recent Enlightenment as the effect of globalization.

Kiribati today is different from Kiribati yesterday. By looking at the society especially the present in comparison with the past would yield a great spell of changes. It is believed that Kiribati now has found a spot in modernization.⁶³

⁶² Mauna, I. 1973, *The transmission of the Christian conception of God from one culture to the other*, BD thesis, Pacific Theological College, p. 161.

⁶³ Kiribati today is a multicultural country. Modern things were happened now in Kiribati. The life style of the people changed from what they used to be before. Modern technology can be found now in the county.

Kiribati is presently known as one of the islands in the Pacific that has been infiltrated by foreign cultures. It is evident in the lives of the people that it is very different then what was here before. The Kiribati islands were once pure, green and lush; holding firm to their traditions and was a much happier place. They had one mind to settle upon their way of living, such as the pride in their own local foods. So life before was very simple, whereas the main source of living was basically from either the land or sea. The traditions and customs or cultures governed the daily life and there was nothing more or less important than enjoying and acknowledging what their gods had given them.

But most of the people today depend on European foods rather than their own. All of a sudden rice has been the main imported food instead of the local food like *b'ab'ai*, coconut, and so forth. If ever rice would run out from stores it could certainly worry the people, as if local food is unavailable. People today depend more on the stores, instead of their own local foods.

For sure our natural resources which are our main source of life are exploited, refined and resold to us by multinationals for big profits.⁶⁴ But people today still ignore what is going on around them. With the abundance of naturally growing foods found on our islands, many still rely on imported foods. I asked one of my informants about this situation, and he replied,

“I believe that today the food would come mostly from the stores, for the reason that it was very easy to cook, rather than their own local foods, which may require great effort in preparation and another reason people today to compared with the past are on the spot of modernization. They changed to a new way of thinking to see the foreign foods are simpler.”⁶⁵

⁶⁴ 2001, Pacific Conference of Churches, *Toward an Island of Hope: The Pacific Churches response on alternatives to Globalization*, Nadi, Fiji, p. 51.

⁶⁵ Tokataake, M. 2010. Interview with the author, Betio, 8 May.

What can be seen is that people are thinking more about what is most convenient. They compare their local foods with the imported ones, and arrive at the conclusion that foods from the stores are easier to cook. Mauna states, “Cooking foreign food is very easy – buy a tin of fish and boil rice.”⁶⁶

The culture has started to change, which is tragic because our culture is unique, for it speaks of not only who we are but where we belong. The values of the Kiribati identity has changed and it seems that Kiribati today is the multicultural Island without a solid past. Many kinds of culture and subcultures are presently seen on the island. The way people dress, talk, dance and so forth seem to spoil the original cultural values of the true Kiribati people. I strongly believe that those who have turned to the Catholic Church and new religious movements are the ones that have lost their cultural identity. The way they dress, talk, and their relationship with others have changed drastically. They attempt to adapt to the western lifestyle. Sometimes they hardly see their families, isolating themselves because of their church doctrines.

The way of respecting others has also started to decline with the newer generation. It appears that most of our youth question and ignore the valuable customs of Kiribati. One of my informants told this story,

“One day we were gathering in our group for our *mee*⁶⁷. All of a sudden we heard loud shouting from not very far from the place we held our function. When we turned around to see what had happened a young man around 15 years was drunk and was using foul words on the people.”⁶⁸

I asked the man what has happened to our young Kiribati generation, he replied,

⁶⁶ Tokataake, M. 2010. Interview with the author, Betio, 8 May.

⁶⁷ The gathering of groups to pronounce the money they have collected for a long time and to see who is the winner, the group who gained more money is the winner.

⁶⁸ Miiteri, R. 2010. Interview with the author, Bairiki, 9 May.

“That’s the way of *Tarawa*⁶⁹. You know *Tarawa* today is very different from *Tarawa* yesterday. The reason behind these changes are: inflow of foreign customs, habits and new technology has been introduced to the island and have changed their life style. This is what I believe.”⁷⁰

According to Mauna;

“*Te katei ni*⁷¹ Kiribati is changing faster on *Tarawa* than in the outer islands, where change is also evident.”⁷²

Since *Tarawa* is the capital of Kiribati, therefore any foreign cultures from the migration of the people would be easy. *Tarawa* sets the trend with changes in lifestyle, music and dance and the way people live together. Additionally, education and overseas exposure have brought great change to our society. At the end of their overseas assignment the students and the workers return home to Kiribati with new ideas and life styles, and certainly become agents of social change in their own community.”⁷³

By looking at the three periods of enlightenment, these encounters have contributed to the different look of Kiribati from yesterday to today. Foreign encounter has changed the island drastically. Not only by the way people look but also by the way they act. Modern influence has greatly influenced the people of the island.

So Kiribati today is changing because we are living in a luxurious and fast changing world, and it is hard to compare the 1990s with 2010 because there is a big gap that has determined the difference between the years. These gaps have a great impact on society since the times are changing. Once we were proud of our paradise, which was governed by our own traditions, beliefs and values. But look at what has happened now? Everything has changed

⁶⁹ In this context Tarawa was changed to modern ways, not like Tarawa before.

⁷⁰ Miiteri, R. 2010. Interview with the author, Bairiki, 9 May.

⁷¹ ‘Te katei ni Kiribati’ means the culture of Kiribati.

⁷² Kiribati Aspects of History, Published by the Institution of Pacific Studies and Extension Services, University of the South Pacific, p. 123.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 123.

and it seems that our lives, behaviours and way of thinking have been influenced by modern technology and convenience and not by faith in God. We have adapted new lifestyles instead of upholding our cultural ways of living.

On the other hand, the Church has also been affected, since the people have now been exposed to all the changes going on in society that their eyes and their minds have been opened to see and think about things differently. This will be discussed further in the following section.

5. The arrival of New Religious Movements.

The arrival of new religious movement from 1947 is one of the channels to introduce new things for instance, knowledge, life style, and new approach especially about theology to the island. People shifted from their previous personal faith, perception, and tradition and adapt to the new approach. Since new religious movements have different views of interpreting the Bible, the understandings of the people about God have been confused. They begin to question which God is more suitable to them.

Moreover, it brought and implemented new cultures and life styled to the people. It is evident that the gate was opened to free thinking approach to the Church members which is evidently existed in the current enlightenment period. According to Manfred Ernst reports,⁷⁴ he puts five reasons why the number of people joined new religious movement growing very fast. He got the answers from all the people who they answering the question. The question is, “Most of new religious groups are fast growing. “What do you think are the main reasons for this?” The following are the answers to the question. 1, they are using modern music equipment.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Manfred, E. 1994, *Winds of Change*, [printed by Star Printery Limited], p.229.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

2, the atmosphere of worship is free⁷⁶ 3, they attracted people with material things and education opportunities.⁷⁷ 4, they offer material wealth and pay school fee.

6. Attracting people with material things and education opportunities

Some of the modern religious movements use material things to bring people to leave the mainline churches for example; the LDS Church runs its own secondary school [Moroni High School], one of the best schools in Kiribati. There are more than 500 students enrolled in this school. The academic years of study start from Form 1 to 7. One of the school policies, when the student baptized and converted to the Church, he received a very low amount of school fee throughout his academic year. Therefore, most of the parents allowed their children to be baptized in order to benefit from that policy.

Also the Church provides more opportunity especially to the young people in Kiribati for education abroad. It can be evident today that some University graduates are former students of the school. Some got good positions working in government ministries, while others work in the Church on their return. The Church gave free education opportunities especially to those who have converted to the Church policy.

In addition, the church provided for the needs of members especially those who need help. One of the member stated, “We are lucky because most of the time we receive something from the church. This is very helpful for our family because sometime we run out of money. In the KPC we always donate the money, but we never receive anything from the church.”⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Manfred, E. 1994, *Winds of Change*, [printed by Star Printery Limited], p. 229.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Teiata, K. 2010, Interview with the author, Betio, 19 May.

This is the approach taken by that the new religious movement and have attracted the people by providing them materials and education.⁷⁹

7. Chapter conclusion.

Even though, these new religious movements arrived differently on the Island. The Seven Days Adventist Church arrived on the island in 1947, and then followed by Jehovah Witness in 1957. In 1967 the Baha'i faith arrived, nine years later the LDS landed on the island in 1976. Beginning after these years, people started to be confused about the Church, and started to think about their faith. Therefore, people moved around and all of a sudden they joined other new denominations. It was believed that the arrival of the new denominations brought a great impact to the growth of population in the Kiribati Protestant Church.

⁷⁹ Anfred, E. 1994, *Wind of Change*, [Printed by Star Printery Limited] p. 224.

Chapter Three. Contemporary Social Issues in the KPC

1. Introduction.

After defining the changes faced by the people, as the product of the Kiribati Enlightenment, I now turn to the changes in the Church, since the Church and the changes are a result of the people. In this section we will look specifically on the problem of the people and the church, especially on contemporary issues which are related to the principal of liberalism and free thinking which the church faces now.

2. The social problem in the Kiribati Protestant Church.

In this section I ask the question why people have departed from their congregation.⁸⁰ To move away from the church means that people no longer want to be involved with any church commitments. There must be a reason because everything takes place for a reason. I have no doubts that the enlightenment process is one of the events which have stirred the people's thoughts and vision regarding their involvement in the KPC.

The following are some contemporary issues regarding the changes seen by the people in the church.

2.1 The atmosphere of worship is free.

The Kiribati Protestant Church (KPC) is a traditional congregation. It maintains its traditional practices up to now. When people come to Church they sit quietly. The men sit on the left side of the building while women sit on the right side. The way members dress are confined to the traditional dressing which is a white top and any colour below.

⁸⁰ Congregation refers to the Kiribati Protestant Church.

The atmosphere of worship is quite different with other denominations. They allow members to use any kinds of dress, for example, the LDS men wear long pants and the women can dress however they please. These other denominations are free to sit wherever they feel comfortable and the people are allowed to make noises in the church, lots of singing and chatting, people greeting each other while waiting for the service to start. In addition, members of different cultures and genders are able to take part in their services. However in the KPC, the minister monitors the whole service. Therefore, the atmosphere of worship for the other denominations is free and comfortable.⁸¹

2.2 The Use of Modern Music Equipment

In the practice of the KPC musical instruments are not used during worship. Praise songs are sung in accapella from hymn books. When I asked one of the senior pastors why music is excluded, he said,

“I don’t understand but it is a practice from the past, and I feel that this is good for me.”⁸²

However, the new generation of believers find this type of worship to be very boring. It is the same thing without changing. At the beginning of the service they all sit up straight but by the middle of worship they begin to fall asleep. They don’t hear the message that the pastor has delivered. One of the youth said,

“Our way of worship must be changed to a modern way. We should use music like piano, organ, and guitar and even play recorders.”⁸³

⁸¹ Mafred, E. 1994, *Wind of Change*, [Printed by Star Printery Limited], p.224.

⁸² Teteki, T. 2010, Interview with the author, Betio, 19 May.

⁸³ Tion, B. 2010, Interview with the authot, Betio, 19 May.

Most of the new religious movements on the island use musical instrument in their worship like pianos and others. For instance, in the LDS Church they have a choir that uses musical instruments that is lively, and the whole church sings with them. They have an organ player and everyone sings along in unison. One of my informants said,

“I was a KPC before, and to compare the way of worship between my new church and the KPC it is quite different. The music used in the LDS has a purpose and that is to get the worshippers to actively participate. Many worshippers feel that when they sing with the organ they are praying or meditating. For me we feel the presence of the Holy Spirit during our worship.”⁸⁴

According to Manfred Ernst reports, the new religious movements are using modern musical equipment which is a new approach and makes the mind of people think more.”⁸⁵

3. The KPC annual offering: A reason why people have left the church.

Prior to the Church gaining independence in 1968,⁸⁶ the church was fully funded and supported by the London Missionary Society. All the money and other forms of assistance flowing to the Church were all provided from the London Missionary Society. Consequently, there was no contribution from the members toward the church financial funds which is known today as *te karea*⁸⁷.

Immediately after the First General Assembly of the Church, held in 1968, the general conference decided and passed a motion that all the Island Churches were to make contributions to the church for financial operation. This was the outset of *te karea* which continues to be practiced today, and is regarded as one of the Church traditional practices. It was said that in the past, people paid their contribution without complaining. No one

⁸⁴ Tiata, R. 2010, Interview with the author, Bairiki 20 May.

⁸⁵ Manfred, E. 1994, *Wind of Change*, [Printed by Star Printery Limited], p. 224.

⁸⁶ The year 1968 is a very significant year to the KPC to mark its independence from the LMS.

⁸⁷ The word *te karea* means the offering to the church donated from the members for the running of the Church.

criticized the donation to the Church. But in these days, this is one of the major challenges within the Church.

Nei Koitoti states,

“Why does the Church need money? Is it possible to pay our offering to the Church? I want an explanation about the offering from the Bible perspective”.⁸⁸

People are now questioning the offering to the Church. They seek justification of their Christian practice in order to feel satisfied by the end of the day, that what they are doing is right. They have become very critical and have made this a common issue within the Church.

Te Karea is the major issue in the KPC. ***Te karea*** is mainly for the operation of the Church every two years. All parishes are expected to pay their offerings after the budget is approved and passed by the Church General Assembly. All offerings from individual parishes should be cleared in the right time. If the offerings are not paid on time, this will cause a major problem to the Church. For example, there will be no monies to make payroll and pay for other church expenses.

The amount of ***te karea*** is based on the latest population census of the KPC. The numbers from the government census is used to calculate the amount of ***te karea*** is needed for the two years. Afterwards the amount is brought before the General Assembly for approval. When the amount is passed, it is then implemented in the 24 Island Council Churches. The Island Council of Churches (ICC) is the body which is responsible for looking after the parishes on the island. Its main function is to make sure that all parishes adhere to KPC policy. So when the ICC receive the amount for the ***te karea***, it divides it amongst the parishes on the island, and this is the amount that each parish should pay to the Church, regardless of parishioner

⁸⁸ Koitoti, K. 2010, Interview with the author, Bairiki, 7 May.

numbers. The changes that have occurred to the *te karea*, are two-fold and I believe are caused by the “enlightenment” in Kiribati.

3.2 High Cost of living

Over the last 25 years members of the KPC have been silent about the *te karea*, because the cost of living at that time was low. The cost of various goods was cheap and most of the people relied on home grown foods for survival and there was very little communication with the outside world. So people didn’t have too many commitments elsewhere and were able to save their money to fulfil all their social and religious expenses.

They were able to pay their *te karea* to the Church regularly. For them it was not a problem, because they could afford it. Moamarawa states,

“It is a free will giving, so whatever you have you can give.”⁸⁹

Today, people live in a society where money talks, and if you do not work then you do not eat. There has become a competition to see who has the latest material possession from the outside world. People tend to fall in the trap of prioritizing wealth as if it is the major necessity in life. Yet people feel the heat and the pain of living in an unbalanced society where what you get is far below what you spend.

The cost of living is very high, and the revenue is very low. *Te karea* is no longer the only major expense for families but there are more for example: school fees, extended family expenses, family expenses, the village commitments and so forth. Those who work can manage the expenses better, but for those who do not work, they have to face the consequences. There are many in the KPC who complain that they cannot afford the *te*

⁸⁹ Moamarawa. T. 2010, Interview with the author, Antebuka, 8 May.

karea so during fundraisers they are nowhere to be found. Eventually most end up leaving the church and joining other churches.

Ten Teriai Koko⁹⁰ [M].

“Before I converted to the Mormon Church, I was a strong Protestant member at least more than twenty five years. **Te karea** is one of my personal problems. I have no work and income I depend mostly from fish and copra. I could not afford to pay my **te karea**, most of the time, I always seek help from my pastor, to no avail until one day; the two missionaries from the Mormon visited me in my home. I welcome them and they started to teach me about their doctrines. One of our discussions was about giving money to Church. I was very interested in their teachings, and they gave me an answer to my problem. I knew through my prayers that what they taught me was what I was looking for. From that time, I was baptized and became a member since then”.

Nei Kiekie,⁹¹ [F].

“Since I became a member of the LDS Church I realize that my body is a gift from God and I should treat my body with respect. I also realized that some places I used to go to for relaxations were not good for me and that I should not go there. I also learned about how to pay my offering to the Church. When I was in the Kiribati Protestant Church one of my problem was the payment of **te karea** because I did not have enough money. My income depended on my handicrafts. Sometimes during the payment of **te karea** by the group members it usually causes a big argument among members in the case that some can make it while others cannot. For me, our way was not good in the sight of God. In my new faith I found my satisfaction and peace and have settled my problem”.

Tekekee⁹² [M].

“What I have found now in my new faith is comfortable living with my family. No more fundraising and other kinds of expenses. We just concentrate now to pay our tithing and that is dependent on our income. More amazing thing now we can afford to pay our needs compared with the past it was very hard”.

Tetio⁹³ [M].

⁹⁰ Teriai, K. 2010, interview with the author, Eita, 16 May.

⁹¹ Nei Kiekie, M. 2010, Interview with the author, Betio, 16 May.

⁹² Nei Tekeke, T. 2010, Interview with the author, Betio, Tarawa, 17 May.

“The teaching of the LDS Church for me is more reasonable and applicable to life today. Before I was a smoker for more than 30 years, but now I quit. I now know that my body is the temple of God therefore, I should respect and to keep it clean. When I was in the Kiribati Protestant Church my Pastor never taught me about my body, the temple of God”.

3.3 People spend most of their time doing the fundraising.

It is a common practice in the KPC that the women are the ones that conduct the fundraising for the church. The men are the thinkers and whatever they approve the women implement. During fundraising it is believed that the women will spend large amounts of their time working within their groups on the planning and implementation of the fundraisers. They will leave their homes very early in the morning and won't be back until very late at night. Especially during the bingos which is the worst *karikirake*⁹⁴ some women will stay into the night until bingo is finished.

The problem this causes is that their main responsibility to the home is left unattended. Sometimes they forget about their children and their husbands. They assign their motherly responsibilities to their oldest daughter in order to fulfil their church/fundraising obligations. In the night time the husband and the wife will attend these church functions, leaving behind their children unsupervised. This causes many problems as unsupervised children are then left to do what they wish such as: going out to social events with their friends, hanging out with delinquent children and getting into trouble, running away from home, drinking, smoking, and other delinquent behaviours. By the time parents return home, it is after midnight and they are unaware what has transpired in their absence. I asked a child and this is what he said,

⁹³ Nei Tetio, K. 2010, Interview with the author, Betio, Tarawa, 17 May.

⁹⁴ Karikirake, means fundraising.

“Every night is my free time. I count it as a special moment for me because I know that my father and mother are not with us. So after my dinner I always meet with my friends and do whatever we want. My assignment for school that I’m supposed to do I leave it without doing.”⁹⁵

Therefore instead of staying home and fulfilling their motherly roles by spending their times with the family, having devotions, discussing family problems, most of their time is spent with the group members. In my previous parish, this is what I also noticed from members during our fundraisers. They do not know what they should do. The home is in disarray in that the children are not treated well, as well their family responsibilities being neglected. As a result some retire from all church fundraisers/activities because of what has happened to their families. They are still members but they are no longer involved with any Church functions or commitments.

3.4 No benefits or financial assistance from the KPC headquarters.

The KPC headquarters (H.Q) is the Church head office where the church officers work and run the church from. I asked a KPC member regarding benefits received from the H.Q.? He looked perplexed by my question, obviously searching for an answer. He said, “*Nothing, Nothing.*”⁹⁶ Another member replied angrily, “*We get nothing! Nothing!*”⁹⁷ The Church expects the people to contribute so much of their time and money, but yet according to members they have received nothing in return. This causes some of the members to become disillusioned and nonresponsive to the church and its activities. So people start to get tired of paying their *te karea* because when they ask for help the Church, especially the H.Q. does nothing. This is also another reason why there is such a mass exodus from the KPC.

⁹⁵ Ruka, K. 2010, Interview with the author, Bairiki, 18 May.

⁹⁶ Teruru, T. 2010, Interview with the author, Bairiki, 17 May.

⁹⁷ Titi, K. 2010, Interview with the author, Betio, 17 May.

However, more importantly, it reveals a negative aspect of the Church [KPC], not fulfilling its Christian mission of providing care for those in need.

3.5 Without money the Church administration is affected.

If the money is not enough in the H.Q it causes a great problem within church administrative responsibilities. The main problem being that employee salaries and payrolls are not able to be processed. Also affected is the power or the electricity payments which affect all office equipments such as: computers, internet, photocopy machines, fax and so forth. Those whom are sponsored by the church and sent overseas for additional education and training are also affected. According to one of the account officers in the church,⁹⁸ she says that the problem is nothing new but is something that is repeated regularly, due to the ICC's failure to fully collect and remit the offering payments. Only 4 ICCs have cleared their offering for 2009 and 2010, and the other 20 have yet to pay up in full. This is the problem that the H.Q. currently faces and needs to address for the future wellbeing of the KPC.

Most of the money that flows into the Church office is mainly from the ICC. According to the Church's General Meeting budgets for 2009 and 2010, \$728, 398.00 are monies received from the *te karea* of the people, while \$197,189.00 is income from other sources.⁹⁹ When the money from the people are not paid on time, this causes a major problem for the church and directly impacts many of the members of the KPC.

4. The development of Education.

⁹⁸ Tearime, U. 2010, Interview with the author, Online, 10 September.

⁹⁹ 2008, *The Minute of the Church General Meeting*, [Printed by the Levette Printing Office], p. 157.

Currently, many Kiribati citizens have received a good education due to more opportunities for education abroad. The ministers for example, are very well trained in their field and have great knowledge. So on many occasions they will have a disagreement over theological issues based on their trainings which has been an agent of introducing new ideas and practices into the church on their return from their overseas training. These new ideas and practices are part of that “enlightenment” process that has brought changes to the islands and the churches and has drastically impacted the KPC.

4.1 The drinking of *Yaqona*.

The drinking of *yaqona* is a new change that has been introduced to the KPC recently. In the past pastors never touched *yaqona*. Presently, more pastors are consuming *yaqona* at an alarming rate. They drink uncontrollably resulting in their inability to perform some of their duties properly. So, they spend the whole day sleeping without performing their jobs and duties, and because of that, the mission has been affected as well as the church.

One of my colleagues said,

“After drinking *yaqona* at night, I did not feel very well the next day to do my duties. So I spent the whole day sleeping hence all my ministerial programmes were cancelled. Yet this is my free will. I know what I’m supposed to do as a pastor”.¹⁰⁰

The drinking of *yaqona* to me is one of the major problems in the Church. We should stop it rather than preventing it. It is a new form of entertainment for today’s pastors. When pastors want to relax from their work, they drink *yaqona*. However, the abuse of drinking *yaqona* has dramatically increased and it has increased to the point in which the pastor and lay people are using *yaqona* improperly.

¹⁰⁰ Atiata, B. 2010, Interview with the author, Betio, 7 May.

In other Pacific Islands it is part of their culture. They know how to drink it, for instance, in Fiji it is the traditional drink of indigenous Fijian. There is nothing wrong with that, but there have been occasions when the people have crossed the line between traditional use and abuse of the drink which is the problem now in Fiji.¹⁰¹ The usual way of drinking *yaqona* was changed and shifted to the modern way with a great impact on society. Because of this, many different social problems have arisen. *Kava* another term for *yaqona* has also been identified as a social problem because of the fact that men spend most of their time drinking kava and do not go to work and spend whatever money they have on buying it.¹⁰² Also concern has been raised by different religious organizations in the country on the abuse of the national drink and various restrictions have been passed by the government to curb the consumption of *kava* during working hours.

The same thing is occurring in Kiribati. Men spend most of their time drinking *yaqona* without going to work. They spend whatever money they have on buying 5 basins of *yaqona* instead of buying things for their family. When they get off from work they never go directly home, instead they head straight for the *yaqona* club and sit there all night. By the time they return home, they are intoxicated and disturb the family peace by forcing their wives to fix their food. One of my informants stated,

“The way my husband treated me when he returned from drinking *yaqona* disturbs me, and it really bothers me, but since I have no voice, I just do whatever he wants me to do.”¹⁰³

In the Church this is also the same problem. In my personal opinion, *yaqona* should be prohibited in the Church [KPC] because it is a real problem. This was evident in the last General Assembly of the Church where *yaqona* was one of the major issues discussed. It

¹⁰¹ Monika, S. 2007, Website.<http://www.fijitimes.com/story.aspx?ref=archives&id=69753>.

¹⁰² Monika, S. 2007, website, <http://www.fijitimes.com/story.aspx?ref=archives&id=69753>

¹⁰³ Tiina, U. 2010, Interview with the author, Bairiki, 8 May.

concerns the people because of the behaviour of those who drink it. This was the recommendation when I was in the mission.

The pastor is the servant of God's word to the people. He has a great responsibility to fulfil that calling. He is an important instrument of God, therefore, once the pastor arrives in his parish he should be considerate of his work load and take it seriously. The drinking of *yaqona* would only take away from that mission and his calling. He should question himself, why he was there, and for what purpose? On the other hand, the people or the members of the church have a responsibility to take care of the pastor as well as each other as one family. The members must be united and not to scattered. The pastor should have in mind that he is the shepherd, to look after all his sheep. But once he fails in his job, the mission is incomplete and he has a higher authority to answer for his failure.

Since *yaqona* is believed to be one of the problems for a pastor in fulfilling his role, most members of the parish do not allow their pastors to drink *yaqona*. In my interview with some of the members of the Church and this they had to say about the *yaqona*.

"It is very hard for me to see my pastor during the day time. Every time when I went to his house just only his wife and kids. I asked the wife about the husband, and this is what she said, he's sleeping. Also the same in the night time when I went there to see the pastor, he is not there."¹⁰⁴

"I say that my pastor has favourites in the church, because every time he always visited those members more. Later, I heard that those members are the friends of his and convince him to drink *yaqona* with them. He can visit us but obviously. I can tell that he loves those members more than us, and I do not want that kind of pastor. He made a division between members of the Church."¹⁰⁵

"I believe that the money given to the pastors is for their food only with the family. Not for the *yaqona*. But pastors now spend that money on the *yaqona* rather than useful items. We are tired of fundraising but some of our pastors still do not care about our burden. They keep on entertaining themselves especially with *yaqona*, yet it is very bad."¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Robati, M. 2010, Interview with the author, Bairiki, 18 May.

¹⁰⁵ Teoi, K. 2010, Interview with the author, Betio, 18 May.

¹⁰⁶ Mierra, K. 2010, Interview with the author, Bikenibeu, 19 May.

This is the problem of *yaqona*. People need their pastors during any time of the day and night for problems that they are having. But imagine when the pastor is not in his home, but sitting with his friends around a bowl of *yaqona* talking about useless things instead of staying in his home reading his bible and waiting for his parishioners to seek him for help.

Since *yaqona* is not good for the body, it makes them lazy and sleepy therefore, it should be removed from the church. For example, the Methodist Church in Fiji has been a strong advocate of restricting the use of *kava* during social functions of the church...¹⁰⁷ According to the report from the Department of Education and Psychology at the University of the South Pacific, and the Ministry of Education states that;

“*yaqona* has the ability to sap energy and support listlessness and there can be little doubt that it substantially inhibits performance of duties such as in non-traditional professional environment, including the civil service and teaching.”¹⁰⁸

4.2 Issues surrounding the Holy Communion in the KPC

In addition, the Holy Communion, those who partake of the elements of the Lord supper are supposedly the ones that have repented and have assumed membership into the Lord's Supper community. This was the normal practice or early Church tradition. However, modern pastors have changed this procedure and have caused a ripple with most members who do not agree with these changes. What the pastor has done is to call out to everyone in the congregation, inviting them to come forward to partake in the element of the bread and wine. This issue was brought forward to the General Assembly to discuss. The motion was, “In a parish during the celebration of the Easter, a pastor conducts the service, inviting all the

¹⁰⁷ Monila, S. 2007, Website:<http://www.fijitimes.com/story.aspx?ref=archive&id=69753>.

¹⁰⁸ Robert, M. 2008, Website:<http://www.fijitimes.com/story.aspx?id=103771>.

people of the worship to come forward and partake in the Lord's Supper".¹⁰⁹ Coming forward is considered too liberal for some, and the issue has created a lot of confusion among the Church members. Therefore, those affected by this new way of worship have doubted the church's liturgy and the immediate implementation of change.

Tanaati states,

"Some of the pastors introduce whatever they want without considering the members. So for us members, we are confused not knowing the right procedure. In my interpretation I can say that I came to believe what I did not understand so I was better off joining another belief/faith."¹¹⁰

Furthermore, the debate regarding of the Lord's Prayer was another issues that shocked members of the Church. Some were still confused about the word of the prayer. I asked an old man about the issue, and he said,

"It was unheard in the past of any argument between pastors, but these days it was very amazing that pastors can argue among themselves, even Church officers. May be the change was because of modern pastors being more trained and educated".¹¹¹

On the other hand, the lay people were in similar situations. Some lay people were degree holders in different fields for example, accountants, administrators, lawyers and so forth. Others had studied the Bible. These people are critical in their points of argument. And it was a problem or challenge for the church, to defend the traditional practices and beliefs of the church against the new and differing views and understanding of the members and those outside of the church.

In response to the above, Pastor Tetoki states,¹¹²

"I believed that people of the Church now are more intelligent. And this is what I saw in my previous parishes. The way they act and talk especially during Church meetings signify their abilities. I have no doubt because of the new things introduced here are really affecting the Church in different ways. We should not leave this problem as it is but we must work it out in order to prevent our people from this kind of attitude"

¹⁰⁹ Eria, T. 2010, Intrview with the author, Betio, 7 May.

¹¹⁰ Tanaati, K. 2010, Interview with the author, Betio, 7 May.

¹¹¹ Moamarawa, T. 2010, Interview with Enoka, the author, Bairiki, 7 May.

¹¹² Tetoki, K. 2010, Interview with the author, Eita 20 May.

Teaotai Taakene one of the Church members in Betio states,¹¹³

“I was in the Church for more than thirty years. The Church today in Betio has a big different than before, and I want to state those differences which are the problem for the Church. In the seventies to the nineties pastors in Betio usually received more than five hundreds dollar per week. The money was collected among the Church members as their gifts to the pastor. However, pastors today in every various village in Betio receive only twenty dollars or less than twenty dollars per week. I was surprised and questioned myself about this, what was happened now in the Church. Another interesting issue is when members of the Church of the BCC¹¹⁴ rejected the “Team Ministry” to work with their pastors on Betio. The main mission of the team ministry is to help the pastors in their pastoral ministry. I could not believe that this was the case. Again I started to question myself.....why? Why have the members reached this decision?”

According to Reverend Tiooti Timon¹¹⁵ the Secretary for Mission in the KPC, he believes that members of the church have joined the other beliefs for their own personal reasons. However, he believes that it is not because they have no money to pay for their offerings, but because they were influenced by the evangelization approaches used by the other denominations on the island. However, he does believe that some of the church traditions are very boring. For example, the worship and the fundraising that have caused members to become inactivate. He said that they are working hard to resolve the problem. He believes that one of the most attractive new beliefs on the island is the LDS Church. And many people from the KPC have joined this Church.

5. Statistics of growth patterns in Kiribati and the affects of Catholicism and new religious Movements to the KPC.

The enlightenment and liberal thinking also intertwined with the many social issues have caused people to move away from the KPC to New Religious Movements and also the Catholic Church. The flowing data was received from the Kiribati Bureau of Statistics which shows of the declining membership over the past 50 years in the KPC.

¹¹³ Teaotai, T. 2010, Interview with the author, Betio, Tarawa 19 May.

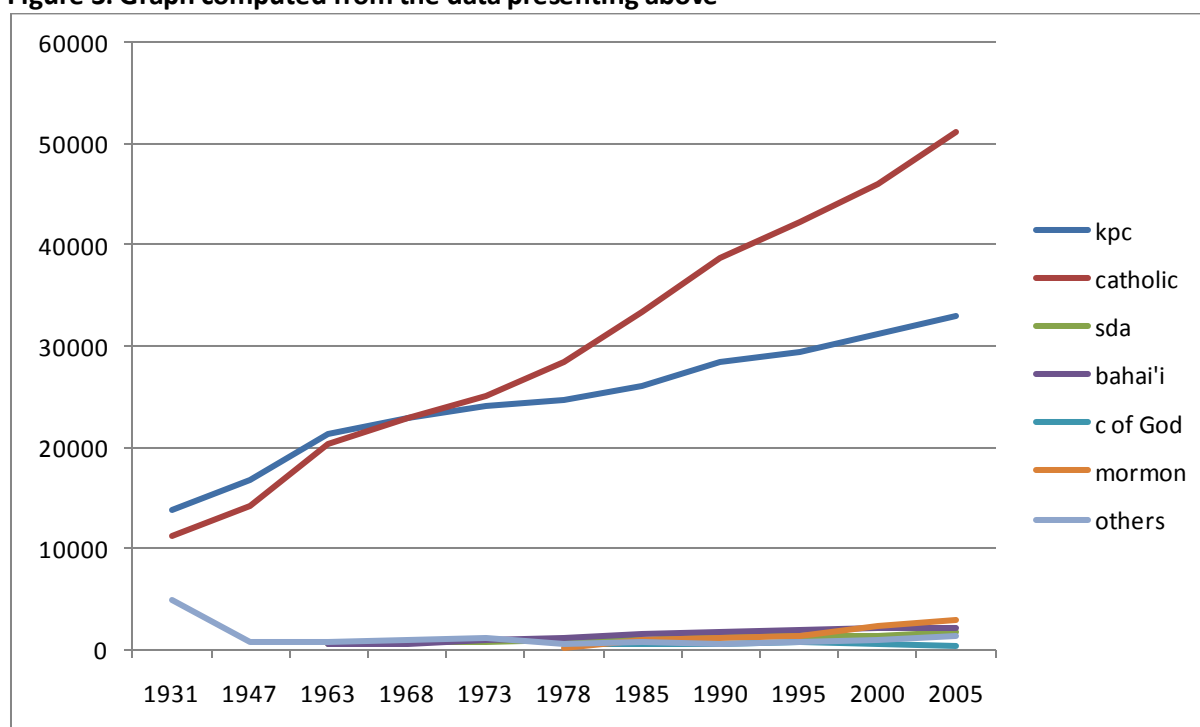
¹¹⁴ BCC stand for Betio Council of Church

¹¹⁵ Reverend Tioti, T. 2010, Interview with the author, Anebuka, Tarawa 17 May.

Table 1 Population by religion denominations: 1921 – 2005 from the Kiribati Statistic Office.

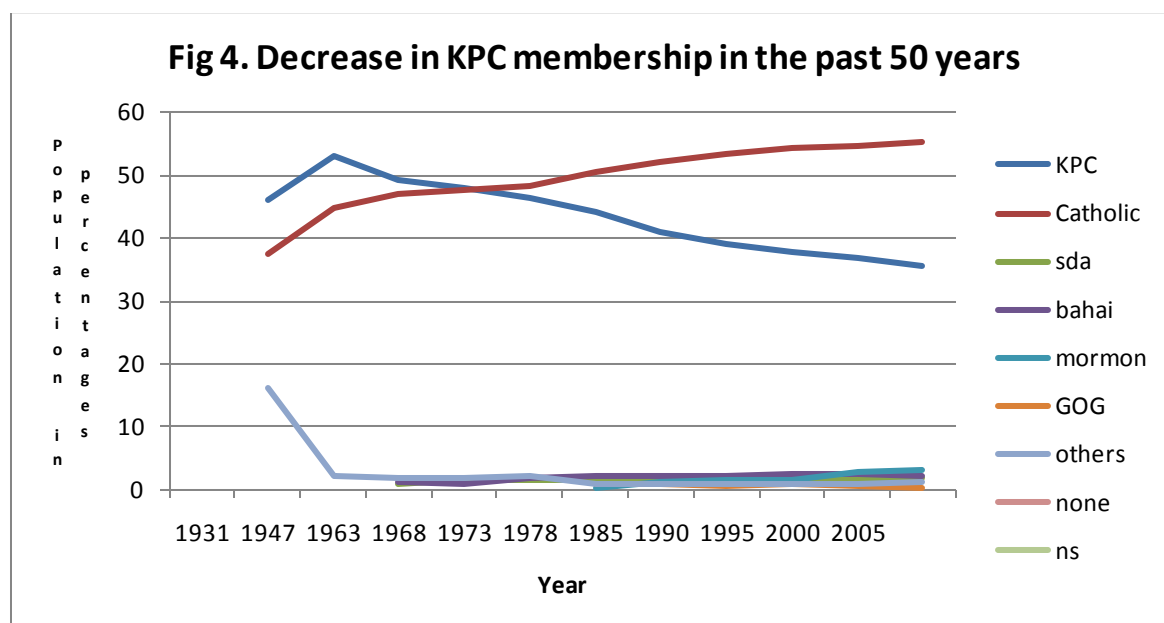
	1921	1931	1947	1963	1968	1973	1978	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005
KPC		13718	16723	21292	22929	24010	24726	26091	28259	29432	31221	33042
Catholic		11173	14108	20305	22792	25062	28321	33351	38657	42164	46108	51144
SDA				436	732	818	893	895	1359	1299	1401	1756
Bahai				507	439	900	1186	1503	1701	2003	2052	2034
Church of God							517	511	509	644	522	364
Mormon							100	853	1186	1302	2307	2910
Others		4860	682	796	843	1136	470	679	564	814	883	1238
None												23
NS												22
Total	26440	29751	31513	43336	47735	51926	56213	63883	72335	77658	84494	92533

Figure 3: Graph computed from the data presenting above



The graph indicates the drop in increasing of the KPC population due to the arrival of new denominations in Kiribati. The KPC populations rapidly increase in 1931 to 1963 and the increase become lower in 1968 when new denominations established. We can assume that

from the graph that people joined other new religious movements and the Catholic Church are mostly from the KPC instead of the Roman Catholic.



According to the above statistics, half of the population is Catholic and a third (1/3) Protestant belonging to the Kiribati Protestant Church which has drastically declined in number as it was once the dominant church in Kiribati. The LDS is the third largest Christian denomination. In figures, Catholic is 50,875,¹¹⁶ Kiribati Protestant Church is 33,300¹¹⁷ and LDS is 13,475.26.¹¹⁸ Comparing the figures will reveal that all three churches have increased in number, however, if we look at the rate of increase for the churches, then we will see that the KPC has the lowest rate of growth compared to the Catholic and LDS churches.¹¹⁹

Although the scope of the paper is to show that there has been a drastic decline in membership based on certain criteria, a future undertaking would need to be done in order to determine the causal factors that have led to the major shift in religious practices and beliefs as a beginning point for church reforms for the future of the KPC.

¹¹⁶ <http://www.janesoecania.com/kiribatikpc/index.htm>.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

The above issues reveal a startling truth, which I believe has to be the impact of the “enlightenment” that Kiribati is in the midst of as mentioned in the previous section. The “enlightenment” has affected traditional Kiribati behaviour and thinking patterns, with many more of the newer generation thinking freely and opposing traditional understandings. With this in tow, they are more opened and acceptable of new approaches and changes. Not for the sake of being rebellious, but because of their new found “enlightenment” inspired by their overseas experiences that yields more meaning and is more reasonable for them. This has given them a new perspective of life and religion in order to find personal satisfaction in the things that they do. Evidently, their renewed outlooks and perspectives have revealed an ugly truth and that is, the mainline Church [KPC] is not providing for the needs of its religious community. The danger being is that the new religious movements are now targeting and offering an escape from the perceived oppressive and old traditional culture and Church demands.

Based on the aforementioned issues and the evolvement of religion in Kiribati, is it apparent that many more members of our island community are readily applying their own free will and thinking processes. They are making their own personal decisions and arriving at conclusions based on their concepts of right and wrong as well as what’s best for them. If this is the case, then I believe that the principle of liberalism and free thinking has infiltrated our Church.

6. The positive impact of liberalism or free thinking to the KPC.

Since we have discussed at length the negative impact of liberalism and free thinking on the Church, we will now turn view some positive aspects from the experiences and views of various people.

The first person agrees with the principle of the free thinking on the ground that God has commanded everyone to seek him when he says,

“But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well [Matthew 6: 33]. ”¹²⁰

He interpreted the text as God challenging all his people to keep searching for his Kingdom in order to realize the presence of his reality. The positive impact is that people are given more of an opportunity to seek God’s will and plan for their lives. They are not being directed by others, but by the works of their own hands, minds, and thoughts to make decisions and act accordingly.¹²¹

The second person gave his own personal view and support from a quite different angle. He says,

“it is the main purpose of the brain and that is to exercise.. When God created a human he gave him the ability to think and to make decision. It is a humans right.”¹²²
He supports his argument by quoting from the gospel of Mark 12 verse 29 to 30 , Jesus answered,

¹²⁰ New Revised Standard Bible, 1989, Printed in the United States of America.

¹²¹ Bitaa, R. 2009, Interview with the author, Lotopa 18 May.

¹²² Tarataake, B. 2009. Interview with Enoke, the author, Lotopa, 18 May 2009.

“The first is, ‘Hear oh Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’”¹²³

He explained that the word **mind** in the text stand for human abilities or consciousness that God gave to them for His purposes only. It seems that people are now striving to seek God using their consciousness and their minds.¹²⁴

The third person gave his view by looking at the influence of the enlightenment in Kiribati, and this is what he said,

“for me the enlightenment is the process of the world changing from time to time. It cannot remain constant but it is always changing in sudden of times. The free thinkers exist now in the Church and have attempted to change things within in the church to fall in line with their new thoughts and beliefs, with the times. They looked ahead and think ahead to seek truthfulness in everything. There is nothing wrong with that and I truly believe that we have arrived to the same conclusion.”¹²⁵

Finally, the last person in her opinion said,

“this is the challenge for the Church. The Church has been given more than ample opportunities to revise all her strategies. She should consider what is happening to the members. She believes that the arrival of the new religious movements have challenged the members’ understanding of issues such as the **te karea** of the Church and so forth in a negative manner.”¹²⁶

7. Chapter conclusion.

Therefore, from the above recommendations on the positive impact of liberalism and free thinking it opens a new way of thinking especially about the church today. Since the church is deeply entrenched in the changing of people, the church should take action regarding the changes brought about by liberal Protestantism or else like a pre-historic dinosaur, they will surely become extinct. Our final chapter will deal with Liberal Protestantism in the Western context.

¹²³ New Revised Standard Bible, 1989, Printed in the United States of America.

¹²⁴ Maria, A. 2010, Interview with the author, Lotopa 18 June.

¹²⁵ Susana, R. Interview with Enoka, the author, Alafua, 20 May 2009.

¹²⁶ Maria, T. Interview with Enoka, the author, Alafua, 20 May 2009.

Chapter Four: Free thinking, Liberalism, and Liberal Protestantism in the Western society.

1.Introduction.

The last chapter attempts to discuss the term Liberal Protestantism from the Western context as this term explains my problem with the Kiribati Protestant Church as discussed in chapter two. This will expand upon what has been discussed, but in a general sense.

2.The definition of Liberal.

Another word for liberal is open-minded, broad-minded, enlightened, forward thinking, forward-looking and so forth.¹²⁷ It refers to someone who is not bound with the ideas or opinions of others. He stands by his own accord as to what he believes as right.

“The word liberal is originated from the Latin word liber. It came from the same pre-history source as Greek eleutheros ‘free’ which may have denoted ‘people, nation’ [in which case the underlying etymology of the word would be ‘being a number of the [free] people, ‘ as opposed to ‘being slaved’]. From liber was derived liberls ‘of freedom,’ which passed in English via Old French liberal.” The phrase “as opposed to being slaved gives a simple meaning of liberal, those who want to free themselves from being slaves; individuals who refuse to be controlled by the authority and power of others in term of ideas or opinions. This term is freely featured in today’s society by people; mainly those want to see change. I believe that when liberalism existed, it signified and marked a new change in terms of knowledge and thinking within society.¹²⁸

Therefore, the word liberal can also refer to the quality of a person who has the freedom to decide and not confine their thinking to any set rules, policies, and decisions. That person is able to think freely about what is sensible and in his best interest. So the term liberal refers to a person who is open to sudden social changes in time.

¹²⁷ *Oxford Paperback Thesaurus*, [Oxford University Press], 2005, p.510

¹²⁸ *Dictionary of Word of Origin*, [Oxford University Press], p. 315.

3. The Definition of Protestantism

The word Protestantism means a member of the Protestant Church.¹²⁹ This term was coined to refer to those individuals that “protested” against the established Roman Catholic Church. The term protest was further lengthened and thus the term Protestant was born. The Protestant Church is referred to as a member of the Western Christian Church that separated from the Roman Catholic Church in the sixteenth century.¹³⁰ Protestantism was rooted in the Reformation Period [1483-1546] when Martin Luther protested against the practice of the church in his time especially in a dispute over indulgences.¹³¹

For that reason, on the 31st October 1517 Martin Luther stated his argument in his 95 thesis¹³² and posted on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg.¹³³ This was the beginning of the protest in form of writing and word and marked the controversy between the main church and the reformers.

In the centuries to follow, denominations known as Protestants were established. They were all in line with the ideal of the reformation. Because the reformation began with the act of protest, therefore all beliefs and doctrines based on the reformation theology were called Protestant theology. The name Protestant therefore referred to the Lutherans in general and finally to all supporters of the Reformation including Anglicans and left wings groups.¹³⁴

¹²⁹ *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, [Oxford University Press, 2001], p.1214

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 1214

¹³¹ Dr. Tim, D. [ed.] 1990, *The History of Christianity*, [Printed and bound in Singapore], p. 366

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ Alan, R and John, B, [ed] 1983, *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology*, [Printed and bounded in Great Britain], p. 477.

The word protest in the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary means the expressing of strong disagreement or action that shows disagreement.¹³⁵ It describes the action of a person who is not happy or disagrees because he or she was in a different position or a different idea or opinion. And according to the Dictionary of Word Origins;

“The noun protest comes from early modern French *protest*, a derivative of the verb *protester*, which goes back to the Latin *protestari* ‘make a public declaration.’ This was a compound verb formed from the prefix *pro-* ‘out, out in public’ and *testari* ‘declare, bear witness’ [source of related to English *attest*, *contest*, *detest*, *testament*, *testify*, and so forth]. The notion of making an objection is comparatively late development in the word’s semantic history,”¹³⁶

3.1 Example of Protest in the Kiribati Islands.

During the democracy of Tab’ai’s¹³⁷ government one of his dreadful project was when Tabai signed political agreement with the Russians to fish in Kiribati waters.¹³⁸ The people were not impressed and strived to bring the project to an end. They blamed the government for not caring about the people. They believed that the government was only concerned about the money rather than the people. It sold out the life of the people of Kiribati to the Russian’s hands. They are representatives of the people, but yet they uphold their own beliefs and do what’s best for their own special interests.

In addition, members of the Opposition Party in the *Maneaba ni Maungatabu*¹³⁹ also disagreed with the assented treaty, thus calling the project, ‘*E a roko te Rokea*’.¹⁴⁰ In the end, the issue had generated much disagreement and dissent by the Kiribati people. The members of the Opposition Party joined together with the public. They lobbied a public declaration

¹³⁵ *Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary*, [Oxford University Press], p. 1213.

¹³⁶ *Dictionary of word of Origin*, [Oxford University Press], p. 416.

¹³⁷ The first President of the Republic of Kiribati His Excellency Hon. Ieremia Tab’ai 1979 to 1992.

¹³⁸ *Atoll Politics the Republic of Kiribati*, 1993, Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific, Suva, Fiji, p. 311.

¹³⁹ Kiribati words for House of Parliament, means the Holy Mountain.

¹⁴⁰ The name of the most dangerous fish in Kiribati and used in this context as the symbol of the Russians invasions.

against the Tabai's democracy. They demonstrated their strong disagreement by public marching and demonstrations in front of government buildings.

The protest mainly revolved around fear of Russian fishing boats, that one day the Russians will turn around and invade their country. Tabai said,

‘It was enabled us to earn money out of our vast marine resources. It was a real surprise when we were faced with a strong wall of opposition from many quarters.’¹⁴¹

Hence, from the above working definition one can say that Liberal Protestantism is the title given to members of the Protestant Church that formed under the guise of having a broad, open-mind, and forward thinker. It is a theological movement that wishes to be free from a corrupt and abusive authority, traditional practices that goes against Scripture and the inclusion of new ideas and changes for the betterment of the church. In addition, they would think deep about a thing either to attach, rely or to obey to the usual ways. They are called thinkers because they are able to take the ideas and experiences learned abroad and merge them within the Kiribati way of life to spice up tradition. As far as the birth of Liberal Protestantism in Kiribati is concerned, it is difficult to pinpoint its actual introduction into our way of life; however, it is helpful to think about it as having arisen from the impact of the intellectual movement of the Enlightenment period. Therefore, in line with this thought we should begin our discussion by looking at the Enlightenment period in Western society.

4. The period of Enlightenment.

The word enlightenment means to provide light or to give light.¹⁴² To give light means to give a new understanding. In the Oxford dictionary, the word enlightenment in its simplest

¹⁴¹ Ritita, A and others, 1993, *Atoll Politics the Republic of Kiribati*, Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific, p. 311

meaning is a process of understanding something. Take for example, in mathematics usually students might not figure out their math unless the teacher shows them the exact method of how to work it out. That means the teacher gave the student the light and that light will help them to understand. So we can say that enlightenment means to enlighten (light up) someone about something.

In the context of the Western society, enlightenment is the name given to the period that covered the seventeenth and eighteenth century. This period is called the modern era since new understanding and knowledge about nature was introduced. Writers claim that this intellectual era marked the completion of the transition from the ancient era to the modern era.¹⁴³

The period of Enlightenment placed great importance on the human person based on his reasoning ability. In another sense, the Enlightenment is referred to as the “*Age of Reason*”, where philosophers emphasized and introduced the use of reason as the one sure method for learning truth. It was believed that this period cited humans, not God, on centre stage in history.¹⁴⁴ The human minds were elevated in order to use reason to explain things that were difficult to understand or to explain in the ancient period.

Humans were given the opportunity to move out from the previous stage, or way of understanding and attempt to formulate their own findings out of their own abilities or free thinking without direction from another. According to Kant,

“Enlightenment is man’s release from his self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is man’s inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another.”¹⁴⁵

¹⁴² *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, [Great Britain, Oxford University Press], p. 358.

¹⁴³ Stanley, J and Roger, E. 1992, *20th Century Theology*, [Printed in the United States of America], p. 15.

¹⁴⁴ Stanley, J and Roger, E. 1992, *20th Century Theology*, [Printed in the United States of America], p. 17.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.21.

The most common philosopher of the time is Rene Descartes. He was the first thinker to challenge traditional belief. In his philosophy his starting point is to doubt everything, except his own consciousness and ability to think.¹⁴⁶ So whatever came to mind, one should doubt and then start to question and to seek the answer according to his own capacity. This is the very beginning of using the mind to reason the supernatural power, or in other words people to freely think of things in the way they wanted. Therefore, all areas especially Western thought and society changed in the way that they thought about God, about themselves and about the world.¹⁴⁷ It was a turning period which caused the switch in understanding, away from the past to the present, likewise, from tradition to modern knowledge.

The main concern of the thinkers of the enlightenment was that they wanted to make sure that what they believed was reasonable. They rejected the traditional beliefs because for them it was not sufficient to give anything truth based on tradition. They wanted to make their own research about the universe and other complicated areas for example, about God. What they believed as traditional beliefs had no foundations. For that reason they claimed that traditional beliefs were based on nothing. This was the main point that the thinkers or philosophers of the enlightenment tried to argue. They concluded that the traditionalist would not be able to explain exactly what they have considered truthful.

5. The beginning of critical questioning of Christian theology.

The Enlightenment inaugurated by Descartes placed theology in a difficult situation.¹⁴⁸ The people were confused regarding their faith. Descartes questioned whether their faith was

¹⁴⁶ Earle, E. 1996, *Christianity Through the Centuries*, [Printed in the United States], p. 378.

¹⁴⁷ Stanley, J and Roger, E. 1992, *20th Century Theology*, [Printed by the United States of America], p. 15

¹⁴⁸ Stanley, J and Roger, E 1992, *20th Century Theology*, [Printed by the United States of America], p. 19.

based on solid reasons or not? For example, the authority of the Bible was a highly debatable issue and needed to be proven as the word of God in the argument of the Enlightenment.

In the medieval period the authority of Scripture was protected and guided by the authority of the church. Only the church had the power over the Bible.¹⁴⁹ The lay people and even the church leaders could not question the authority of the Bible. Although there were differences of opinions and ideas concerning the interpretation of scriptural truth, no one doubted the truthfulness of Scripture¹⁵⁰. It was confirmed and strictly upheld to be Word of God. Even though it was written by human hands it was still believed as the Word of God, the divine revelation of God.

In contrast, this set of basic belief in the enlightenment era shifted the focus of the authority away from the Church and the Holy Spirit and left it to reason.¹⁵¹ People started to question the Bible in a more critical light as a historical document. And that created a difficult situation for the Bible, whether it was God's word or not. According to Descartes philosophy, when the principle of doubt was applied to Scripture, the Scripture could not be regarded as the Word of God until observation and experience proved it to be the Word of God.¹⁵² This is where confusion arose concerning traditional beliefs.

Before the Enlightenment, theologians would naturally uphold the Christian principles of faith, creation, atonement, redemption as a set of basic belief.¹⁵³ A basic belief is justified by reference to any other belief.¹⁵⁴ In other words, prior to the way of thinking of the

¹⁴⁹ Alan, F and Robert, W. 1993, *What Christians Believes*, [Printed in the United States], p. 47.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Trevor, A.[ed.] 2000, *The Dictionary of Historical theology*, [Printed and bound in the United States of America], p.177.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

Enlightenment, the faith that is acceptable is proven as a set of basic beliefs.¹⁵⁵ Whatever they believed and practiced, they were bound and committed to it. With the advent of the Enlightenment, that same faith was subjected to the structures of criticism,¹⁵⁶ attacked from the new theories and understanding, which dominated Western society and marked how people began to shift away from sets of basic belief to the new theory.

6. The rise of Liberal Protestantism.

Following the period of Enlightenment a number of theological movements were established. The principle of these theological movements based on the ideal of free thinking greatly influenced the Enlightenment period. One of those movements was Liberal Protestantism. The Enlightenment was influenced by Liberal Protestantism around the seventeenth and eighteenth century, putting Christianity in a compromising position. As mentioned earlier, Liberal Protestantism is a term used for those Protestant members that are liberal in their way of thinking. These Protestants are no more bound to a set of basic rules, policies or beliefs of the main church on the reason that they are more influenced by the Enlightenment principle. In addition, another point put forward is that the term admits that there is no simple definition,¹⁵⁷ but it has been used to describe both those Protestants first, whose relationship to Christian Orthodoxy has been one of radical criticism.¹⁵⁸ It is believed that the premise of their interpretations denies God's superiority as the Creator and One who has the power to control everything, thus contradicting traditional theology. Their criticism is radical in the sense that they depart from and move away from the basic concepts of Christianity.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Trevor, A. [ed.] 2000, *The Dictionary of Historical theology*, [Printed and bound in the United States of America], p. 315.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

Secondly, those who considered themselves completely orthodox have sought to reconcile Christianity with modern thought. They work closely with Bible concepts without going against the traditional theology, but to reconstruct.

The main target of this group is to transform Christian thinking in light of the modern context, without changing the meaning of the Bible as usual. What they had found was that the world has changed since the time Christianity was found. They affirm that the way the Bible is interpreted with a set of beliefs were incomprehensible to the modern world.¹⁵⁹ They argue that theology must be in line with modern philosophy and science to determine the essence of Christian faith.¹⁶⁰ The way of thinking for this movement was not to reject or turn down Christianity, but to reinterpret or reconstruct Christianity by adapting new knowledge without losing itself.¹⁶¹

7. Protestant theology more susceptible to Principles of Enlightenment.

It is believed that Protestant theology beside Orthodoxy and Catholic beliefs was one of the denominations after the enlightenment era that was easily opened to changes from the enlightenment. Alistair E states;

“It was Protestant theology, rather than Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox, which was especially open to influence from the new currents of thought which arose from the Enlightenment and its aftermath.”¹⁶²

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Alan, R. and John, B, [ed] 1983, A New Dictionary of Christian Theology, [Printed in England, Bath, Press],325-326.

¹⁶¹ Stanley, J and Roger, E 1992, *20th Century Theology*, [Printed by the United States of America], p. 52.

¹⁶² Alister, E. 2001 ,*Christian Theology, An Introduction*, Blackwell Publishing Ltd], p. 90.

And there are four main factors that were noted as to why Protestant theology was open to influence by Enlightenment thoughts.¹⁶³ However I will state only three of these as they are more applicable to the context of this paper;

Firstly, because of the absolute weak point of Protestant ecclesiastical institution, meaning that Protestantism is more open and has more freedom to do what they want to do. There are no sets of rules to stop them from doing so. They are free to question what they thought to be wrong and to seek the truth. They have the freedom to voice and respond to disagreement. This attitude signifies a far greater freedom than Roman Catholic Churches.

Furthermore, the nature of Protestantism itself was another funny reason. This is based on the name of the church. Protestants have the spirit of protest, therefore, criticism, argument or disagreement is inherently part of their nature.

Finally, the relation of Protestantism and the universities brought more theological understanding to Ministers of the Protestant Church. The Ministers had greater access to educational training to learn more about the Word of God. For this reason they disputed more theological issues during the Enlightenment period. Based on all the aforementioned reasons, Liberal Protestantism formulated a changed theology in response to the Enlightenment critique of Christian theology.

Protestant theology and their form of Christianity strongly emphasised sacred Scripture, therefore, they developed various theological lenses by which to view the Scriptures. Firstly, the Bible is seen by liberals as a human document whose main weight lies in the fact that it

¹⁶³ Alan, E. 2001, *Christian Theology, An Introduction*, [Blackwell Publishing Ltd], p. 90.

records the experiences of persons who are open to God's presence, for example, the prophet Isaiah in the Old Testament and the Gospel of John in the New Testament. Secondly, what they noticed is that the Bible is God's exclusive revelation to humankind; in fact humankind then is able to record whatever it is they wanted to write about.

Consequently, when a liberal Christian interprets the Bible, they put more serious emphasis or critical observation on historical information. For example, they try to answer their own critical questions about Christianity from the perspectives of history. As opposed to something that even history itself could not do justice to.

Therefore, according to Donalde Miller, they were agreeable to apply the historical method of the Bible to their interpretation in both higher and lower biblical criticism¹⁶⁴ as their main target which is to explain the meaning of the Bible in two directions; in the brightness of a modern world-view and the best of historical research. Even though they strived to put into practice their new thoughts and how it related theology to the ideas of the Enlightenment, there was no single set of conclusions that all liberal theologians could agree on.¹⁶⁵

8. Chapter conclusion.

In the 19th and 20th century, the Church continued to use the liberal theological principles formulated during the Enlightenment. Even though the era has changed but the theological principles have remained the same. For example, the Enlightenment period significantly changed Protestant thinking, in the sense that they are more open to new ideas and changes and have the freedom to say and do what they want. There are no sets of rules to stop them from doing so. So they have easily adapted to the new changes that are occurring with the

¹⁶⁴ Alan, R and John, B, [ed], 1983, *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology*, [Printed and bound in Great Britain] ,p.325.

¹⁶⁵ Roger, E. 1999, *The Story of Christianity*, Inter Varsity Press, p. 234.

change in time. They are quite different from the other mainline churches such as the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the period of Enlightenment is a foreign concept that saw great changes in every area of Western society in the nineteenth and twentieth century. The area which was largely affected and placed in a precarious situation was Christianity; forcing many to change the way they thought about their faith.

Based on our findings, Protestant theology was mostly affected by the Enlightenment due to the nature of Protestantism; their openness to change and their freedom to openly defend their theological doctrines. For this reason, Protestant theologians began to move away from the mainstream church and established their own movement known as Liberal Protestantism in response to the new changes, for they were free thinkers.

The existence of Liberal Protestantism grounded on the principles of the Enlightenment allowed for rapid transition from tradition to modernization. What is important is that man was removed, escaped or released from his traditional understandings and beliefs; instead, he was to make use of his own consciousness to think without guidance or hindrance of any and all presuppositions. In other words the principle of free thinking led to the search for truth.

I believe that what has happened in the last centuries with the Enlightenment, Protestantism, and Liberalism in Western societies has slowly infiltrated the Kiribati Islands. However, the utilization of these principles within the Kiribati Protestant Church have started to emerge; however, the use of these principles outside of fully understanding the history behind Western Enlightenment has been the impetus behind the dwindling KPC membership.

When we compare the present Kiribati context with the past, there are significant differences which are noticeable. These differences are: form of education; use of traditional practices, and new innovations or approaches which have drastically impacted the KPC.

Today, members are starting to question the Church, they are implementing and adapting to new or foreign changes and are moving away from the Church. The big question still being asked is why are these people moving away and joining other churches? Why are people starting to question the Church or are more susceptible to changes? I believe the same thing is happening here in Samoa – believers are moving away from the main Church.

Therefore, I call this present stage the period of Enlightenment or the Enlightenment of the Southern Hemisphere for the reason that people are more critical in the way they think. The academic and global phenomenon has greatly impacted the way that the Kiribati people think and act. In the Kiribati Protestant Church today, people have become liberal in their way of thinking. The time when tradition was adhered to and respect governed has been replaced by free thinking and vocal protest. I believe that the Church needs to address this issue for the future of the KPC.

Although free thinking and liberalism should always be encouraged, it can be a stumbling block to the very fragile and traditional society in which Kiribati is founded upon. It is this traditional society or community that is affected when the individual usurps his/her importance over that of the community as a whole.

The problem with liberal, open minded and free-thinking ideas are that they tend to denigrate traditional and conservative approaches as being pre-historic and irrelevant in

today's time and age. However, in reality, what is really being promoted is non-conformists ideologies and selfishness. What I mean is that one questions the validity of a practice based on their own personal ideas and their inability to adhere to the guidelines of that practice. When it no longer serves one's self-interest, change is quickly promoted, open mindedness is encouraged and free-thinking is the solution. However, what they have done is turn their back on the community, the family or the group by putting their individual needs over the well-being of the whole. When was one ever greater than the sum of many ones?

This is the danger of liberalism, open-mindedness, and free-thinking. When the interest of the individual takes precedence over the well being of the group. As a small Island nation, Kiribati is built on the core value of the group and when one decides to leave the group, it weakens the group by weakening the infrastructure and when that happens, the group will cease to exist and a culture and community is lost forever.

I don't mean to belittle the importance of the individual need, because within the group the communal concern over the one is the foundation upon which the group is able to remain strong. Just like one pole is unable to hold up a hut, it takes a group (community) of poles to come together in order to stabilize the hut and ensure the wellness of the whole structure.

What the concept of liberalism, open-mindedness, and free-thinking is doing to the KPC is questioning the validity of its practices based on what is being offered by the new religious movements or even the counter-reformed Catholic Church. When our faith or worship of God in the Kiribati Protestant Church, Roman Catholic Church, Methodists Church, Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints, and so forth are easily influenced by circumstances (use of musical instruments, set offerings, clapping, or standing during worship), then we must

question what type of faith we have? If the KPC believes in a Jesus Christ that did not come to do away with the law but to fulfil it in the traditional Kiribati setting and we one day wake up and decide that this faith is no longer relevant, because the Jesus of the Latter Day Saint says that you don't have to pay as much for offering and we have a social ministry that gives you food and if you live a good enough life here on earth than when you die you have a chance to be a God, then that is your choice. But don't blame the KPC practices for your individual choice to leave. You left because your faith was not being nurtured the way you wanted it to. This is the shortcoming or danger with liberalists' ideas. When change is promoted to fit the need of one over the needs of the group.

One may concede that this may not be a bad thing for the KPC, however, leaders of the KPC must work to harness this energy and work with the people to find a balance that can be adhered to. If a general consensus is reached, I believe the benefits will be great. Sometimes the hardest thing about change is knowing when to let go. Holding on to traditional practices and beliefs may be the root cause of the problem, however, change does not mean to let go of the core values of Christianity: doctrines, practices, and liturgy but it does mean to be open to new ways of growing the faith of your church community.

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