**“Paddle Together: Mission Possible”**

Kosrae Leadership Conference, April 26, 1999

**Facing Heavy Weather**

The journey that Kosrae State faces is difficult and perilous, one that will bring rough seas and bad weather. We have already felt this in the midst of the financial crises that our state and the nation have experienced over the past years. When trying to take a ship through rough seas, learn from early navigators who settled these islands and the whalers who brought their ships to Kosrae in the nineteenth century.

First, call all hands to action, with each one responsible for his own post. Whatever divisions may have existed, whatever quarrels may have broken out are forgotten in time of emergency. When a gale is blowing strong, the crew must work as a team. All must focus on the goal–that is, bring the ship to port without loss of life or damage to the ship and cargo.

Second, head into the heavy seas; don’t try to outrun the storm. This simply means that there is no point trying to avert our eyes from problems and hope that they go away. They won’t. We will have to face them head on anyway, better now than later.

It can be helpful to remember your past in dealing with the future. Kosrae was the only island in Micronesia that was free of regular traditional warfare. This was because in Kosrae alone of all the island cultures there was a single paramount chief. In this respect Kosrae was unlike Pohnpei with its five kingdoms, unlike Yap and Palau with its autonomous, competing villages, unlike the Marshalls with its different paramount chiefs who vied for land and prestige, and unlike Chuuk with its continuous warfare between sections. Because of the lack of warfare, Kosrae could channel its energies into production rather than warfare. This was the glory of Kosrae in the past. Let’s hope that it is still true today.

Someone once told the story of two men fishing at opposite ends of the same canoe. They both got a bite at the same time, and both struggled mightily with their catch until the canoe tipped over and dumped them in the water. They were embarrassed to find that they had hooked one another’s lines and were struggling against each other, while the fishes merrily swam by unharmed and laughing at the two fishermen.

**Change of Thinking on Government**

The struggles we face are related to development, our project for the future. Economic development is not just a matter of feeding ourselves, which the people of Kosrae have always been able to do easily, but of producing a surplus. The surplus is needed to support the government services that we have come to rely on. In the past we have followed the general rule: we support our church, but our government supports us. This is no longer viable. We have to adopt a new understanding of the relationship of government to the people. In the future we will have to support our government as well as our church.

This means a reversal of the direction of the past forty years in which the government has provided for everything: free electrical power, salaries to feed families, spending from which a private sector with its restaurants and stores could spring, risk-free economic development loans, scholarships, school lunches, and so forth. The shortage of funding for the government has shaken us up. Now we are being asked to contribute by paying for utilities, providing tax for the government, and initiating private development projects. If we think that this is impossible, we should be reminded of what happened in Chuuk a few years ago at the depth of the state government’s misery. At a time when the government was unable to meet its payroll, when it had run up a debt of $16 million, private industry in Chuuk was alive and well. People were sending to Guam ice chests filled with fish and packaged breadfruit. These were sold along the road in Dededo and the other villages, and the sales were providing help for Chuuk when the government was failing. This is the model of the future.

Leo Delarosa once told me that before Kosrae became a subdistrict center for Pohnpei volunteer groups used to go out two or three times a week and work on the road. When the first bulldozers from Pohnpei arrived to work on the road, the village groups stopped their volunteer work and never resumed. “Let the government do it” seems to have been the motto of the years since then. Somehow this direction has to be reversed.

One way that we can do this is to utilize better the resources that Kosrae possesses. An example is the women’s church groups that are to be found around the island. This tremendous resource could be used for more than entertaining visitors or for cleaning up around the church. They could be mobilized to do community education work in the areas of health, nutrition, prevention of alcohol abuse. We ought to consider using these groups rather than hiring new personnel to extend our government programs into the villages.

**Economic Development**

When I speak of economic development, I can do no more than remind you of the five basic principles that I tried to develop in my talk for the Kosrae Economic Summit in January 1996.

* *Cut the size and cost of government.* This has already happened to a great extent since this was forced on us by budget cuts.
* *Be ready to pay a bigger share of the costs of government.* You are already doing this since taxes have been increased and the government no longer subsidizes utilities. This will continue into the future, however.
* *Increase productivity in the private sector.* Commercial production means a more intense, year-round effort than subsistence requires. It also demands a change in thinking about surplus.
* *Bring more land into production.* Land is a valuable resource. Don’t let it lie fallow. Use it for investment purposes, either directly through productive business or as collateral, but remember that you run the risk of losing as well as winning.
* *Encourage small-scale industry.* Don’t think that you have to go for the big money. Starting small is no disgrace. Thriving economies are built on many small industries. Remember what the Chuukese did in shipping their fish and pounded breadfruit to Guam.

**Human Development**

Development is not entirely a matter of earning more money; it also means building up our human resources, not allowing them to atrophy for lack of use. Investment in people is an investment in the future. Trained and healthy people will be a great asset any time.

Resource development implies a good education system. Let’s take a quick look at the education picture in Kosrae. The strengths of Kosrae’s education system appear in its high retention–the percentage of students starting first grade who graduate from high school. In Kosrae, 61 percent of all first graders graduate from high school–a high rate compared to Yap’s (35) and Chuuk’s (15). We know that a good number of those who finish high school can and do go on to college. In fact, Kosrae’s acceptance rate into the College of Micronesia-FSM has been higher than any of the other states over the past five-year period.

But Kosrae also has problems. There has been a documented drop in performance among students after the shift from a five-day school week to a four-day week. If this remains true today, aren’t we doing our young people a disservice by reducing the school week? Kosrae students, as well prepared academically as they may be, have had a hard time persevering in college, it seems. The reputation of the island is that its young people tend to run wild when they are free from the tight social controls that prevail on Kosrae. If this reputation is accurate, then something may need to be done to correct this situation. Some years ago, when I took over as principal of Xavier High School, I found the same problem there. The students were well trained academically, but many seemed to collapse when they were given the kind of freedom they experienced in college. I loosened the controls a little, assuming that it would be better for them to fall on their face while we were around to help them up than to collapse later when there was not the same support for them.

Investment in people also implies a good health care system. Kosrae’s seems to be rather good overall and the morale of the health services personnel appears high. There are improvements that could be made, however. The state should work harder to bring health care to the local community by utilizing the dispensaries that Archstone Foundation built for the state some years ago. This will not only advance the cause of primary health, but will do much to win back the confidence and support of Archstone Foundation in the future.

Good health could also be promoted by better care to ensure proper diet and physical exercise. The Kosrae population shows rather low rates of lung cancer and liver disease, probably owing to the good influence of the church on the lifestyle of the local population. Yet, the diabetes rate is very high–one of the highest in the entire region. Ways should be found to cut down on turkey tails and other fatty foods, and to encourage even middle-aged people to get more exercise.

**Kosraean Emigration**

Before I conclude my talk, let me point out something that, although often ignored, is relevant to development planning in the future: emigration. At present there about 1,800 Kosraeans living off the island: 368 on Pohnpei, 1,041 in Guam, Saipan and Hawaii, and the rest in mainland US. When we put this number alongside the 7,300 people living on Kosrae in 1994, we find that one out of every five Kosraeans now live off island, many of them in the US or its territories. We have to take these people into account in our planning, for they are part of the Kosraean people, even if not necessarily the Kosraean state. We will have to be mindful of the need to prepare our young for life abroad, if this is what they choose. At the same time, we will have to renew contacts with these people and utilize them for the economic resource they could be. People who have left home in the rest of the Pacific send remittances back. Sometimes the money they send represents a substantial percentage of the total national income. This may someday be true of Kosrae as well.

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