

The late President of the Methodist Church in Fiji and Rotuma, Revd. Dr. Tuikilakila Waqairatu



The late President, Revd. Dr. Tuikilakila Waqairatu (in blue) and the General Secretary, Revd. Tevita Nawadra (yellow), in happier times

The late President of the Methodist Church in Fiji and Rotuma, Revd. Dr. Tuikilakila Waqairatu, was unique in Fiji; he used to get my name right, and be bewildered by people who continually mispronounced it - Julia was his mother's name. Revd. Tui was also one of the great church leaders of the South-Pacific nation; sensitive to circumstance, receptive to change and committed in faith, the late president led by example.

At the time of his tragic and unexpected death, Revd. Tui was guiding the Methodist Church in reconciliation and reform, and many were speaking of a church renewal under his leadership. Revd. Tui died suddenly on 11th February, after a short illness; he was 66-years old. Just three days earlier, Revd. Tui had walked his only child, daughter Salote, down the aisle. Many of the wedding guests - and marquees - still remained at the church compound when his death was announced on the Tuesday. He had been admitted to the Colonial War Memorial hospital, Suva the day after his daughter's wedding.

The i-reguregu: at Jubilee Hall



Response to the news of the late president's passing was swift.

Condolences arrived from every corner of the world church, and all spoke - with one accord - of their great shock and sadness at Revd. Tui's untimely death, and of the transformation that was taking place within the Methodist Church, since his incumbency as president in August 2012.

His funeral was going to be a very big event.

The i-reguregu: at the home of the late president



Following Fijian tradition, the funeral gathering starts days before the actual funeral service. The formal *i-reguregu* (the pre-burial rite of paying respects) was to take place at the Methodist Church, Jubilee Hall and also at the home of the late president, where his widow, lowana, and family were receiving mourners for the four days before the burial.

The Pacific Conference of Churches (PCC) had an *i-reguregu* appointment at 10am on the following Wednesday, the day before the funeral. Mats, *yagona* (the social drink, kava), *masi* (bark cloth) and *tabua* (a whale's tooth) were presented formally by the PCC spokesperson to the all-male church representatives. And a spokesperson humbly received the offerings on behalf of the church.

The Moderator of PCC, Revd. Dr. Tevita Havea, headed the PCC contingency, having flown in specially for the service. Revd. Havea is a



A Tongan woman respectfully wearing a tattered *ta-avala* (mat of mourning)

Prayer Points:

- Pray for all who have lost loved ones recently, that they may find comfort and peace at this time of grief and loss, praying especially for Iovana and Salote.
- Give thanks for the life of Revd. Dr. Tuikilakila Waqairatu, a faithful servant who lived by the word of God.
- Pray for the Methodist Church in Fiji and Rotuma that it may continue the transforming work of reconciliation and renewal, so boldly started by the late president.
- Pray for the nation of Fiji, that, in this general election year (the first since 2006), all peoples of faith, and none, respect viewpoints, reconcile differences, and genuinely love “the other” for the betterment of all - all equal in the sight of God.
- Pray for those in authority that they may be receptive to the needs, and uphold the rights and dignity, of all peoples in Fiji.

Tongan chief, and so was accompanied everywhere by a group of attentive Fiji-based Tongans. The Tongan group sang Tongan hymns during the PCC presentation.

Once the *i-reguregu* was over at the church, the PCC entourage moved on to the home of the late president, where the mats and bark cloth were presented again, this time to his widow, Iovana, and prayers said with the family.

On the day of the funeral, central Suva was brought to a virtual standstill as thousands of school children and mourners lined the streets to pay their respects to the late leader, and church members, who wished to attend the Centenary Church service, had to arrive by 6am to guarantee a seat.

During the four-hour funeral the most notable, dignified and personal eulogy was given by the daughter of the late president. Dr. Salote, a lecturer in marine biology at the University of the South Pacific, spoke of her father’s love of animals. She recalled how her father would chastise anyone who harmed an ant, and how “Ratu” had conducted a funeral service for a favourite family rooster.

Revd. Tui was buried at Davuilevu Theological College, Nasouri, where he had studied for ministry and, later in life, been the much respected principal.

Davuilevu translates as the ‘large conch shell’, a musical instrument used in the Pacific to summon people - a fitting final resting place for a man of faith who never tired of calling others to Christ.

