

Visit to the Methodist Church in Fiji
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The Methodist Church: Of Fiji's population of around 850,000, some 280,000 souls belong to the Methodist Church. The Church is organised into 47 Divisions, each with a Superintendent Minister, and around 250 circuits. The number of churches in each Division varies greatly and is higher in urban areas - for instance, Nadi Division has around 40 churches. Roughly 5,000 Methodists are ethnic Indians worshipping in Hindi, and there is therefore an Indian Division comprising nine circuits. At present there are about 300 active ministers including some ten women, plus deaconesses, lay pastors and local preachers. There is actually a small surplus of ministers, with about seven occupying assistant posts. Each year around 200 candidates present themselves, and at Conference last year 29 new ministers were ordained (including three women) and also four deaconesses.

The Church runs 13 secondary schools and 16 primary schools. It has recently opened a brand new office building in memory of the Revd John Hunt, using a bank loan of about three million Fiji dollars. The Government has agreed to rent the Centre for one of its ministries for a period of 20 years. Since the loan should be paid off within seven to ten years, income beyond that can be used to fund church activities.

Politics: It was a pleasure to meet with former colleague, the Revd Akuila Yabaki, who is now Director of the CCF (Citizens' Consultative Forum) with a staff of five. I met also with a member of the Board, Mrs Tessa MacKenzie who gave me an extremely useful paper on indigenous/Christian/multi-faith relations in Fiji prepared for a UNESCO symposium held recently in Korea (copies available from me).

Since it was set up in 1993, the CCF has been aiming to make Fiji a home for all the communities in the nation. A large part of this role is educational, using means such as radio. However, since the violent coup of May 2000, its work has been redefined to cope with the still unresolved crisis. In particular, the land issue rumbles on with no land leases being granted to Indian tenants. The electorate is still race based, and it seems the country is not yet ready to change this. The Constitution adopted in 1997 envisages a multi-party government formed of all parties which have 10% or more of parliamentary seats; but despite a court of appeal ruling, the large Labour party, which has a mainly Indo-Fijian following, is not included in the present Government. CCF is now increasingly a lobbying organisation and is frequently used to give briefings to the UN and foreign governments. It is also attempting to help bring to book those responsible for events in 2000, among them some important chiefs, and this means that it has acquired some enemies. Nonetheless, its credibility is good with both the police and army. Some 65% of CCF's funding comes from the EU, with smaller grants from many quarters such as the New Zealand and Australia High Commissions, the German Church, and MRDF.

Ecumenism: The Fiji Council of Churches has been in existence for around 30 years and includes all the mainline Churches including the Roman Catholics. However, since the events of 2000 the ACCF (Association of Christian Churches in Fiji) has been formed, mainly by Pentecostal groups which support the SDL (Fijian Nationalist) Party. At the other end of the spectrum is the Ecumenical Centre for Research, Education and Advocacy, which grew out of the Fiji Council of Churches. Its primary aim is reconciliation through seminars and workshops around the country.

Theological education: The Methodist Theological College in Fiji is called Davuilevu, which means 'big conch shell', to symbolize the broadcasting of the Gospel. It offers a three-year diploma in theology with around 15 new students each year and is just about, for the first time, to offer a three-year B.D with seven students enrolled for the first year, though the curriculum is still in the formation stage. The College currently has nine academic staff but would welcome one or more tutors from overseas, either as mission partners or on sabbatical. The particular needs at the moment are for biblical studies and social ethics. I had a meeting with the Principal, the Revd Tuikilakila Waqairatu, and his assistant, who told me they are anxious to upgrade their programmes and make them culturally relevant. This is in line with the current SPATS emphasis on contextual theology and the use of relevant cultural models for theological themes - the aim is to help students, and through them church members, to discover ways of doing theology in their own contexts. I was shown a scale model of the very ambitious building plans for the college which, if completed, would increase its size perhaps fourfold. They would hope to offer an M.D and have courses open to fee-paying lay people. Some funding may be available from the USA, but the rest is yet to be found.

I also visited the ecumenical Pacific Theological College to meet with the Principal, the Revd Fele Nokoise. The College has around 50 students from Protestant Churches around the Pacific doing either a three-year B.D or a two-year Master's degree. Because the Methodist College is now offering the B.D there are no Methodist students from Fiji beginning this year. Before too long the PTC hopes to be able to offer Ph.Ds. Fele is immensely grateful to the World Church Office for funds to help towards fencing the compound - the work is in progress and partially completed.

I also had a meeting with the Revd Tevita Banivanua, General Secretary of the South Pacific Association of Theological Schools (SPATS), and with Mrs. Joan Tofaeono, who co-ordinates the Weavers (women in theological education) Programme. There are only two other members of staff, both administrative secretaries, but Tevita believes that being small and focussed is part of the strength of SPATS. It has some 25 member schools scattered around the Pacific, most of them denominational, including some Roman Catholic seminaries. Some are quite small and offer only training certificates, others diplomas, but PTC is the only one to offer a Master's in theology. SPATS aims to strengthen the institutions through seminars and consultations and offers a very important service in accrediting courses. The work of Weavers in promoting theological education for women is of prime importance, particularly since many Churches in the Pacific do not yet permit the ordination of women.

The Experience Exchange Programme: All those who had met her spoke with appreciation of Laura Smith, who spent a year as an EEP with 'Weavers' within SPATS.

They would appreciate another EEP volunteer with good computer and internet skills to help train office staff and possibly employees in some of the theological schools in Fiji and around the Pacific. This might include desktop publishing and possibly setting up websites. Library skills would also be useful at the SPATS office.

Another possible placement for a future EEP could be at the Dilkusha (Loving Heart) Children's Home not far from Suva. The Home was opened nearly 100 years ago and now cares for around 60 children, from newborn babies to young adults. Some have been abandoned and others are the children of single mothers who cannot care for them. One of the original buildings might be available for accommodation, but it is in great need of renovation - it has a preservation order on it and so cannot be pulled down. A grant from the World Church Office to help with the cost of renovations would be much appreciated.

A Fijian welcome: It was an extraordinary honour to be given a formal Fijian welcome when I arrived at the Headquarters of the Methodist Church. At least 20 men were seated cross-legged in the church hall, with a few women at the back. On three sides of a square in the centre was a large, shallow 'cava' bowl and I was asked to sit on the fourth side of the square on a low pile of woven mats topped by a piece of tapa (bark) cloth. The ceremony began with a formal speech of welcome in Fijian, and I was then presented with a whale's tooth, a symbol of particular honour. A locutor then responded on my behalf and I was then very formally given a small amount of cava to drink from a coconut shell. This was accompanied by rhythmic clapping with cupped hands. The Church leaders were then similarly presented with cava before I was invited to say something. After a couple more speeches and further clapping, tea was served accompanied by many kinds of fruit, sandwiches and a very large cake.