

# Report on a visit to Fiji

Partnership Coordinator Asia/Pacific – Steve Pearce

## Aims

- To make a first visit to Mission Partner, Revd Dr Val Ogden
- To meet Mission Partner, Dr Julia Edwards
- To visit partner organisations
- To meet with leaders of the Partner Church, Methodist Church Fiji (MCF)

## Background

Methodist Church Fiji celebrates 180 years of presence in Fiji this year. In 2014 there was a celebration of 50 years as an autonomous Conference.

Both the nation and the Methodist Church Fiji had a new start in 2014 after a general election ended 8 years of difficult relationships between MCF and a military government led by Frank Bainimarama – the only time in Pacific history a church has been attacked so seriously by its government. The governance process, including the Conference and Divisional meetings, was shut down as well as the main fundraising events (including the biggest choir festival in the world). The members responded by paying 100% of their church levy and Methodist Church Britain (MCB) began paying an annual grant to MCF aimed at registering church land and increasing its income generation potential.

The Standing Committee members still have a court case pending against them, but leaders have held meetings with government leaders, including Frank Bainimarama, who is now Prime Minister, and with leaders of the opposition. There is a general feeling that relationships have largely been restored and that the Methodist Conference will take place this year in its normal form, including the Choir Festival.

The new constitution of Fiji no longer has a reference to God, a change felt keenly in the Church, but seen as a move to multiculturalism by the government. For its part the Church, following these tumultuous years, 'went back to the drawing board, to try and reshape 'who we are' ...'to seek God's guidance' ...' As a result there will be a revised constitution going to 2015 Conference, and a new Code of Conduct for members.

## The Visit

**Revd Val Ogden** has settled very well into her post as Director of the Pacific Theological College Education by Extension (PTCEE) programme.

She has a pleasant house on the PTC campus and has fitted enthusiastically into the ecumenical, multi-ethnic community of PTC. She is delighted that the sea is only a few minutes away, near enough to have her evening prayer time on the sea wall quite often and she enjoys being part of the worship and social life of the college community.

There is plenty of work to do reviewing and extending the course material as well as building up a network of contacts and making visits to other islands in order to extend the reach of the programme.

Val also has a developing attachment in one of the Suva Methodist churches and is preaching in various local churches.



During my time at the college I had a good meeting with the Principal, who is very pleased to have Val as a member of the faculty. Val also kindly arranged with the Principal for me to do a presentation to the staff and students on the MCB approach to world mission and our work in the Pacific, this was a very successful occasion which evoked a lot of interest and some interesting questions, as well as the presence of several MCB Scholarship students.

**Dr Julia Edwards** is now well known in Fiji and beyond for her work on climate change and relocation. She is currently seconded by the Pacific Conference of Churches, where she has been based for the last four years, to the Fiji government helping to manage a large climate change project funded by the European Union. This is a very demanding time for her and it was good to be able to spend some time together discussing life and work. Fortunately the work will bring her to Europe at the time of the MWM Conference at Swanwick enabling her to participate.

**Ecumenical Centre for Research, Education & Advocacy (ECREA)** has been a MCB partner

organisation for some years and is currently working with the leaders of the main denominations to overcome divisions and enable joint pieces of work. This is now being rolled out as a programme for local congregations, hopefully adding a sense of Christian unity to the atmosphere of new beginnings. Val joined me in meeting Sirino the Coordinator and Reshma the finance officer.



**Citizens Constitutional Forum** is the partner organisation currently led by Revd Akuila Yabaki. It was good to hear from him a summary of the current situation. Along with the signs of hope there is the reminder that the government ministers are the same military people who were in power under the interim, post-coup regime and the decrees issued during that time are still in force despite a new constitution. Akuila, however, retires this month and will be a hard act to follow.



**Fiji Methodist Church** has a new President, Revd Tevita Banivanua, on my left, and a new General Secretary, Revd Epineri, opposite me, and we were able to have some very helpful discussions about the new situation and partnership development.

**New Zealand** was on my way home after Fiji and Samoa, and here I met with Prince Devanandan, my counterpart in the New Zealand Methodist Church and the Chair of the Committee relating to Pacific partnerships, Revd Terry Wall. We are working together on the formation of a round table for the Solomon Islands and PNG and cooperate on our partnership with Helena Goldie Hospital.

*Steve Pearce April 2015*