

CHURCH PLANTING IN WESLEY

Vakatawa Vakacegu Waqa Ledua



Church Planting Vision:

We aim to accomplish the Great Commission by establishing strong and spirit-filled English-speaking churches in all cities and towns in Fiji.

This was the original Vision that was first introduced to Wesley by Rev. William Powell during a combined Divisional Church Service at the National Gymnasium in 2007. At that time, Rev. Powell was the Assistant Circuit Minister at Wesley City Mission; Rev. Waisele Tora, the Divisional Superintendent (Talatala Qase); Rev. Emotama Pene, the Minister of Yarawa Circuit and Rev. Sausemolia Fomanu, the Minister at Navoka.

Yarawa adopted this vision and started to pray and yearn for it to become a reality. The first church planted was Rarau in Wainadoi in 2008, followed by the churches in the North. It is certainly a good reason to be happy with the great momentum in church planting that Yarawa has accomplished in these few short years. However, it is good to look back at the church planting history in the Wesley Division, even before Yarawa came into existence, to put it into perspective.

Church Planting In Perspective

Right from the very beginning of Christianity, church planting was part of the early evangelistic movement “starting from Jerusalem to Judea, Samaria even to the ends of the earth.” The mark of the spread of Christianity was the establishment of churches all over the world. The apostle Paul in his missionary journeys was well known for planting churches as it is well documented in the Book of Acts and in the Epistles. Of course he was not the only apostle to

do so; other apostles were also known to establish churches wherever they went. The lasting legacies of church planting in Asia Minor and Europe are the beautiful churches and cathedrals wherever Christianity had spread, albeit some of them are now empty of congregation and are just national monuments for tourist attractions.

In Fiji, the early missionaries from England planted churches, some with great difficulties because of resistance from local chiefs and the poor state of the people who had just converted from paganism and spiritual darkness (mai na butobuto ki na rarama). Missionary work and church planting has had a very turbulent history in Fiji. In the island of Moala, in Lau, the first church was built on Vunuku village in 1837, but was razed to the ground and the Catechist (Vakavuvuli) escaped with his life to another village, Keteira, where he built a new church. Some stones used for its foundation mound can still be seen today.

Of course, as the Lotu became well established, building churches became very important, and very often, the first building in the village with corrugated roofing iron and timber or concrete walls would be the church. It would also be the largest building in the village and it would be the pride and joy of the villagers, built at great expense through communal fund raising involving “saini” (contract) in copra estates or “ta dovu” (cane cutting) in sugarcane areas.

Church planting, however, is not so much the building



of church buildings as the evangelizing and nurturing of a congregation of believers toward conversion and spiritual maturity. The physical manifestation of spiritual growth is shown in the building of places of worship and the setting up of organizational structures to support the work of evangelism and church growth. The early overseas missionaries to Fiji started by having catechism classes to train local catechists (vakavuvuli) who were then sent out to new areas where they set up their own classes (mata siga), and so the spread of Christianity began in earnest. Churches were built and Bible Schools (vuli lotu) were established. Many of these vakavuvulis became vakatawas (lay pastors) and then trained to become ordained ministers to assist the overseas missionaries in overseeing the expanding Church.

Our pioneers in church planting operated along the same lines as the early missionaries. Quite often they started by setting up a Sunday School outpost away from the mother church which later grew to be a preaching point and then eventually became a full-fledged church. I can testify that I am a product of the Sunday School outpost of Lami Wesley which is now the Lami Oceania Wesley Church.

Lami Oceania Beginnings

When I was a young boy growing up in Lami in the early 1960's, I attended the English-speaking Sunday School Classes run by Mr. & Mrs. William Mar and Mr. Ken Giblin and others, held at the Mars' home on 4 Nasevou Street, Lami from 9am to 10am. After that, my siblings and I would go to the Fijian-speaking church service at the Delainukuwatu Methodist Church on Vetaia Street, Lami which started at 10.30am. (The Fijian-speaking church service was held in the home of an uncle, Jeremaia Robanakadavu, and it

was also the home of our current Talatala Qase, Rev. Jeremaia Waqainabete.) In the afternoon we would also attend the Fijian-speaking Sunday School from 2pm to 3pm. Quite a busy Sunday schedule for a young boy like me, but it was fun and I did not mind at all. The part-European children who attended the English-speaking Sunday School in the morning were from the Halstead, Eitcheson and Costello families. (I may have forgotten some.) These part-European families and the Mars were also pioneer members of the Delainukuwatu Church.

Later on (early 1970's), the Delainukuwatu congregation built their own church on Nakula Road, Lami which became known as Nakula Methodist Church. Due to



the close association of the part-European families with Delainukuwatu and later Nakula Church, the English-speaking congregation started to have their own time slot with Sunday School from 8 to 9am and church service from 9am to 10am. So it became a Preaching Point of the Wesley Church, Butt Street in the mid-1970's. Later on, in the early 2000's, the Lami Wesley Church moved down to their own church,

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the old ANZ Bank branch office on Queens Rd, Lami Town, which was kindly donated to Wesley by the Samisoni family. It is now known as Lami Oceania Wesley Church and is one of the four churches in the Wesley City Mission Circuit.

Note: Currently, as they are building their new church, Lami Oceania is back at Nakula Church using their usual time slot at 8am to 10am as before. Such is the working together in harmony of the God's people and the benefit of long associations of fellow believers in the Church.

The other two churches in the Wesley City Mission Circuit are the Nasinu Wesley and Pacific Harbour. Regrettably, I do not have a thorough knowledge of how Pacific Harbor was planted, except that it was the pioneering effort of the late Rev Josateki Koroi, the Powell and the Rigamoto families that got the English-speaking Wesley Church started in the *"Toba ni Pasifika."*

Nasinu Wesley.

Nasinu Wesley owes its establishment to the late Jokatama Toga who was the first Vakatawa of Nasinu Wesley. Toga was a former Fiji Rep rugby prop forward and a giant of a man, but his huge size was only indicative of the size of his heart. He was a gentle giant with a kind heart who had time for everyone, no matter what age, race or standing in the church and community. I remember his calming influence during our Wesley Circuit meetings when discussions became heated and tempers were frayed.

In the 1990's Nasinu Wesley used the Valelevu Methodist Church for Sunday School at 8am to 9am and church service from 9.30am to 10.30am. Preachers were rostered from Wesley Church, Butt Street and Yarawa Wesley until Yarawa became a separate circuit in 2003. I remember preaching there a few times.

Vakatawa Toga persevered with his small congregation for many years and he tried his best to plan for their own church. He was able to secure the piece of land at the bottom of Yasiyasi Rd, Nadera, where the current church is now located, and submitted several plans and budgets for a new church, but they were rejected in the circuit leaders meetings for reasons of



lack of funds. Unfortunately, he passed away before the church was built. To help in strengthening the congregation at Nasinu Wesley, some Yarawa church members transferred to Nasinu including Jone Cama and Netani Sukanaivalu who were lay preachers.

The new church was built in 2004 under the leadership of the late Vakatawa Sumasafu Vilsoni's, another gentle giant with a great heart. Vakatawa Sam was an amputee who walked almost all his life on crutches. His passion for people who are physically challenged and /or impaired led him to leave Nasinu Wesley to start the Horeb Disability Christian Fellowship, a group of believers with various disabilities who meet regularly at the Fiji Vocational and Training Center for Persons with Disabilities (Brown St, Toorak.) on Sundays. He left us to be with the Lord in November, 2013.

Through Sam's influence and as tribute to his memory, Nasinu Wesley Church has recently launched its own Vision, in May 2015:

"Towards an Inclusive and Safe Church that Exist to Fulfill the Great Commission"

and its Purpose:

"To honour our Lord Jesus Christ by carrying out His command to make disciples of all nations. Specifically, to focus on reaching out to all people including the physically challenged and impaired in Nasinu and surrounding areas."

This is a great vision and purpose and takes the Nasinu Wesley to a completely new and exciting area of witness which will enrich the Wesley Division as its churches diversify their purposes and experiences.

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There are different ways that church planting can be achieved but God's hand can be seen in all of them as He uses His people to accomplish His purpose. Here is an account of Yarawa's church planting efforts.

Rarau Wesley

The first church planted by Yarawa was Rarau Wesley in 2008, when Vakatawa Fuata Viliame of Chruchwood Chapel retired and moved to a piece of freehold land which his family bought in Wainadoi, and the young family of Jiare and Darlene Viliame and their children moved in with them. With the encouragement of Rev. Emotama Pene, Darlene's father and Minister at Yarawa, they started a Cell Group and called it Rarau, pronounced "Rarou" meaning "branch with green leaves" or "living branch" in the Rotuman language. They had their own family worship services and held Sunday School classes on Sundays. Families from surrounding farms started to join them and soon a practicing church community began to grow.



In 2009, Rarau became a preaching point and lay preachers from Yarawa were rostered to preach there. Rev Salanieta Lili Makutu, who replaced Rev Pene as Yarawa Circuit Minister, conducted Holy Communion once a month. In 2013, Rarau was promoted to church status and became the second church in the Yarawa Wesley Circuit. Vakatawa Viliame became its first Lay Pastor, assisted by sister Belinda Tomasi and his wife, Darlene. In 2014, Vakatawa Belinda took over from Vakatawa Jiare who had moved back to Suva with his family.

The Viliame Family donated an acre of their freehold land to the church and plans are now under way to build a new church which is to be opened in December 2015.

The Move Up North

We must acknowledge the great work carried out by Vakatawa Meli Vunisakalo and for his passion for evangelism and the ground-work he has done to prepare the English-speaking communities for church planting. He sacrificed his family time in Nadi eight years ago and served alone in the North, first

under the Indian Division and then under Wesley, to prepare the way for the church planting movement that is now in motion. When Yarawa came into the scene in 2012, Pastor Meli had already spent five years in the field preparing the "soil" for church planting. The English-speaking churches in the North are now beginning to run on their own.

Now the wheel has turned a full circle and Pastor Meli is back home operating from Nadi as a "Roving Pastor" to spear-head our incursion into the West at the same time visiting the Northern churches. A lot of church members in Yarawa have their roots in the North and became their desire that Wesley should plant churches in their family estates in Rava, Vatudamu and Kasavu. This prompted a 'recon-team' consisting of Waqa Ledua (Vakatawa) and Solomon Raravula (Asst. Vakatawa) to be sent, in February 2012, to the North to "scout out the land." During this first visit, it became apparent that the part-European communities and minority groups in the North have not been sufficiently served by the Indian-speaking and Fijian-speaking churches and that English-speaking churches were in need of planting. The recon-team also met up with Meli Vunisakalo who had been sent out to the North by the Indian Division, in 2007, to serve their English-

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speaking congregations as lay pastor and he was known by everyone as Pastor Meli. He informed the recon-team that most of the congregations were keen to come under the Wesley Division because they weren't happy with the service they were receiving from their own churches. So the "field" was tilled and ready for the English-speaking churches to be planted.

At a meeting convened by the President of the Methodist Church, Rev. Ame Tugawe, and attended by Asst. General Secretary, Rev Tevita Banivanua, Div. Superintendent of Indian Division, Rev William Lucas, Div. Superintendent of Wesley, Rev Filipe Tiulawalawa, Yarawa Circuit Minister, Rev Lili Makutu, Labasa Indian Circuit Minister, Rev Ram Pritt, Pastor Meli and Vakatawa Waqa Ledua. In the meeting Rev Tevita Banivanua emphasized the importance of the three Synods of the Church; Fijian-speaking, Hindi-speaking and the English-speaking to take the Gospel of Jesus into all the communities in Fiji. The President gave his blessing to the church planting work by Yarawa Wesley and asked everyone to work together for the growth of the Church.

So at 8am on Sunday 22nd July, 2012, Rev Lili Makutu conducted Holy Communion in the first service at Rava, Savusavu, in the family church of the Hazelmans. Then at 5pm she held Holy Communion at the Vunibalawa Church, Kasavu, the estate of the Whippys and the Andrews. This was the launching of the Wesley churches in the Savusavu area. Then Rev Lili and her group of Prayer of Warriors (Avisaki Tukana, Fanny Simpson, Jessie Kotoiwasawasa and Tony Lanyon) went to Labasa where she held Holy Communion at the Nasea Church at 7am on Sunday 29th July to launch the Wesley Church in Labasa. It should be noted here that Rev Savirio Vuata, Minister at Nasea Methodist Church, was also instrumental in the setting up of the Labasa Wesley Church. In the same way Rev Ulai of the Vivili Circuit, Savusavu should be acknowledged for his assistance in conducting the Holy Communion services with the three Savusavu churches every a month after the launching. Note: Rev Lili Makutu and Rev Ulai were students together in Davuilevu Theological College.



New church at Wadravua Wesley, Savusavu

Some Early Challenges to Church Planting

Kasavu Wesley Church - The Minister at Waikava Circuit had not been informed about Wesley's church planting move into his "turf," even though prior arrangement had been made with the Divisional Superintendent of Cakaudrove (based in Somosomo) to make the contact. So when he heard that Rev Lili was coming to hold Holy Communion at Vunibalawa Church, Kasavu, there was a stand-off and resistance against the new English-speaking church at Kasavu. This was later resolved when the Divisional Superintendent of Wesley, Rev. Filipe Tuilawalawa made a personal visit to Nakobo and a traditional reconciliation and handing over was done with the Waikava circuit minister in the presence of the local chief, Tui Korocau.

Rava Wesley Church - It was evident that the small church at Rava would not fit the size of the growing Wesley congregation. Mr Bureita Nabong at Naiyavita Estate, donated two acres of his family freehold land to the church and Rev Lili Makutu re-named the church as Wadravua Wesley Church. The Wadravua congregation moved to the new site and wasted no time in organizing the building of a new church. A member donated some mature pine trees to be lumbered to provide the timber. Members fished and sold seafood to raise funds for the materials and labor to build the church was freely given. Yarawa Church contributed the rest of the funds needed to build the church. On 13th December 2013, the new church was dedicated by Talatala Qase, Rev Filipe Tuilawalawa, assisted by Yarawa Circuit Minister Rev Jone Marika, and Director Ambassadors for Christ Pacific Islands Rev Sione Veituna. This is the



Paster Meli Vunisakalo with members of the Naselesele church, Taveuni

pioneering spirit that is the hallmark of successful church planting. Praise be to God!

Rev Salanieta Lili Makutu Left Us - In November 2012 Rev. Lili Makutu left us to be with the Lord, leaving behind the work of church planting which she started. Such is the work of church planting, it never stops, we simply give it our best shot and move on, God will always find the willing hearts to continue the work.

To Naselesele, Taveuni

According to Pastor Meli, the choice of Naselesele was due to God's intervention. In March 2015, he was on his way to Qamea Island where some ground work was being done for church planting. Just as he was about to board a boat from Waiyevo, the Holy Spirit told him to take his bag and go to Naselesele instead. As he disembarked there was someone right there at the landing, who had come to take Pastor Meli to Naselesele. He was received with open arms as if they had been expecting him.

Naselesele is home to the Fishers, Stolzs, Petersons and Taylors. There is church there that was built by their ancestors and the inscription on it's plaque says:

This Methodist Church has been built by the people of Naselesele Estate. Let us praise the Lord. Do not doubt our God. 1924.

This was a statement of faith and showed the hope of these early settlers for their descendants to continue to worship God in this church. Unfortunately, this hope was not lived out by their descendants. As time passed none of them attended church except for Tom Fisher who was the only confirmed member of the Church but was worshipping with the Fijian-speaking congregation. The others were either non-practicing or joined other denominations. Their church is being used by the Fijian-speaking congregation. Such was the challenge for church planting in Naselesele.

Tom Fisher attended the Wesley Divisional Meeting in Suva in early May 2015, with the delegation from the Northern churches. Unfortunately, he was called to rest 26th May during a fishing incident. Our hope of planting a church in Naselesele appeared to be doomed. Officiating the funeral service was Rev Jone Marika. He stated that Tom's funeral encouraged the families to organise and attend church services on a regular basis. God indeed works in mysterious ways!

Pastor Meli has already laid the ground work for church planting in Wainunu (another branch of the Whippy clan), Qamea and Rabi. With God's help new churches will be planted in these places.

Over to the West - Nadi Wesley

Sunday, 5th July 2015 will be marked in the history of the Wesley Division of the Methodist Church in Fiji as the inauguration date of the Nadi Wesley

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Methodist Church. It was the continuation of the church planting mission for Yarawa Wesley Church.

Acknowledgement must also go to the Cawa Methodist Church for receiving our English-speaking Wesley congregation into their church, to use a time slot between 8am to 9am. Tatala Qase and our Talatala Jone Marika, and the delegation from Yarawa who were present at the launching, witnessed the warm acceptance and Christian love shown by the Fijian-speaking congregation of Cawa Church and it augurs well for the future growth of our English-speaking congregation. In no uncertain way God is going to use the interaction between two traditions to revitalize the Methodist Church in Fiji.

We praise God that the inaugural members of the Nadi Wesley consisted of the Lanyons, Newtons, Fishers,

Copelands and Whippys. These are the relatives of the families in the Northern churches. We have to reach out to all the others out there who are seeking a church where they can feel at home. Let us all join hands and support the work of church planting.

As we focus into the future, we thank God that English-speaking churches will soon be established in Lautoka, Sigatoka, Ba, Rakiraki and so on. What we are witnessing is a great revival of the Methodist Church and we should be thankful that we are part of this revival. This also comes with great responsibility for us at Yarawa. We must support the work of church planting through prayers, goodwill or financial commitment. This is a big undertaking and requires a church with a big heart to bear the burden of evangelism, disciple-making and church planting. ■



