

Phoebe Mills and Her Sisters

Our 30th Anniversary is all about tributes. On this page we want to pay tribute to the Mills sisters for their contribution to the Methodist Church in Fiji and Rotuma, and particularly to Miss Phoebe Mills who was the organist at Yarawa Church prior to her return to Australia in 2003. This tribute is taken from information by Dr. J.S. Baravilala displayed in the PMB Mills Hall of Yarawa Church dated 5th November, 2003.



“The hall is named after the three Mills sisters, Phoebe, Nona Mary and Elizabeth also commonly known as Betsy. Phoebe the eldest of the three is the only surviving member in the year 2003. Mary, who became the first ordained woman Methodist Minister in Fiji died first then followed by Betsy in 2001.”

The three sisters were the daughters of Alfred Avery and Hannah Mary Mills. Rev. Mills had left Victoria and went to Queensland as a Home Missionary. After acting as Chaplain to the Australian Forces in France in WW1, he returned to Queensland as a Circuit Minister. He became the Home Mission Secretary responsible for “building their own church buildings and parsonages”.

The eldest of the three sisters, Phoebe Mills, came to Fiji in 1938 as a Methodist Church Teacher when the Methodist Church in Fiji was part of the New South Wales synod. Phoebe taught in several schools, including Ballantine Memorial and Dudley Schools. She became involved in Yarawa Church when the old Butt St Church organ was given to Yarawa. She became the organist for Yarawa

until the organ was beyond repair and replaced by a keyboard.

Miss Mary Mills came to Fiji in 1970 to work as a librarian at the University of the South Pacific. In her spare time she was actively involved with work among the children, particularly in the Hart villages. She advocated abstinence from drinking of alcohol and drug abuse amongst the youths. She assisted with the small congregation that worshipped at St Matthews Anglican Church in Mead Road before it moved to Yarawa Rd. Miss Mary Mills obtained a Bachelor of Divinity from the Pacific Theological College and later was the first woman to become an ordained Minister in the Methodist Church in Fiji.

The youngest of the three sisters, Betsey, joined her older sisters in 1972 and worked as a volunteer in several areas of church activities including becoming the organist at Butt Street Church. She was involved in Religious Education in several schools and supported her

sisters’ work. Accompanied by Rev Mary Mills, she went regularly to the Heffernan home in Valelevu for Sunday School and worship thus laying the foundation for the Valelevu congregation (later to become Nasinu Wesley Church)

Miss Phoebe Mills finally left Fiji to return home in Queensland on Friday 3 October, 2003 after serving in Fiji for sixty five years. She was born in 1914 and come to Fiji in 1938 as a teacher when she was only twenty-four years old.

The three Mills sisters remained true to their calling as servants of God throughout their entire lives.

Footnote: In a recent visit to Yarawa Church, Mrs Fulori Low reported that she visited Miss Phoebe Mills at a Nursing Home in Brisbane in July 2015, although frail, she still reminisces with fond memories of Fiji in particular Wesley Butt St and Yarawa Churches. She is now 101 years old. We thank God for Miss Phoebe! ■

Rev. Salanieta Lili Makutu

During this Anniversary celebrations of Yarawa Wesley Church, we remember with fond memories Rev. Lili Makutu, who passed while serving as our Circuit Minister.

Rev. Lili was resident minister of Yarawa Circuit for almost four years from January 2009 to November, 2012. In fact, her name was proposed from Yarawa Circuit in 2005 to be a candidate for ministry and she was accepted for training in Davuilevu Theological College from 2006 to 2008. It was indeed a blessing that she was assigned back to Yarawa in her first posting, because she brought with her, not only her theological training, but also the many years of administrative expertise as a senior public health official in the Ministry of Health. She was passionate for the Word, evangelism work and was also compassionate for the people in and out of the church. She was dedicated to prayer, fasting and urged church members to do the same.

Rev. Lili headed the Evangelism Committee and led outreach programmes into the squatter settlements along the Cunningham Rd corridor and Bureta St, including the well-trodden areas of Wailea and Nanuku settlements. She took the Bible-Week reading programmes out of the church to MH Nabua car-park for three successive years.

In 2009 when the *Solevu* and *Bose ko Viti* were cancelled by the Interim Government, the Methodist Church made an appeal to all Circuits to financially contribute to the Church headquarters (HQ) to replace the *Solevu Soli* competition. As the result of Rev. Lili's faithfulness in tithing she proposed to Yarawa Leaders Meeting to tithe 10% of the estimated annual income over and above the Levy (*Vakamisinari*) for the year. The Leaders Meeting agreed to this and also called for the congregation to Soli in a Revival and Celebration Service on 26th

September, 2009. In this soli alone \$5,890 was raised, which was added to the tithe of \$15,280 and Levy of \$5,290, Yarawa was able to give to Church HQ a total of \$26,460 which was the highest contribution from any Circuit within the Methodist Church. In addition to this, Yarawa made a commitment to tithe to the Church HQ instead of the giving the Levy each year. For five years Yarawa was giving much more than three times the levies that were due.

The other initiative by Rev. Lili was the church planting in the North. This rose out of the requests from relatives of church members who live in Savusavu and Kasavu for English-speaking church services to be held in their own estates. Also Rev. Savirio Vuata of Nasea Methodist Church, Labasa was persistent in urging Rev Lili to set up an English-speaking church in Labasa. A preliminary visit made in February 2012 saw the establishment of a new English-speaking churches in the North. First to be planted was Wadravua Wesley Church, near Rava Estate in Savusavu. On Sunday 22nd July, Kasavu Wesley was established on the afternoon of the same day. The following Sunday, 29th July they moved on to Labasa. Rev. Lili last church planting was in September that same year, which saw the establishment of Vatudamu Wesley. Sadly that was also her last mission to the North. Two weeks later she suffered a stroke, which she did not recover from and resulted on her demise on the 12th November, 2012.

Within four years Rev Lili Makutu had accomplished what not many ministers would have not achieved in their lifetime of ministry. This was a testament of her zeal for the work of the Lord. She lived out her faith in the most practical ways possible.

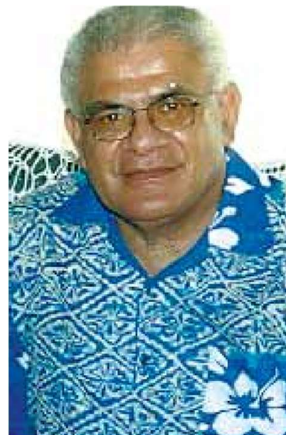
Rest in peace Rev Lili, the church planting flame that you ignited is still continuing today! ■



YARAWA PIONEERS - *Down Memory Lane*



Mr Joe Hoyt



Mr Viliame Gonelevu



Rev. Sausemolia Fonmanu



**Dr Jona Baravilala
Senilagakali**

On reaching milestones such as our 30th Anniversary, it is a good time to go down memory lane and remember those who were influential in the life of Yarawa Wesley Church.

First let me recount how I came to join Yarawa Church. During the sad days in our history when nationalistic influences took hold of the Methodist Church in Fiji after the 1987 Coup, I stopped attending church after the “Sunday-Ban” period. However, on December 1989 I missed going to church so I searched for a church to attend. Some friends recommended Yarawa Wesley Church, so on Christmas Day 1989 I took my young family to Yarawa and we’ve been worshipping there ever since. I found it a caring church and the Sunday School was well suited for my young children at the time. Now, I cannot think of any other church I want to be in.

Mr Joe Hoyt

I was a typical “Sunday-only” Christian, not committed to any serious search for spiritual growth. One evening I was at home when the late Mr. Hoyt, who was Vakatawa at the time, accompanied by Mr. Viliame Gonelevu, visited and shared a simple message: “Just try and read the Bible regularly- spiritual growth will come automatically.” And Mr. Hoyt told me a story of the servant who was asked by his master to fetch water from the river using a dirty leaking bucket to fill up a drum. After several attempts the servant complained to the master that it was a fruitless exercise. “It’s not fruitless,” explained the master. “You see, when you first started, the bucket was very dirty but now it is clean because the water

has cleaned the bucket thoroughly.” I’ll never forget Mr Hoyt’s story to illustrate the cleansing power of the Word of God.

Mr. Hoyt handed over to Mr Gonelevu as Vakatawa not long afterwards and migrated to Australia.

Mr Viliame Gonelevu

The most influential person in my spiritual growth, as with many others in Yarawa. He always claimed that he never sat any Vakatawa exam and only became Vakatawa by default, but his simple Biblical teachings always sink home because he practiced his faith with dedication and commitment. During his busy working life in Government and later on in the Church HQ, Mr Gonelevu always found time to carry out his church duties to perfection. He introduced the use of lectionary readings to follow the church calendar and the colors of the season. He was also innovative and introduced “foot washing” on Maundy Thursdays during Easter. He also encouraged praise and worship using musical instruments, admitting that he cannot sing in tune.

He took time to take the Men’s Fellowship out to camp each year and encouraged engaging speakers outside of Yarawa Wesley Church to teach important Biblical topics, for example; the Campus Crusade for Christ on “The Four Spiritual Laws” and Christian Mission Fellowship on “Tithing.” His long association with ICEJ (International Christian Embassy of Jerusalem) also made Yarawa a pro-Israel church and our on-going commitment “to pray for the nation of Israel and the peace of Jerusalem.” *Continued on page 28* ▶

TRIBUTE - YARAWA PIONEERS

Vakatawa Vakacegu Waqa Ledua



Mr. John Rosa



Mr. Tale Chang

Rev. Sausemolia Fonmanu

When Mr. Gonelevu retired from the Vakatawa position in 2003, he was replaced by the late Mr. Sau Fonmanu. He was a staunch man of prayer who started the Prayer Warrior and also initiated the Praise and Worship Team. Sau was good with the guitar, an expert in choruses and had a lovely baritone voice.

Vakatawa Sau was recommended for Ministry training at Davuilevu and later on became the first Minister of the Navoka Circuit in Levuka in 2005, as Rev Sausemolia Fonmanu. He spent four years in Navoka and was posted to Nausori Highland in January 2009. Rev. Sau lost his life in an untimely road accident on his way to his new circuit. His funeral service was held in Yarawa Church.

Dr Jona Senilagakali Baravilala.

The late Dr. Jona was a pioneer member who came from the Nabua Wesley St Matthews congregation. He was responsible for all the major physical improvements of the church in his position as Chief Steward. He was also a visionary, effective organizer and had enough influence in the Wesley Circuit Leadership, to plan and execute an orderly transition for Yarawa to become a separate Circuit of its own. This was no mean feat because it involved approval by the Methodist Church Conference and the purchase of a minister's residence to be ready before the new Circuit Minister was stationed to Yarawa in January 2003.

Dr Jona was affectionately known as Doc or Pa to everyone. He was a stickler for time and always advised us lay preachers to stick to the allocated

one-hour service, and if the service started to go into extra time, Doc would often show his displeasure in no uncertain terms. He remained a lay preacher well into his 70's until his eyes started to weaken. Doc always put on an air of seriousness, but behind that facade he was a very kind hearted person.

Mr. John Rosa

The late Mr. John Rosa was another pioneer of Yarawa Church and he was absolutely committed to doing whatever needed to be done. He was a regular member of the choir. Although he had great difficulty holding a note in tune, what he lacked in ability he made up with enthusiasm. He did all the tasks required of a church steward even though he was not honored with the title. When Mr Rosa was sick the church would remain unlocked, lights were not turned off, the garbage bin was not emptied, the church compound not cleaned and the mail box not opened. Mr. Gonelevu told the congregation, "You may not notice Mr John Rosa, but you will surely notice when he is not around."

Being an ex-Solomon veteran, Mr Rosa was always proud of his service status and calls Col. Kacisolomone "tin soldier." His favorite saying was "Born 1820, still going strong." Someone who was not familiar with this saying, couldn't believe that Mr. Rosa was born in 1820!

Mr Rosa always showed authority whenever necessary. So whenever we went to Butt St for Vulavou Service, he was in charge of the transport. Afterwards at the Fellowship-cup-of-Tea, we were given just one warning about the bus leaving exactly at 7 o'clock! Sure enough if you were not in the bus by 7 o'clock you had to find your own way back to Yarawa!

Mr. Tale Chang

The late Mr Tale Chang was another pioneer of Yarawa Church. He was a keen gardener and his "sevu" of yams and dalo were always the biggest each Harvest Sunday. He and Aunty Sai were long-time choir members and inaugural members of the Senior Members Fellowship. Whenever Yarawa put on a feast, Uncle Tale was always in the kitchen doing the cooking. He was an expert in both Chinese and Fijian cuisine.

We thank God for such pioneers of the Church for they shaped our history, and may their legacy live on. ■