

A Mission Story

The Very Rev Michael Bent (now retired) reminisces about some of his experiences in Fiji in the 60's.

I first came to the three villages during my time at the Cathedral in Suva (1960-1964) as I had an invitation to visit Fr. Maurice Basden, then parish priest stationed in Savusavu. His parish extended from Buca Bay along the Viti Levu coast as far as Bua.

Maurice took me to see Naviavia and we had our share of adventures in getting back to Savusavu for my flight back to Suva.

It was in 1963 that the Bishop asked me to be the first priest to live and work amongst the people of the three villages which comprised the Settlement. There was no road around Savusavu Bay so the only ways of getting there was taubalei – walking around the coast on bush tracks, or, hiring a boat to hug the coast line around the Bay.

One of the first needs was a house in which to live. This was soon built and I moved in.

By this time I had completed a holiday in NZ and whilst there a tour of the country planned by the Anglican Board of Missions as it was known at this time. After a tour of the Diocese of Dunedin I went to Christchurch to complete a number of preachments and meetings.

After passing a suitability test by the vicar I was allowed to preach at Evensong at Cashmere Hills and to meet the youth group following the Service. It was out of this encounter that a young man expressed a desire to come and work with me at Naviavia and even sold his car to pay his fare over. That young man was Andrew Yates (of the seed family fame).

Andrew soon found himself using his skills around the place. He taught in the School and assisted the children. Together we attempted to make the then school room a more suitable place for worship.

It was in the school room that worship took place on Sunday and on Saints' days and was used for the Bose ni koro – the meeting of the men of the villages to discuss affairs of the people.

How could we use local material to have a focus for worship in this very busy place? With Andrew's artistic ability we obtained a fine and suitable mat for the reredos and fashioned two coconut shells for altar lights which we filled with local coconut oil to be either side of a Cross painted on the reredos mat.

Another thing which Andrew helped me to do was to persuade the men to admit women of the villages to first of all sit at the back whilst the Bose was taking place and later to allow them to speak.

When we first took up residence in the vale kau ("the wooden house") we had no water supply so it was down to the river for washing both ourselves and our clothes. Drinking water was obtained from the roof of the house. Help was close at hand and we installed a 1000 gallon water tank in due course only to find that it filled up quickly enough during a rain storm only to empty too quickly with our daily use

Another problem was at the matter of sanitation. So Andrew, with help of the men, dug us a "Water Sealed Privy"

This was a pit on top of which was placed a concrete block with an "S" bend. This when filled with water kept the smell in and the flies out. (I recall the people of Nabunikadamu – one of the villages I visited each month – knowing that the Bishop was to visit them thought that



his Lordship was not to be assigned to the bush but would build him a “vare lailai” (small house). This they did but built it in the middle of the village. Though the village knew when the bishop visited the place they also knew that when he had departed they could use it as a communal toilet!

My time was largely spent in supervising the school, celebrating the Eucharist (in Fijian), seeing that the sick were visited and getting the more serious cases to the hospital in Savusavu. (Unfortunately known as “vare ni mate” (house of death) or “vare ni sele” (house of the knife)). With no roads it was not easy in visiting homes and villages along the coast and bringing Word and Sacrament to many.

Of course, I was helped and assisted by the people. Master Luke Oli, head teacher at that time (later to be ordained priest) translated my sermons into Fijian and covered the finer points of business at any bese.

He did have a difficult time when Bishop John Charles Vockler, after a visit to the US came to tell us about the efforts of Black Americans in self support under the title of “Operation Bootstrap”. Master Oli tackled this as said “Cakacaka ni bootstrap” – simply “work work the bootstrap” which failed to convey all that the Bishop had intended. Luke was asked to try again by his Lordship but found he could not do so seeing that no one ever wore boots and many had never seen them.

Master Luke was a helper to me and to John Ormiston, who replaced Andrew Yates. John was the son of a Waikato farmer who came to us with the blessing of St Paul’s School in Hamilton. John was a first-rate teacher and was soon alongside the pupils and families in their endeavour for a better life. It was through John that his father donated the first generator to give lighting to the school. This was a great step forward for it meant that the children could return to school to do their “homework”, whilst also providing a meeting place for adults to meet together on the verandas of the school. (John to-day is a world class cardiologist who has just retired in Auckland after lecturing around the world)

During my later days at Naviavia Bishop Vockler appointed Viliame Hala’appi to join the team for work along the Savusavu coast. Later in life Viliame was consecrated as a Bishop and attended the Lambeth Conference.

A 2019 photo of Savusavu parish church

