

## REFLECTIONS: FIJIAN CONFERENCE AUGUST 2024

I was privileged in 2017 to visit Fiji and to attend the annual conference so it came as a surprise to be asked to represent the church again this year. I first became involved in the Fijian Methodist Fellowship in 2010 and since that time have made many friends in the fellowship in our connexion and also in Fiji.

Our first activity at the conference started really early on Sunday morning when around 400 people walked through the centre of Suva to begin the celebrations for the recognition of 60 years of autonomy from the Fijian Methodist church in Australia. This was followed by our opening act of worship, which was rich in choral singing. There were a number of acknowledgements of the significance of the anniversary but also emphasis on the theme of the conference “Restoring the lost image of Christ within the Methodist church in Fiji.” We heard Revd Dr Semisi Turagavou the president this year preaching from John’s Gospel on the image of the vine and urging the church to change and replant and grow. A number of Fijian dignitaries were present, none more so than the President, who comes from the same island as the Rev Semisi, as does the prime minister. God is at work within the political system now after many years of turmoil. The service concluded with the joint choirs singing the Hallelujah Chorus, which they did with great aplomb.

The first day of business started with an address from the President, who was not afraid to tackle the issues that would be required by the church to make progress in the next few years in line with the identified theme of the conference. He quoted a Korean proverb “the 60th year is an end to a journey and also the beginning of a new one.” The President identified a number of issues that the conference would debate this week, and also sought to make note of some other issues that the church needs to pay attention to, such as same sex blessing and climate change. He noted that the church needed to address the issues of the world today, and to have a positive message in terms of holistic development and sustainable growth. He made comment about a conservative and liberal approach to faith, making note that it’s important to work together. What I was not aware of until I was on the flight coming home was that this address had attracted rather a lot of media interest among many who are not regular church attenders who were applauding the stand he took.

During the whole week of the conference we experienced some very interesting debates, none more so than when the conduct of ministers was discussed. Smoking means suspension from ministry for 6 months. We affirmed the creation of 9 new circuits in the divisions and revised the need for catechism. Agreement was reached about training modules for both lay and ordained. Much time was spent in looking at the provision of the work around children and young people and the importance of training and what provision was offered, and how to encourage conversation around mission, on social justice, climate change and other world issues. As a conference, we heard about the world evangelism meeting to be held in Suva in October this year when 4-5 thousand people from around the world are expected to attend. Ministers were encouraged to preach against the use of illicit drugs and about the ramifications of watching porn, and to engage with the police and the government around street sleepers. On a number of occasions, the issue of same sex marriage came up and the church

affirmed it would lobby the government not to allow it in Fiji. This was further complicated by Fijian ministers working in situations where SSM and blessing has been agreed; and what does this say about the memorandum of understanding entered into by Fiji with partner churches. This debate was suspended and sent back to the standing committee. We also heard about the project to have a Fijian Methodist TV and radio station and to look after all things media. This is making very good progress and the spring should bring good news. We heard as part of the conference that 26 divisions of the 59 have increased in membership over the last 20 years, and 33 have seen little growth. 186 thousand is the current membership.

Every afternoon from 4 till around 1030 the conference swelled to around 5000 when choirs came from many of the islands to take part in choir singing and it was joyous with the largest choir number 450.

The very last event in this year's conference was the ordination service. As always, the service was very moving with 2 deacons and 12 presbyters being ordained. The two deacons were women and so were 2 of the presbyters. The normal age for retirement of ministers here is 70 and the Vice president from New Zealand and I had the privilege of presenting 15 of them with an envelope which I assumed contained money, a sort of kettle boiler and a very large blanket! The choir as always were great.

I have had some interesting discussions and enriching conversations and renewed friendships, which of course have been valuable. The hospitality as always has been wonderful. Thank you for the privilege of representing the church once more as the Fijian conference the people and the church are very close to my heart.

Lorraine N Mellor  
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