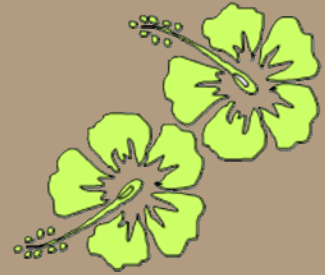


The "Bula Bulletin"



April - May 2012



Location, location, relocation...

Vanua Levu, Fiji's second largest island, is often referred to simply as "The North" by residents of mainland, Viti Levu. Its two main towns of Labasa, population 28,000 (and known affectionately as "Lebraska" by some locals) and Savusavu, a pretty coastal town of 3,400 people, certainly have a different feel to that of Suva, Fiji's 'bustling' capital.

"I will be with you"
Exodus 3:12 (NRSV)



I have visited both towns recently, but not to take advantage of the sight-seeing opportunities that they both offer. Work with the Pacific Conference of Churches (PCC) brought my colleagues and me north.

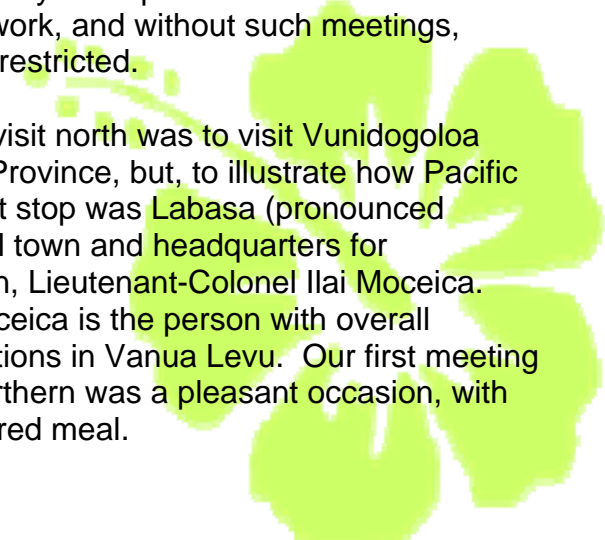
Pacific Protocol

Formal introductory meetings are essential components of any work at the community level in the Pacific. Courtesy visits provide an excellent understanding of the context to any work, and without such meetings, access to local communities may be restricted.

Visiting the Provincial Office in Savusavu



The main focus of our visit north was to visit Vunidogoloa village in Cakaudrove Province, but, to illustrate how Pacific Protocol works, our first stop was Labasa (pronounced Lambasa), the principal town and headquarters for Commissioner Northern, Lieutenant-Colonel Ilai Moceica. Lieutenant-Colonel Moceica is the person with overall responsibility for operations in Vanua Levu. Our first meeting with Commissioner Northern was a pleasant occasion, with discussions over a shared meal.





We then moved south to Savusavu to meet with the officials at the Cakaudrove Provincial Office and at the District Office, all of whom are answerable to Lieutenant-Colonel Moceica. We also met with the Superintendent of the Nasavusavu Circuit of the Methodist Church, again an essential opening meeting for our church-related work. At the PCC we are fortunate to have an alternative and appropriate approach to communities through our broad church membership.

BUT why the interest in Vunidogoloa? What's so special about Vunidogoloa village...?

Relocation of Vunidogoloa village

Like many other low-lying settlements throughout the Pacific and elsewhere, Vunidogoloa is a coastal village gradually succumbing to the adverse effects of climate change. What makes Vunidogoloa unique is that it is the first settlement in Fiji to make a formal approach to government for financial assistance with the relocation of the village.



Vunidogoloa has a very attractive setting overlooking Natewa Bay (the largest bay in the South Pacific), and each of the village's 26 houses is just a few metres from the shore. Life in the village is relaxed and seemingly unchanging; yet for the last 40 years the village has been increasingly exposed to repeat flooding. Now each time a high tide coincides with heavy rain the entire village is inundated and the villagers find themselves surrounded by flood water. "When the water comes in, the houses are like boats on a sea of water", says Headman, Sailosi Ramatu. Consequently, each of the houses is constructed on stilts with large raised steps leading up to front doors. Unfortunately the elevated designs have not prevented the floor of some homes becoming warped and uneven with the water, making it impossible for the families to use the floor space to sleep on at night (the preferred, cooler sleeping option for many Fijians).

Another feature of life in Vunidogoloa village is that there is no need to cut the grass; apparently saltwater kills freshly-cut grass. The village is also surprisingly devoid of vegetable gardens and flowering shrubs, a result of the villagers' reluctance to plant the usual vegetation of a village. "Flooding has destroyed the true beauty of our village", says Chief, Simone Botu. "Nothing grows in the saline soils". Only four stunted breadfruit trees remain in the village and they produce only wizened fruit.



A stunted breadfruit tree in the otherwise sparsely-vegetated village centre. A typical mature breadfruit tree would attain a height at least 4 times the height of the tree shown in the picture.

At low tide the PCC team was taken on a guided tour around the village site. The extent of the damage to the seawall was obvious at low tide, and posts from long-abandoned pig pens protruded from the mud at the low-water mark. Presently, the pigs roam freely on the far river bank.



At low tide, Headman, Sailosi Ramatu points out the effects of coastal erosion and where the seawall has been breached. The seawall used to protect Vunidogoloa.

God's presence and guidance at all times

Vunidogoloa is a 'Methodist' village and all members of the 122-strong community attend church several times a week. The community started praying in earnest about their situation in 2005, and since 2007 they have dedicated the first Friday of each month to fasting and praying about the relocation process. It is the villagers' faith that has kept them strong during times of adversity. "We fully believe that God is leading us in the direction we are taking", said Headman, Sailosi Ramatu, referring to the planned relocation.

The steps are all that remain of the old church; in the background is the current, temporary place of worship in Vunidogoloa



Vunidogoloa has been without a permanent church structure for the last forty years when in 1972 Cyclone Bebe destroyed the then church building. "We believe that this move [the relocation] is the answer to our fasting and prayers over the years and a church is the first building that needs to be built at our new site," said Sulueti Lusiana.

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

2 Corinthians 5:17 (NRSV)

Kenani: The new relocation site

The villagers have named their new site *Kenani*, Fijian for Canaan, the Promised Land, and it is over a mile inland and uphill from Vunidogoloa. The site offers lofty, mountaintop views across Natewa Bay.

All the villagers are looking forward to the move: "We cannot wait to relocate as it will make our life so much easier. The relocation has been a topic of conversation amongst the people of Vunidogoloa for a long time. We feel sorry for our children and our elders", said Ilaitia Naikasowalu. Hopefully the relocation will happen next year.



Kenani: the new village site

Prayer points:

- Pray for the people of Vunidogoloa as they anticipate, plan and implement their relocation to *Kenani*. Pray that they remain safe in Vunidogoloa, their current location, until the time that their new homes in *Kenani* are ready to receive them.
- Give thanks for the availability of land, and for the many blessings offered by the new site of *Kenani*.
- Pray that all necessary site works at *Kenani* will be completed on time and to a satisfactory standard.
- Pray that the people of Vunidogoloa continue to show patience and grace in their current location.
- Pray for those in authority who are assisting with the relocation. Pray that they keep the rights and dignity of the Vunidogoloa people to the fore in their work.
- Pray for other communities who face the same relocation dilemmas and who either have started, or are about to start, the long and often traumatic process of relocation.

The plan is for each married couple to have a new home (some married couples share a property currently), and all homes are to have an inside bathroom and connection to an electricity supply.

So far the site has been levelled, and three earthen tiers created. Much work still needs to be done, however. Proper drainage must allow excess waters to drain away freely (recent heavy rains had created deep gullies in the terracing), and the planting of vegetation must be undertaken to help stabilise the soils.

Only deep-rooted *vertiver* grass has been planted so far, and only then following the contour lines of the terraces.

Awareness-raising workshop

During our visit, the PCC team was given the opportunity to co-ordinate a awareness-raising workshop with the villagers. The villagers discussed the history of their community, and how their forefathers and mothers had moved from the mountainous interior of Vanua Levu to the coast when their original settlement had been flooded.

The villagers also mapped out the extent of the environmental changes to Vunidogoloa over the last 70 years, and they also had the opportunity to voice their hopes and fears for the village move.

Aside from distance to fishing grounds at their new, elevated site, among the villagers' concerns was the proximity of the main road and the issue of road safety for their children.

Relocation not only involves the upheaval of the old, it can also create new issues for a community that may not have been envisaged previously.

Let's pray that their relocation to *Kenani* will ensure the continued vibrancy, health and safety of the Vunidogoloa community.

God bless
Julia



Vertiver grass at Kenani



Workshop discussions

