



Thames North Synod Partners-in Mission Fiji Report

**Paper E
22 October
2022**

We have now been in Fiji for almost six months, arriving here at the beginning of April 2022.

Melanie has been working as the Director of the Women's Centre at Pacific Theological College ("PTC") and is therefore a member of the Faculty team at the college. This has meant being involved in the decision making at PTC and she has been continually told by the Principal that she is the Director of the Women's Centre and therefore decisions about the Centre are down to her.

She is very much on her own at present as there are no support staff working with Melanie and she is having to lead training courses for those women that wish to enrol on these courses and has been tasked with writing and developing new courses for the new academic year (starting in January 2023) and also in planning for the transition of the college into University status by 2024/5 (an ambitious proposal).

The Women's Centre is a hexagonal building with about seven rooms coming off a central core but has lacked attention in recent years and is in need of a facelift. We have obtained a quote for installing solar panels on the roof of the centre (in the region of £30,000) and are together trying to work out how best to make the Centre into a place which feels homely and welcoming for those who come to use it.

Melanie and I have delivered seven safeguarding training sessions for all staff and students to attend in the Centre over the (UK) summer months (winter months here in Fiji, but little drop in temperature) as we have found the policies that exist to be light when compared with what we are used to working with in the UK. Those attending these, and those attending the teaching sessions Melanie has been running, though few in number, have been most appreciative of the training.

In addition to managing the Women's Centre, Melanie has responsibility for the kindergarten on site. This brings with it responsibility for the three staff employed there, and the (at present) 29 children who are enrolled (some full-time, some part-time).

We both feel that we have made a useful contribution to the kindergarten as Melanie has been able to be supportive to the staff and helped provide a steer for their activities, which they have felt they have lacked. We have been particularly encouraged by their willingness to accept training.

In addition we have together worked on getting grant support for the kindergarten which has meant that they have been able to go on outings for the first time in about eight years, been supplied with new equipment and managed to get removed antiquated play equipment which had rusted in the grounds of the kindergarten.

We have received support from the local Rotary Club who have also supplied books and equipment through links that Melanie made with the Rotary Club in New Zealand.

Mark found the first few weeks in Fiji at the college to be difficult for him, as the job of Marketing and Fundraising Officer was ill-defined, in addition to which key staff who were

in supporting roles alongside him were, for good reason, not present for long periods. This meant that getting a good understanding of what was expected of him in this new role was difficult.

However, things have now changed and alongside developing marketing material and applying for funds from donors and potential donors to the college, PTC has realised that Mark's previous experience in Property Management and ministry are useful assets that can be utilised, especially when the college, in its planning to transition to University status has plans for its buildings and estate.

This has meant that, if anything, Mark is now over-involved in some areas and will need to review his priorities in the coming months.

Mark was able, with the generous support of the Council for World Mission, to attend the World Council of Churches Assembly in Germany at the end of August/beginning of September to help promote PTC and its programmes.

This has opened doors to many connections with others all over the world which we hope will help the college in the future.

URC Assistance

We both richly value your prayers for us, as living here in Pasifika is quite different to the UK.

We have settled in to worshipping at the Presbyterian Church in Suva, where the minister is Canadian and the congregation very mixed with attendees from several Pacific Islands and from Korea, 80% of whom are either students or involved in the educational community in Suva.

We do not, however, yet feel very well connected with the church scene in Suva and would value your praying for a way in to enable us to share more with the Christian community.

We also find ourselves working in a college that is seeking to de-colonise theology, and be an agency for leadership for justice, but we find PTC to be a place that is heavily reliant on any overseas funding that it can obtain in order to operate (so still dominated by "western" church involvement, sadly) and also a place where we feel there is injustice present in some of the actions and activities and modes of operating that take place in the college which we feel we do need to gently and slowly challenge.

For example, the women on site are very much still expected to do what are seen as "women's tasks", for which they are thanked gratefully and genuinely ...but they do not really have a choice about whether they do these things or not! For a college that runs a course on gender justice and is looking to shortly run a Masters in Gender Justice this feels awkward at the very least.

Having said all of the above we would be delighted if the Synod could give some kind of financial support to assist us in the work we are doing.

Ideally, helping to provide some administrative support for Melanie in her role (it would cost less than £5,000 per annum to provide this) would be very welcome at present. On Mark's side of things, he is looking for sponsorship of students by way of scholarships, but this is more expensive and is a long term commitment (Bachelor degrees take three years, Masters two – the Bachelor degree for a student from Pasifika would cost around £10,000 over three years). However, books are very expensive for students and the kindergarten (and for us!) here in Pasifika so it may be that a small fund that could be

made available to provide additional support for the relatively small book grants that the students receive from their churches could be very helpful if it was put at our disposal to utilise.

There will always also be building works to be undertaken but, for now, we share with you some of the things that are in front of us here in Pasifika as we move forward in our new work as partners in mission.

We are looking forward to being able to spend Christmas and the New Year in Australia with our eldest son, daughter-in-law and two grandchildren after the second semester finishes in November and graduation takes place.

Thank you for your support and encouragement.

**Rev Mark Meatcher & Rev Melanie Smith
Partners in Mission
Council for World Mission
Based at Pacific Theological College, Suva, Fiji Islands.**