

The Islands Will Worship Him

In Fiji, where Christians have been divided for years, spiritual renewal has engulfed a nation—and its president has publicly led his people in repentance.

At 11 a.m. on Friday, May 19, 2000, eight gunmen stormed into the Fiji Parliament and seized 35 hostages. They were acting, their leader George Speight said, to protect the rights of indigenous Fijians against the increasing influence of the islands' large Indian population.

Speight's key hostage was Mahendra Chaudhry, the first Indian prime minister of Fiji. Speight's aim was to remove Chaudhry's Labour Party government and ensure indigenous dominance of future administrations.

The action triggered a 56-day siege of Parliament and nationwide civil unrest. Mobs rioted in the streets of Suva, the capital, looting and burning Indian-owned shops. As the violence spread across the provinces, Indo-Fijians fled their homes, and indigenous factions clashed even while they endeavored to find a solution.

The crisis raised thorny questions about national conscience.

How could such conflicts erupt? Who was to blame? Fiji—about two-thirds of the way from Hawaii to New Zealand—had long identified itself as a devoutly Christian nation. It clung to the belief that its almost 900,000 inhabitants lived in the shelter of a South Pacific paradise.

Yet a report on the coup, commissioned by the influential Great Council of Chiefs (GCC), concluded one of the main

culprits was the nation's Christians.

Prodding a Sleeping Giant

To Vuniani Nakauyaca this finding was a statement of the obvious. Driving through Suva the day of the coup, the senior pastor of Covenant Evangelical Church saw the mobs staving in shop windows. The sight sickened him.

"I'd never felt like that before—these people, supposedly Christians, you know," he says. "They just roamed the streets and did whatever they liked."

Nakauyaca suspended Covenant Church's usual schedule of meetings and called his congregation together to "pray to God in deep repentance" for several weeks. A colleague approached him with an uneasy question: In the midst of all this, where's the church?

"I responded and said, 'That's a very good question,'" Nakauyaca says.

Once a vibrant force in the forefront of national life, the church had become obstinately conservative and narrow-minded.

"As the church, so the nation" is an oft-quoted sentiment in Fiji, and for years before Speight's coup attempt, the country's established denominations had been mired in doctrinal standoffs while newer and more zealous churches fell foul of tradition.

"We were not taking our role to be a prophetic voice to the nation," says Suliasi Kurulo, senior pastor of 3,000-member World Harvest Centre in Suva. While visiting neighboring Samoa in the 1980s, Kurulo read a book on the history of Christianity in Fiji and wept. It did not describe the church he knew, which he says was "so dead."

"People were still religious—they went to church and all that—but there was no life," he says.

Ordinary Fijians badly missed the leadership a healthy church once had provided. They reacted to the coup with shock and dismay but had nowhere to turn for guidance.

Sairusi Rakuro, a bus driver from the village of Korovisilou, about 43 miles west of Suva, says wistfully that before the coup Fijians were "like a big group of fish all swimming together, and then a shark came and stirred them up, and they all separated."

A Methodist, Rakuro firmly believes in the church as a force for unity. Nonindigenous Fijians share Rakuro's view.

Imran Ali, an Indian Muslim and a journalist with the Fiji Times, says indignantly: "Forget about what happened; let's come together. The more polarized we are, the more important it is to make Fiji a peaceful place in which to live."

He accepts the Fijian church's influence for reconciliation.

"If you do it spiritually there's more power in it," he observes. "If it comes from a church minister there's more

influence.”

Yet the church was busy brawling and seemed an unlikely source of rescue. God, however, was prodding the sleeping giant. As a result of the crisis and subsequent unrest, Christians were forced to face a clear question about their integrity: Were they prepared to practice what they preached?

Some were.

Ignoring the dangers, members of Central Christian Centre church approached Indian shopkeepers—Hindus and Muslims—with offers of help and protection. They swept up the wreckage of their shops and mounted a 24-hour guard over their premises and homes until the violence subsided.

Defying the so-called Dogs of War—the marauding bands Speight was arming and sending out to assail his opponents—Kurulo’s World Harvest Centre also raised its colors. Indian riot victims were invited to a special meeting at World Harvest.

“The Lord gave to us a message that said the church had to make a stand, and we had to declare what we believed regarding the crisis to the nation,” Kurulo says. “We stood on behalf of the indigenous Fijians and asked forgiveness for what had happened.”

Inspired by such acts and strengthened by a growing commitment to prayer, the church began to raise its voice. Nakauyaca says he sensed God nudging him like a Daniel into the lions’ den, so during the seventh week of the siege he went to the gates of Parliament with a group of pastors and asked to see the hostages. The group was admitted by gun-wielding sentries and

taken to Speight.

"We talked with him and said, 'Look, we are here to try and do some reconciliation,'" Nakauyaca recalls. Speight, looking tired and chastened, let them see the hostages.

"We sensed that God was providing a platform for us," Nakauyaca says. "We sensed that it was ... a moment that was given by God for the church." He knelt in repentance before Prime Minister Chaudhry on behalf of all Fijians.

Chaudhry was astonished. Nakauyaca recalls that Chaudhry said, "We cannot believe that you, our brothers the Fijians, can go this low and ask forgiveness from us." The church, though still disoriented after so long in the wilderness, had reclaimed its mission. The coup ended July 14, 2000.

National Reconciliation

Since then, a Christian research and information agency—The Sentinel Group—has sent crews to Fiji to document in film the revitalization of Fiji's church as well as its national revival and reconciliation movement. The Sentinel Group is headed by George Otis Jr., producer of the popular Transformations video, which chronicles cases of Christian-led national renewal in separate parts of the world. The Fiji documentary is titled Let the Sea Resound.

"One of the things that has impressed us very much has been an emerging unity amongst the people of God here," Otis says of Fiji. "It isn't just between denominations. ... There's this wonderful, almost seamless working partnership between the church and the state here right now. ... Many senators and

parliamentarians are also pastors and church leaders.”

Foremost among these government leaders is President Ratu Josefa Iloilo.

The GCC, which selects the president and half the Senate, appointed Iloilo—a born-again Methodist preacher and himself a high chief—to the presidency when the coup ended. Iloilo, 83, exudes good-humored dignity, and those around him clearly adore him.

His predecessor, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, said dictatorship alone would unite Fijians. Iloilo disagrees. He believes the task clearly belongs to the church.

In early 2001 he approached the major denominations and asked them if they would formalize the growing unity of the body of Christ in Fiji and lead a national reconciliation movement. In response, Tomasi Kanailagi, president of the Methodist Church in Fiji, invited church leaders to a meeting in his office on May 31, 2001. The response exceeded expectations.

“We were jammed shoulder-to-shoulder,” Nakauyaca recalls. The meeting brought a decisive breakthrough: the founding of the Assembly of Christian Churches in Fiji (ACCF) as an official proponent of church unity.

Adopting a vision for “Fiji to Be God’s Treasured Possession,” the ACCF organized a nationwide Millennial Revival Mission, which Iloilo launched in Suva’s Albert Park July 8, 2001. As a crowd of 10,000 watched, he publicly bowed before God and said he and his household rose at 5 o’clock every morning to worship and seek God’s guidance for the nation.

Also present was Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase, a committed Christian, who declared: "Our efforts towards building this country will come to nothing if they are not rooted firmly in the love and fear of God."

Iloilo and Qarase lit a torch, which symbolized revival and reconciliation, and young Christians carried it Olympic-style to towns and villages across the country. Churches joined together to host reconciliation meetings along the route, and reports about the torch's passage began to filter back—people were suddenly being healed; others were falling before God in repentance and giving their lives to Him. Miracles were breaking out even in places far off the torch's planned route as a sense of hope and renewal filled the country.

"I believe it's because of these two men," Central Christian Centre senior pastor Pita Cili says of Iloilo and Qarase. "I believe God honors their faith. ... I have never seen leaders in Fiji committed to Christ like that."

Ratu Epeli Kanaimawi, the chief who chaired the GCC commission that investigated the coup and determined the church was partly to blame, points out the reuniting church was quick to get alongside government members.

"We have delegated responsibilities to the church leaders to be responsible for ministry to government, right from the president's office to the other ministries and statutory bodies," says Kanaimawi, now vice chairman of the ACCF.

Others followed the lead.

“The Public Service Commission is very active now in holding regular church meetings of the [public] servants,” Kanaimawi continues.

Prayer movements have arisen as well. Otis was impressed to see chiefs rededicating their lands and people to God. “This is happening in a very significant number of places around Fiji,” he says.

Winds of Revival

One such place is Beqa Island, home of a renowned fire-walking clan that would walk barefoot on white-hot stones without any sign of pain or injury. Their occultic ability, attributed to an ancestor’s dealings with a “spirit god,” came at a price, however. Their men died prematurely, their fruit trees withered, and the nearby coral perished.

Now the fire-walkers, including their high priest, are living fervently for Christ and have renounced their occultic ceremony. Moreover, as they have dedicated their land to God, He has renewed it. Otis, who has visited the community, confirms that miracles are taking place—the coral has been restored and the once-withered trees are bearing fruit again, giving, witnesses say, year-round yields.

Also remarkable is Nukulau, a prison island 30 minutes by boat from Suva. Its only inhabitants are inmates, guards and the crew of a navy gunboat that patrols the island.

Nukulau’s most celebrated resident is George Speight. After his coup attempt collapsed he was arrested, tried, convicted of treason and sentenced to death, though his sentence later

was commuted to life in prison.

A man of religious sentiment, Speight had advocated Christianizing Fiji through legislation. In the early days of his imprisonment he read the Bible feverishly, seeking justification for his coup attempt in Scripture. Over time he learned about grace. Eventually, renouncing the cause of indigenous supremacy, he gave his life wholly to Christ.

“He is thankful for the time he has spent in prison,” says Jack Simpson, who works with a prison ministry and recently talked with Speight about the attack on Parliament. “He believes he would have never met Jesus if [the coup attempt] had not taken place.”

Speight almost eerily personifies his nation’s spiritual journey from stagnation to crisis to renewal. Fiji’s Christian leaders have no doubt that God used Speight’s actions to trigger revival.

If he had not staged the coup attempt, many other things would not have happened either. Central Christian Centre would not be running an Indian service with hundreds of former Hindus and Muslims, World Harvest Centre would not be baptizing as many as 50 people a week, and the people of Korovisilou would not have needed to build a bigger church to accommodate the entire village.

The key to all these things was changed hearts, and it seems fitting that the man who tried to change Fiji with guns is now grateful that it wasn’t the plans in his heart that prevailed, but the Lord’s purpose.

The Healing of a Land

Christians in two areas of Fiji say that after public repentance their food supply underwent a supernatural transformation.

It was an isle of plenty. Branches groaned under yields of mangos, breadfruit and papaya. Fish filled the nets in the surf, and an abundance of tasty crabs skittered across the beaches. Nairai—in the Koro Sea east of Fiji's main island, Viti Levu—was a modern-day Garden of Eden for the people living there.

Then, in the late 1940s, the coral began to die, the fish and crabs abandoned the coastline, and the trees ceased to bear fruit. Overabundance gave way to scarcity.

In the highlands of Viti Levu, the villagers living in Nuku used to draw their water from a sweet spring. About 40 years ago the spring suddenly developed a whitish cast and turned poisonous. Plants on its banks died, and blindness or madness afflicted anyone who drank from it or bathed in it.

The change was said to have coincided with a declaration of war by Nuku's chief against neighboring tribespeople, whom he drove away or killed. In later years, government chemists tested the water and found traces of arsenic and asphalt, among other poisonous substances.

Whether Nairai's and Nuku's distresses stemmed entirely from sin is not clear. What is undeniable, however, is that the people's repentance brought healing. As people gathered to humble themselves and seek God's face, He clearly responded.

Taking samples of their soil, seawater and coral, the people of Nairai spent some weeks in prayer, offering the samples up to God and inviting Him to exercise His lordship over the land He had given them.

One day while they prayed someone called out from the beach. The surf was frothing with large, edible fish of a species they had not seen for more than 50 years. Older people recognized them as being part of their staple diet when they were youngsters.

Every able-bodied person grabbed nets and hauled in as many fish as they could. Still the water churned with hundreds more. After the fish came the crabs—again in huge numbers—and in their seasons the fruit trees began to thrive again as richly as before.

In Nuku the people met together for a week of prayer in April 2003, rededicating their land to God. They also met with people from a neighboring village to reconcile longstanding differences. As they did, the opaque cast disappeared from the spring, and the water began to sparkle.

Someone, daring to taste it, declared it sweet—restored after 40 years. Now plants grow on its banks, flowers are flourishing nearby, and small fish have returned to it.

The residents of Nairai and Nuku, who testify consistently of these miracles, continue to meet regularly to give thanks to God for His renewal of their communities.

Population: 868,531

Area: 7,055 square miles, slightly smaller than New Jersey. Fiji is not one island but two main islands and 332 smaller islands, 110 of which are inhabited, that are volcanic and coralline.

Racial tensions: Mainly between indigenous Fijians and immigrant Indians, who were brought to the islands as indentured servants by the British from 1879 to 1916.

Total number of languages: 10, but most residents speak English.

Percentage of Christians: 58 percent claim some allegiance to Christian faith. Fiji has the highest percentage of Methodists of any country.

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