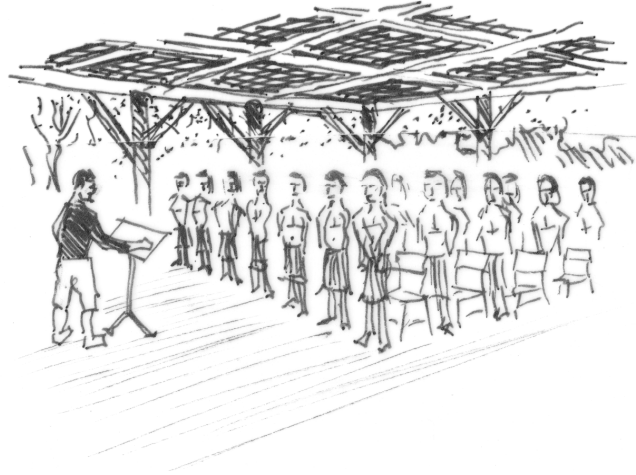


The Fijian call to New Guinea



By the mid 1870s Fijians as a whole had embraced the Christian faith and the church was asking itself, "All the people have turned away from heathen idols and have begun to worship Jehovah God and His Son, Jesus. What do we do now?"

As they thought and prayed about it they began to see the answer to their question. "The Tongan Christians left their homes to bring the message of Jesus to us. We must do the same and take the Christian gospel to others who have not heard it yet."

The Methodist Church in Australia was pleased that the young Fijian church had a vision to extend their borders beyond their own islands. They came to an agreement that the church in Australia would supply the ships, materials and money whilst the Fijian church would supply the missionaries from among their own people.

At about this time a measles epidemic hit Fiji. Measles was previously unknown in the Pacific Islands so they had no immunity to the disease. When their bodies burned with the high temperature the natural thing for them to do was to go down to the sea and cool off in the water. This brought on pneumonia for which they had no remedy, and thousands of Fijians died at that time. Many Christian pastors and teachers were among the victims.

When the epidemic had passed its peak the church leaders began to assess their situation.

“What will happen to our plans to take missionaries to the islands to the west?” some asked.

“We have lost so many pastors and teachers. There aren’t enough to serve our own home churches at present. Why should we send any to other islands? Shouldn’t we look after our own churches first?”

Then a ship arrived from Australia bringing Dr. George Brown, the head of the Mission Board of the Methodist Church in Australia. He had come to seek for volunteers who would come with him to help establish the New Guinea Mission. This was the first ship to arrive in Fiji since the measles epidemic took hold, so it was the first anyone outside Fiji knew of the devastation it had caused. As Dr. Brown listened to the missionaries’ accounts of the losses of people to the epidemic he was shocked. He began to review his plans. “I don’t have the heart to ask these people to give up any of their pastors and teachers. They have so few left,” he said. “But I’ll go to the training school and tell them why I have come here. There might be someone who will go with me to the west, to New Guinea.”

That evening the students were called together and Dr. George Brown was introduced. “You know how we had planned to send some of your pastors and teachers on a mission to New Guinea,” began Dr. Brown. The students were all listening attentively. “Since we decided on this plan you have suffered great losses in the measles epidemic. I really don’t know what to do. It is hard to ask the church here to send out men when your home church has lost so many. However, I’ll put this question to you tonight. Don’t make any decision until you have prayed about it with your wives. I am asking if there is perhaps one among you who would volunteer to go with me to New Guinea. I must warn you that there will be many trials and hardships. There are sicknesses there that you don’t know here. The people will most likely be hostile when we first arrive. You may never see your homes in Fiji again. You must count the cost of going, but if God calls and you agree to go, He will help you all the way.”

The principal spoke to the students. “Don’t make any decision now. Please think carefully about all that Dr. Brown has said. Pray with your wives about this question. We’ll talk about it further tomorrow.”

Next morning the 84 students gathered together and sat down. There was a quiet stillness in the room. The principal addressed the students: "You heard Dr Brown's request last night. I'm sure you have all prayed about it with your wives. Now, I'd like to hear from you. Is anyone among you willing to go with Dr Brown to New Guinea? If so, would he please stand up."

An amazing thing happened. All 84 students stood up! This solved one problem, but created another. Not all of the 84 students could go, so there had to be a selection of the ones most suitable to go, and the equally important ones whose calling was to stay home and serve God and their own people in the home church.

They had begun to get visas and traveling papers ready for those who were preparing to go to New Guinea when some outside gossip was passed around.

"You know, these poor Fijians are being forced to go to New Guinea. They're going against their will," was the word coming from some people in government circles. As a result, the Administrator of Fiji called together the men who were preparing to go.

"You know you don't have to go if you don't want to," he told them. "I want you to know that nobody can make you go unless you really want to."

The only response was, "Yes, we do want to go. We have decided to go of our own free will. God has called us and we will obey Him."

The Administrator began talking more strongly. He was doing all he could to discourage them. "Do you people want to die in a foreign land?" he asked, knowing that a Fijian's one desire if he is dying, is to be in his own land. Dr Brown later wrote in his diary that when he heard that question he was afraid it would change the men's minds. The discouraging talk went on for some time until a Fijian spokesman for the group, Aminio Bale, asked permission to speak.

"Dr. Brown told us of all the hardships we will meet when we go to New Guinea. We know there will be sicknesses, the people will be hostile to begin with and they might try to kill us. We have fully considered the matter and our minds are made up. No one has pressed us in any way. We have heard the call of God, we have given ourselves to God's work and it is our mind to go to New Guinea. If we live, we live. If we die, we die."

That was the end of the matter, and they went. Most of them did die there, mainly from tropical diseases. Over the years hundreds more have followed. They planted a church in New Guinea that is still there today, and very much alive.

Adapted from:

An Autobiography, George Brown, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1908

Deep Sea Canoe, Alan R. Tippett, William Carey Library, Pasadena, California, 1977