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Why am I here? An itinerant minister reflects on a recent move

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Prompted by the vocational challenge of a gospel chorus writer, Val Ogden considers the different ways in which a minister might 'be proud to be known'. She contemplates her own, unexpected, recent move in mission and ministry to serve churches of the Pacific region through theological education by extension, and confronts some of the missiological dilemmas it revives. She recognises the consistent 'core' of word, sacrament and pastoral care to ministry in whatever context and ends by sharing a sample of Pacific voices whose most creative theology is born from the ocean depths and fruitful earth.

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> Wide, wide as the ocean, high as the heavens above,
> Deep, deep as the deepest sea is my Saviour's love;
> I, though so unworthy, still am a child of his care,
> For his Word teaches me that his love reaches me everywhere.

This is what we need: professional theological reflection in a serious academic journal that has us bursting uncontrollably into song. (Don't deny it. I could hear you!)

It's a Charles Austin Miles chorus: a glad and permanent imprint on my mind and heart from Methodist Sunday school days in Manchester, England in the 1960s.[1] Start it off here in Fiji, in 2015, with children or adults who come from a vast range of churches across the South Pacific, and it is equally well known and sung, with younger arms flung out excitedly to their widest, highest and deepest. Across generations and evidently continents, this song has made a simple but credible liturgical attempt through music and movement to express something of the un-navigable, unfathomable, unattainable vastness of God's love, incomprehensible in its enormity until it touches us personally, through the reach of a Saviour for whom 'everywhere' is no barrier.

Composer Charles Miles said of his vocation, 'It is as a writer of gospel songs I am proud to be known, for in that way I may be of the most use to my Master, whom I serve willingly although not as efficiently as is my desire.'[2] That one-sentence vocational summary of his becomes a profound spiritual exercise when we blank out six words and attempt to reframe it for ourselves: *It is as a _____? I am proud to be known, for in that way I may be of the most use to my Master, whom I serve willingly although not as efficiently as is my desire.*

How would you complete that sentence?

Applying the discipline to myself for the purposes of this article, I can start nowhere else than in the present moment.

It is as *Director of Theological Education by Extension at the Pacific Theological College* in Fiji I am proud to be known

That word 'proud' gets in the way and I shuffle uneasily. Paul's reflection on Gentile identity and participation in Romans 11:13–22 helps a little.[3] I stand, not proudly in a conceited sense, but in utter faith and awe (v. 20) because, through being open to move in mission, I appear to have been grafted as a

'wild olive shoot', a British Methodist mission partner, onto the 'olive tree' that is the richly rooted and grounded Pacific Theological College, 50 years old this year.[4] Since August 2014 I have lived on a beautiful, lush and leafy campus, learning quickly that wobbly branches are vulnerable to the wayward winds. A strong fusion of this new English twig with the established plant is needed before branching out too much.

The Extension department now under my care is known as PTCEE and has been in existence for 25 years. Its commitment is to offer practical courses in areas such as Introduction to the Bible, Ministry, Worship, Pastoral Care, Pacific Church History, Ethics, and more, designed for use by (and here comes that dubious term) 'ordinary Christians' across the South Pacific. PTCEE's well-established aims and objectives are clear:

- to train lay Christians in the Pacific, both men and women, for theologically informed service in various forms of ministry
- to develop Christian responses to social issues affecting church and society in the Pacific, such as the environment, poverty, politics, justice and reconciliation
- to enable people to learn in their own environment and at their own speed.

Through courses at certificate and diploma level and potentially to Bachelor of Divinity level, people are equipped for ministry, but not ordained ministry necessarily. PTCEE plugs a significant gap. Most areas in the Pacific do have theological colleges, but full-time study residentially would be impossible and inappropriate for most. Theological colleges are dedicated to training people for ordination primarily, to which is accorded massive status, though the laity may be responsible for much of the ministry within and beyond their churches. The deeply religious nature of Pacific people and their enthusiasm for growing in faith and gaining qualifications along the way makes it imperative for PTCEE to provide accessible, affordable, reputable theological education.

Practically, many people in the region live on isolated islands separated by vast expanses of ocean, so PTCEE programmes are print-based and generally completed through textbook, pen, paper and the postal service. Computer proficiency and internet access are not required, though typed and emailed assignments are of course acceptable if people prefer to work that way. Hopefully I can visit smaller islands and more remote areas in due course to meet Extension students, encourage them and promote the programme. It may well be that, as the years progress, the face of PTCEE changes and we will

be into online learning, webinars and the like, but that is not the present scene. Most students complete assignments in lined exercise books, handwritten in biro, and post them back to PTCEE where they are marked and returned.

There is something much earthed about that. I flick through the pages and feel a connection to the person and try to imagine their setting. I like it that one human hand has physically shaped the lines and curves of the sentences (except when illegible!). There are occasional smudges and neat crossings out; possibly a change of ink colour. There is no slick cutting and pasting and no smart layout and design tricks to entice the eye. It is a method of theological communication-reflection fast disappearing of course and I acknowledge it, not to over-romanticise or have a questionable nostalgia trip. Nor do I argue against development in communications technology and connectivity. We all have a right to the same and Suva, the capital city where I'm based, has all this. I simply reflect on PTCEE's commitment to champion courses that are written mostly by people in the Pacific to be appropriate for Pacific people on the ground in real settings. And, as of now, grounded theological reflection and the painstaking graft of handwriting – in the blessing and curse of the English language – is how it happens. Often a handwritten manuscript has a mysterious and powerful way of conveying grass-roots content and context. I feel proud to read and react to them.

Now, back to that earlier probing vocational sentence and a slightly different response.

It is as *a mission partner of the Methodist Church in Britain* I am proud to be known

Would that a gleaming, glowing confidence and surety accompanied that sentiment! Mission partnership – even that terminology – always generates some deep and discomforting reflection, and may God forgive us if we ever shirk it. Here I am in Fiji, independent from Britain since 1970, living a short bus ride from the Queen Elizabeth barracks. Because of my roots I happen to speak English with some sort of English accent (as opposed to, say, the Australian, New Zealand, German or Samoan versions more frequently heard on campus) and this generates admiring comment constantly. Two Methodist lay preachers were in the office the other day enquiring about courses and hung onto every word I said with such rapt and reverential attention it was really quite disconcerting. 'Ahh', they said on leaving, with a sigh and a shake of the head,

'now we know where to come to hear English spoken properly!' The anecdote may induce a smile at one level, but any serious unpacking of it theologically and missiologically can't avoid three heavily laden words: 'British', 'mission' and 'partnership'. Let's also add to those, 'white' and 'power'. The language that enables verbal communication in the region across ethnicities and communities for the purposes of politics, business and education – theological or otherwise – is English. We are where we are. But there is still a massive task to do in enabling communication in English as a learned language to feel truly liberating and empowering. It is basic in communication studies to acknowledge that all manner of words can be spoken and heard, written and read, yet there is no guarantee that meaningful communication has taken place. Sometimes we have to test out quite intentionally whether that has happened. A mission appointment in Fiji throws all that reality into sharp focus once again.

So, should I be here? Can I trust it was God's leading? Coming to the end of a Methodist-Anglican circuit appointment in the South-East and some doctoral research, I had offered to serve as a Chair of District in British Methodism, after much encouragement to do so, and in a context where my gifts, graces, experience and shortcomings in ministry are known. I was shortlisted but considered by the appointing panel to be unsuitable for that responsibility. The Pacific Theological College in Fiji, where my gifts, graces, experience and shortcomings in ministry are *un*known, were recruiting and judged me suitable to lead and manage a region-wide theological education programme across the South Pacific having never set foot here before. All is mystery. Better the devil you *don't* know, clearly.

Because money and mission are key factors and holy business in any overseas partnership, let me fill in a detail or two for background. Here I receive a local programme head's salary paid in Fijian dollars (£14,000 equivalent). The Pacific Theological College pays 75 per cent of that and houses me on campus. I pay utilities, tax, local pension fund etc. The Methodist Church in Britain picks up 25 per cent of the cost, keeps up my pension contributions in the UK and buys the flight to and from. In monetary terms, I would cost British Methodism more at home, contrary to some assumptions that mission partners are largely an unjustifiable expense.

As a probationer minister years ago, I served (1993–1998) as a Methodist mission partner in the United Church of Zambia and was ordained there, unforgettably, in 1994. God used Zambia to shape and form me for mission and ministry since more than any other influence, of that I have no doubt.

Global, ecumenical, mission education became my 'world' from 2000 to 2009 in Selly Oak and at Queen's, Birmingham. The equipping and enabling of those embarking on short- and long-term mission was always part of that ministry, plus teaching, tutoring and engagement with leaders from the wider world Church studying or preparing to serve in the UK.

I'm proud to say – really proud this time – that we never ducked the hard questions. A revealing exercise was the one where we had those from the UK preparing for overseas mission placements seated in one half of the room directly facing those who were in Britain from elsewhere seated in the other half: the 'sending' and 'receiving' Churches confronting each other, so to speak. When people took the risk, conversations could get hot. If you're a young gap-year volunteer, nervous but enthusiastic about 'serving the Lord in Africa', sponsored and urged on by your generous local congregation, it is a bit of a blow to hear from an experienced minister in the country you're jetting off to about all the problems he's encountered with recent volunteers and what the price of your return air fare could do for his local health centre. It's also not great to hear English Methodists talk about how disappointing their 'overseas minister' has been when they had such high expectations of what she or he might bring in terms of reverse mission, critical challenge and possibly revival. 'It might help if s/he mixed with us not just other …….s!'

But the point to ponder is this. Never once did any person, on either side, argue for a moratorium on comings and goings, sendings and receivings in mission. With all its messiness we still wanted it. In recent doctoral research on the mission and ministry of the Revd Dr Colin Morris, I revisited the missionary moratorium debates of the 1970s, which occurred during his period as General Secretary of the Overseas Division.[5] A lot more is said in the thesis than I bring here, but Dr Morris's passion for an incarnational missiology that safeguards catholicity and ecumenicity is strongly heard. A passionate, high-profile, controversial campaigner in northern Rhodesia's independence struggle and sharply critical of the British Church scene, he nevertheless feared for the catholicity of the Church globally in the 1970s if moratorium gained ground. He expresses this movingly and succinctly: 'Outsiders in any one national Church's midst are living parables of the Incarnation. God cleaves history in two by breaking into it with the gift of salvation which no-one can puzzle out, conjure up or discover for himself.'[6]

Because God in Christ chose the model of 'breaking in' for the purposes of our salvation, Christians follow his example by doing so too, in and from many

directions. It shatters conventions and disrupts comfort zones, of course. How many congregations do we know who, secretly, would love to hang a 'do not disturb' sign on the door? Elaborate rituals of welcome and farewell to newcomers are hugely important in the Pacific and raise some intriguing 'gospel and culture' questions for those who follow a Jesus who frequently pitched up without invitation. But then we don't break in armed and violent. Forced entry isn't the way of servant-leaders. It wasn't a burglary at Bethlehem after all. We tread the territory gently, incarnationally, in wonderment and deep gratitude to God for new life in a fresh context. Breaking in is sacramental.

It is as *Director of Theological Education by Extension at the Pacific Theological College in Fiji* I am proud to be known. It is as *a mission partner of the Methodist Church in Britain* I am proud to be known. But there's another reflective sentence that presents.

It is as *a minister of word, sacrament and pastoral care* I am proud to be known

Everything has changed, but nothing has really. Reversing the order above, opportunities for pastoral care will always present themselves here: among families on campus, in local churches and because of the unexpected conversation on the local bus. Ministry is like that, and thank God for it. There will frequently be the opportunity to preach and to preside at services of Holy Communion in our college chapel and beyond, formally breaking open word and bread. But I need to be attentive to what it means not just to function and operate ministerially in this new mission context, but to discern what it might require in terms of holy and sacramental living in this new sacred space. We are instructed at ordination, 'Remember your call', and that's a call that must embrace the whole of life here.[7] Much more than a job. The Roman Catholic Cathedral of the Sacred Heart here in Suva has been making much of Pope Francis' 'Year of Consecrated Life' which began on Advent Sunday. A bold and striking banner appeared above the high altar saying, 'Wake up the World!' with its confident declaration, 'Grateful for the past. Hopeful for the future. Joyful for today.' It has become a most powerful message for me, unexpectedly 'born again' into Fiji for a while and trying to work out what that means.

A ministry of word and words will inevitably dominate in theological education and gives weight to the first part of 'word, sacrament and pastoral care'. My

mission world will be largely one of writing and marking, compilation and collation: the chance to play a tiny part, as others of far greater stature have already done, in enabling the words, work and experience of ordinary Pacific Island Christians doing theology to be recorded and accorded value, even to Bachelor degree level through extension studies, which will be excellent. Also, perhaps, to be part of an ongoing mission to ensure that Pacific words and voices are given more generous space on the global church stage. There is fine literature and scholarship around. But who's reading and who's listening?

With that in mind, here are just three examples of recent theological work through the words of contemporary Pacific Island theologians and Church leaders, gleaned from the library which now happens to be the gift on my doorstep. It will be a very limited selection and sharing inevitably as I read and digest in these early months.

The impact of the insignificant

I appreciated reading Judith Vusi's article, 'Lord of the Insignificant – A Christ for Ni-Vanuatu Women', where she uses the legend of Wagerrie to speak of influence and power emanating from one who was regarded as unimportant and ineffective. Wagerrie refers to a very small man who served Budkolkol, a native god. There are many legends concerning Wagerrie's character; one in particular notes the distinctive and different colour of the root vegetables which he grows in his little garden. Judith retells the legend:

> Once upon a time, Budkolkol and his group of followers including Wagerrie decided to plant a new garden of taro, which they did. Even though Wagerrie was present, he was not counted or included, but he managed nevertheless to clear some bush and to plant one tiny garden. When the taro was ready to be harvested, a big feast was held. When the men collected their big taro, Wagerrie also collected his. His taro were tiny in size, but he still contributed them. The others laughed and said they were worth nothing at all. Still, when the tiny taro were grated to make a big pudding (*laplap*), the tiny taro Wagerrie brought were also grated, and their colour was a bright red. The *laplap* was baked in the bush-oven, and when the leaves were unwrapped, to everyone's surprise and amazement the colour of the whole *laplap* was red, taking on the colour from the tiny taro that Wagerrie had contributed from his little garden.

Judith reflects:

> We women in our communities in Vanuatu and the Pacific today also have resources within ourselves and our own households – gifts of various kinds which we can contribute toward the development and well-being of our people, our churches and the world. Although society may not view these gifts as significant, in Jesus' eyes they are of great value.[8]

'The land has eyes' – Trinity and ecotheology

I've been learning a lot from Jone Ulago's MTh thesis from 2012, 'Cultural Values in the "Vanua" and their Bases for an Ecotheology in Holistic Relationships in the Fiji Islands'. Reading of and absorbing more and more about the sacred relationships of land, water and people in this region is enlightening and moving. Ulago identifies the threefold set of relationships that the *vanua* (indigenous Fijians) venerate: those between human beings themselves – chiefs, warriors, priests, craftsmen and fishermen; those between human beings and their ancestors which require loyalty, obedience and reverence; and those between human beings and their natural environment. Always in a creative interplay are the human and divine, natural and supernatural. In this way, Ulago argues, the divine Trinity and the *vanua* community are interconnected and interrelated in terrestrial and marine environments, and even in the atmosphere. His work is rich in illustration, including this snippet from a conversation with Rotuman minister Raki Tigarea:

> The neighbouring island of Rotuma has a very meaningful and touching statement which says, 'The land has eyes' (*Pear ta ma 'on maf*). It means whenever someone commits an offence on any turf without being seen by any human being, the land has eyes to record and express openly in the future about the committed offences. Nature has voices and these can only be heard and understood by those who are closely connected and related to them. But the voices need to be heard and nature cared for as they have parts to play in our harmonious relationships.[9]

Gospel and culture – continuing debates

I've been dipping too into words and writing that constantly wrestle with missionary heritage across Pacific churches and illustrate what ministers are

facing daily. In Uesile Tupu's thesis 'Mutually Indispensible', he unpacks the leadership tensions that arise between ministers of the Methodist Church in Samoa and the *matai*, traditional village leadership. His concern is that the *matai* 'tend to accuse the minister of interfering with or interrupting them in their traditional leadership', and he continues:

> I perceive that if the tension between Gospel and Culture is not resolved, then it is likely that culture will undermine the Gospel in the future. Samoans will eventually resurrect the behavioural patterns banned by the early missionaries. The practice of punishment in the traditional Samoan culture like *mu le foaga* (burning of possessions), *ati ma le lau* (uprooting of crops) and others will come into force to control the life of the community without any consideration given to the Christian point of view. The Gospel will be viewed as lesser or not important at all.[10]

The harmonious workings of a Samoan fishing net give Tupu a creative window onto the gospel and culture relationship. The *uto* is the float at the top that prevents the net from sinking and tangling. The *maene* is the sinker, the lower part of the fishing net tied with rocks which allows the net to be anchored and spread for catching fish. Both *uto* and *maene* play distinctive roles but are vital to successful fishing. The same must be the case, he argues, with gospel and culture, the ministers and the *matai*.

Having begun with 'Wide, wide as the ocean', a fishing net analogy is an apt one with which to end this reflection. Are contemporary British mission partners to be read as 'floats' or 'sinkers', I wonder? Or neither. Discuss.

In the end, a simple hope remains for me; the same as expressed by gospel chorus composer Charles Miles, 'that I may be of the most use to my Master, whom I serve willingly, although not as efficiently as is my desire'.

Notes

1. Charles Austin Miles (1868–1946) was born on 7 January 1868 at Lakehurst, New Jersey. He died on 10 March 1946 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. See www.hymnary.org/person/Miles_CAustin, accessed 29 December 2014.
2. See the reference above.
3. Romans 11:13–22.
4. See www.ptc.ac.fj/ptcee.
5. The literature is considerable. One example, 'The Moratorium Debate', *International Review of Mission* 64 (1975), 148–164, features a robust exchange

between a sample of eleven scholars, one each from Costa Rica, Tanzania, Korea, Uruguay, South Africa, Switzerland and Britain, but dominated numerically by four from the USA.

6. Colin Morris, 'Was My Old Mum Wrong?' – annual sermon of the Church Missionary Society, preached at the Society's headquarters, 29 January 1975.
7. Ordination of Presbyters, *Methodist Worship Book*, Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 1999, p. 308.
8. Judith Vusi, 'Lord of the Insignificant' in *Weavings: Women Doing Theology in Oceani*, Fiji: South Pacific Association of Theological Schools, 2003, pp. 58–61.
9. Jone Davule Ulago, 'Cultural Values in the "Vanua"', unpublished MTh thesis, Pacific Theological College, Fiji, 2012.
10. Uesile Tupu, 'Mutually Indispensible? A Theological Exploration of *Uto Ma Le Maene* as an Expression of the Gospel and Culture Relationship in the Methodist Church in Samoa', unpublished thesis, Pacific Theological College, Fiji, 2012.