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Anglican Women's Studies Centre

## AWSC Council in Tonga

By Karena de Pont



From left: *The AWSC Council Nai Cokanasiga, Carole Hughes, Evelini Langi, Jenny Quince, Helen Roud and Mere Wallace in the grounds of St Paul's*

within the Diocese of Polynesia. The Council led by Archdeacon Carole Hughes as Convenor, Archdeacon Mere Wallace (tikanga Maori), Nai Cokanasiga (tikanga Polynesia), Revd Helen Roud (tikanga Pakeha), and Revd Jenny Quince (tikanga

Not only were we greeted off the plane by a warm tropical breeze which made a welcome change from the biting winter chills experienced in New Zealand but we were also met by a delegation of Anglican Tongan women who honoured us with the presentation of beautiful kahoā (*Tongan lei*) for each of us. Each kahoā was unique and looked divine with an exotic tropical perfume. The AWSC Council had arrived for a five day visit to Tonga, an opportunity to meet as many Anglican women as possible and to gain an understanding of the Tongan context

Maori Alternate & Convenor of AWSC 2017 Hui Organising Committee) were welcomed by fellow tikanga Polynesian Councillor Revd Evelini Langi and a delegation of Anglican Tongan women at the airport. This was the first trip to Tonga for all of us except for Carole Hughes who had been to Tonga many years earlier as part of an Anglican Youth event so we were all eager to see and learn.

We soon regathered at our hotel near the airport and were briefed on our itinerary of who we were going to meet and when during our five days in and around our



Council meeting. Unfortunately, our time and budget in Tonga did not allow for us to venture much outside of Nuku’alofa on Tongatapu island. However, an action-packed week had been prepared for us visiting Nuku’alofa parishes so an early bedtime helped prepare us for the busy week ahead.

The Council was fortunate that both Archbishop Winston and Bishop Helen-Ann both took the time to call into the hotel to greet the Council on their way to the airport during the week as they both returned to their respective homes. On reflection, as so often happens in Church related matters, it is those 5 minutes scraped here and there that can lead to great things and the case in point was the brief initial discussion with Bishop Helen-Ann regarding the upcoming celebration of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ordination of women in this Province that will be celebrated on 4<sup>th</sup> December this year.

We began our week-long Council meeting on Tuesday morning in earnest, determined to plough through the significant agenda but welcomed the shift of focus in the afternoon when we had the opportunity to

visit with women at St Paul’s Anglican parish. We were blessed that each aspect of women in ministry in the parish sent a representative to meet with us. Mele (Saane) Barrett represented the Bible Study group which began 3 months ago. Everyone in the group takes turn to lead and all are encouraged to spend time in the word of God each day, so that each experience the “planting of God’s word in our hearts, cultivate it and give it time to produce”. Matagi Netatua is the Principal of the parish’s Sunday School. There is both an English and Tongan language Sunday School within the parish. The Moana Children’s Ministries mission is to make a solid foundation for children so that they have a basket/kete of gifts of knowledge for their journey through life. St Paul’s also hosts a social event for the youth of the parish each Friday night so that the children and youth continue to enjoy being with the larger parish community. Recognised by those gathered for her

most loyal and active support for all parish activities, Sela Tuilotolava humbly addressed the gathering on behalf of AAW and Mother’s Union. Along with Tema Kisi both are involved with any fundraising activities, e.g. replacing the church roofing. It is always a struggle to raise money and AAW and MU meet regularly in support of the parish and its community. Vika is involved with making tapa cloth for parish members. Every two weeks, a group will gather together to create a cloth for one of its members. Naomi Fakauka, although not a young mother herself came to represent the *Young Mother’s Group* an initiative supported by the late Archdeacon Joe Leo-ta. Recognizing that here too in Tonga, as women need to be in the workforce to support themselves and their families that



*The Council with Vika, Naomi and Sela from St Paul’s*



the parish needs to provide a support network that meets their needs that may differ from the traditional model and its expectations. Offering the opportunity for diversity and different settings, members of this group regularly get together to share a meal. Naomi was about to embark on a contract with the Peace Corp teaching Tongan language to Peace Corp volunteers. Archdeacon Colleen Cowley who also helped with preparations for the Council’s visit to Tonga, runs the Ladies Guild which is a working committee that fundraisers in support of hurricane relief and other community needs. As Colleen said, “St Paul’s is very fortunate to have all these ladies who like to work to support and get things done”.

After we left St Pauls we took a mini ‘tiki tour’ around Nuku’alofa District which included the Royal Palace and Royal Tomb and the low-lying area. As a first-time visitor, I was surprised to realise that Tongatapu Island is a low-lying landmass



*Like many low-lying Pacific Islands, Tongatapu is susceptible to flooding combined with rising sea water levels*

with no hills or mountains to escape to if a tsunami came their way. Whereas some of the northern outlying islands in Tonga are mountainous and volcanic, rising sea levels throughout Tonga are contributing to many Tongans making Tongatapu home. Land reclamation is not a Tongan Government led programme but that hasn't stopped private individuals taking the initiative to reclaim land to build their homes upon. Although I'm still unsure as to what they use as landfill since there is no hills to quarry from. Unfortunately, these areas are so low lying that with any continued period of high rainfall combined with rising sea levels, houses are flooded easily and frequently.

How blessed we are to live here in Aotearoa, sure we have floods and earthquakes and other heart-aches to contend with. But to see what Climate Change is doing to the Pacific Islands is mind boggling. I understand now what Bishop Winston Halapua is saying when he talks about climate change. I felt very privileged to have been able to see the reality of his words and his tears.

There are places in Tonga where if there is a high tide you just open your doors and let the water flow through. The people have nowhere to go because there are no hills! They have tried to reclaim land but water just seeps up - plenty of rubbish because the people are tired of cleaning up every time there's a high tide. The people are turning to God because there is no other answer. Those who can emigrate - do so, and those who can't they have to live with the changes because there is nowhere to run to.

May the Lord protect and guide the Pacific people always - may he provide the answers they need to survive.

In Jesus name we pray.

**Revd Jenny Quince**

After dinner, another couple of items were discussed and ticked off the meeting agenda for the week.

Sunshine and blue skies greeted us on Wednesday morning as we made our way back into Nuku'alofa to St Andrews High School, an Anglican co-educational high school for students from Years 7-12. This is the only Anglican school in Nuku'alofa in an educational landscape dominated by other denominations. The Council was greatly honoured by teachers and students alike with the performances of sung songs and the school's Brass Band who had understandably high aspirations for taking out the Tongan School Competition in a few weeks. Each of the Councillors spoke to the assembly in the school hall and I spoke about the need to find a mentor in your life that you can use as a sounding board as you consider options for career and life.

St Andrews High School is where Sr Fehoko is based as the School Chaplain. Sr Fehoko was the recipient of an intentional AWSC mentoring programme negotiated with the support of the Diocese of Waiapu and Wellington a couple of years ago. While in New Zealand, she spent time with Revd Numia Tomoana and Winifred George at Hukurere Girls College and had the opportunity to discuss how the Anglican School Curriculum depending on context - learning first-hand from others who have shared a similar journey and challenges. Sr Fehoko expressed a sadness of not being able to keep in touch with those she had met as she had no laptop so if anyone has a good quality second-hand laptop they are happy to send to Tonga, AWSC knows of a very happy woman in need.

The Community of the Sacred Name convent is just across the road from St Andrews High School and we were lucky to have a quick visit there and meet with Sr Louisa who is now confined to bed. The convent is a lovely new house with a guest room that the Sisters can offer to visiting Anglicans.

From there we went onto All Saints where we had lunch with representatives of the Youth and Women's Ministry within the parish including Vika Ve'a, wife of Fr Epalahame Ve'a; President



The Council with Sr Fehoko, Chaplain of St Andrews High School and Principal Mo’unga Maka. The visitors, staff and pupils of St Andrews being entertained by the school’s Brass Band.

of AAW Siosi (Joyce) Tongia; Talisa Fanua, Lay Minister; and Tupou Sunia, People’s Warden’s wife. After every second Sunday service, the AAW gathers at All Saints and once a month all the AAW from the surrounding four parishes gather together and hosting rights shift each quarter of the year. Currently, the focus for AAW is to fundraise towards the renovation of the vicarage and church on Vava’u Island. The Youth Ministry at All Saints is very active. Talasia Fanua spoke of the strong family presence in the parish especially since most are related to each other in some way or other. Youth are active senior members of the Sunday School programme too and discipleship is role modelled so that everyone knows how to ‘build a church’. One of the youth leaders we met is Samisoni Manoa who is also the Anglican Youth Enabler for Tonga. They too do a lot of fundraising so that every-

one can attend the Easter camp however, there is no fundraising drive during Lent. After lunch, we were entertained with some songs and in tikanga Maori tradition we responded with a waiata of our own in thanks.

Then we hightailed it back to the Scenic Hotel for another AWSC Council meeting session before returning to St Paul’s in Nuku’alofa for the 6pm Holy Communion Service. After service, we were very fortunate to have Mele’ana Fifita organise for us to be included in the evening festivities at the Liku’alofa



Beach Resort where each Wednesday evening they hold a traditional Tongan feast and put on a show. The place was packed with locals and tourists including New Zealand’s High Commissioner Sarah Walsh who was entertaining a delegation from the United Nations and Tongan Parliamentarians. A volunteer was called to say Grace



Top: All Saints with Vika Vea, wife of Revd Hame Vea in the centre and members of Youth and Women’s Ministry; Left: Council at St Barnabas with Bishop-Elect Revd 'Afa Vaka & Revd Malia Salome Lise Latu who was visiting from St Andrews Church on Vava’u Island; Right: Council with Revd 'Atolo at St Matthias.



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during our stay and a most humble man you could hope to meet. Speaking on behalf of the Council, Carole said 'that this trip has allowed the AWSC Council to have a glimpse of each other's lives. The Council's kaupapa is to enable women and men to work well together and to encourage lay and ordained women to follow their calling to ministry'.

Joining him for our visit to St Barnabas, was Revd Malia Salome Lise Latu from St Andrews Church on Vava'u Island. The journey from Vava'u Island to Tongatapu takes about 5 hours so we were very appreciative that we could finally meet her. We had heard stories from Evelini Langi how Malia and her supported each other through the many challenges faced for those in isolated parishes when Evelini was based at Ha'apai Island.

Our last parish visit was to St Matthias where we met with Fr 'Atolo. Fr 'Atolo has recently retired and was the longest servicing priest in the Diocese of Polynesia. He was instrumental in building the parish of St Matthias from the ground up, his mantra that he lives by 'step with faith and the Lord will carry you' has put in good stead for his life and work in ministry.

on behalf of us all and Archdeacon Mere Wallace immediately answered the call with a karakia. During our meal, Sarah Walsh visited our table to ask about our visit to Tonga and thanked Mere personally.

On Thursday morning, we met with Fr 'Afa Vaka, the Bishop - Elect for the Tonga Archdiocese. His upcoming installation as Bishop in September is greatly anticipated by all that we met

Back at the hotel we continued working through our Council meeting agenda before we put on our finery in anticipation of sharing an Anglican service at the Palace with members of the Tongan Royal family. Each month, different dominations are rostered to hold a service at the Palace and tonight an Anglican service was scheduled. We were well schooled in the acceptable protocols and dressed accordingly but once we got to the Palace Gates were turned



away – apparently the Methodists had beaten us to it, some mix up with the roster. All dressed up and nowhere to go we ended up at the Waterfront Lodge and Restaurant, which I will heartily recommend to anyone visiting Nuku’alofa.

On Friday morning, with our bags packed and ready to go for our return flights to Auckland and Suva respectively we spent our final morning in Tonga completing our agenda for our meeting. With an hour to spare we made a mad dash to

Ha’amonga Trilithon. This ancient monument is made from three huge coral limestone slabs creating a structure similar to shape and size of those seen at Stonehenge. Anyone who



*The Council all dressed up in our finery outside the Palace of the Tongan Royal Family*

good to have the time to thank her personally. Our sincere and heartfelt thanks also goes to fellow Councillor Revd Evelini Langi for hosting us and showing us her home. The dedication to mission and parish life from all those we met was very humbling.

Like all international airports, Fua’amotu International Airport was hectic on Friday afternoon especially since the computer system had crashed and all boarding passes had to be manually written out. Nervous moments were had when our flight was being called and we still standing at the front desk checking in but all in good time, bags and Councillors made it on board. However, the thought that we might miss our flight and just have to spend another evening in warm tropical climate rather than the freezing temperatures being reported in New Zealand that day put everything into perspective. Thank you Tonga for opening up your hearts and homes to the AWSC Council.

We hope to return

in the future.

*Karena de Pont has been involved with AWSC since its inception and became the AWSC Administrator in February 2011. This selfie is trying to show the lovely kahoā (Tongan Lei) presented to each of the Councillors when we arrived in Tonga.*



*Playing tourist, the Council visit Ha’amonga ‘a Maui*

stands before these structures ponders the question of how and why ancient civilisations built these things as the limestone for this monument is not found locally. The reason for the building this trilithon and when it was built is unknown but in 1967 the King of Tonga, Taufa’ahu Tupou IV suggested that there was astronomical significance relating to solstices and equinoxes and in 1972 he named it Ha’amonga ‘a Maui (a carrying stick or burden of Maui).

We were especially glad to catch up with Lola Kolomatangi at the airport. Lola had spent the week at a conference so we had only the chance to see her when we landed and now when we were taking off but knowing that she had done some great work helping with the organisation of our trip, it was



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The Centre for Anglican Women's Studies, commonly known as the Anglican Women's Studies Centre was set up to serve and to advance the interests and needs of the women of this Church particularly those undertaking Theological training.

The Link Representatives from each Diocese and Hui Amorangi have been chosen for their leadership ability to identify, gather, facilitate, resource and encourage women in their educational preparation for ministry whether lay or ordained. It is hoped that the Anglican Women's Studies Centre can continue to enjoy the support of each Diocese and Hui Amorangi in this endeavour.

The issue of increasing numbers of women in representative positions across the councils and committees of the Church is seen as a high priority and the practice of intentional mentoring by those already in national and international representative roles is seen as a good way to expose women of this Church to fulfil their potential as leaders.

Ensuring that women's voices and stories are heard now and in the future is also one of our continued aims whether it be by traditional methods of publication or using more contemporary technologies like web publication. We remain optimistic that through continued support, the needs of women throughout this Province will be valued and recognized.

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