

# PURE RELIGION

## Food in Fiji

Poverty forces people into often difficult and sometimes deplorable choices.

With 70 percent unemployment, families in the Nausori Fiji Stake have many difficult choices to face, such as which of their children, if any, they will send to school. Because they cannot afford bus fare, some families permit only one child to attend school, and even then, for only two or three days a week.

Another choice families must make is what to feed their children. Many families in Fiji eat only tapioca and taro root—both of which grow in abundance—and little else. Although vegetables such as cabbage and tomatoes are available, they are a luxury and eaten only on rare occasions.

For stake president Taniela Wakolo, these urgent needs were a constant worry for him. He had been to Utah and had seen the Church welfare farms. He had watched how members worked together to help others in need. Could the Saints in Fiji establish something similar—a welfare farm where they could grow nutritious food for those members who so often went without?

President Wakolo approached the Area Presidency with the idea, and, with their support, the Welfare Services Department asked a retired couple, Joel and Kathryn Sperry of Heber City, Utah, if they would be interested in traveling to Fiji to see if such a proposal would be possible. Brother Sperry had grown up on a farm and had always loved gardening. Sister Sperry's father

had served as an agricultural extension specialist for Utah State University. The Sperrys considered this a wonderful opportunity to serve others. They eagerly accepted the assignment, and soon they were on their way.

When the Sperrys arrived in Fiji, they noticed that Church members owned plenty of land that could be used for gardens but, because of the constant rain and relentless heat, the earth seemed more like cement than soil. Because of torrential rains, it was difficult for seeds to sprout without being beaten down or drowned. Worse, the members were too poor to afford a package of seeds, let alone to rent a tractor that would be needed to break and till the soil.

One of the first things President Wakolo did was to assemble the stake and ward leaders. He explained to them what was about to happen. "The people in Fiji have been promised that if they remained faithful, one day they would have the blessings of the welfare program," he told them. "This may be the dawn of that day."

President Wakolo taught the members that self-reliance was the first principle of welfare and that the members would be required to do all in their power to help themselves. Their reaction was exactly what President Wakolo had hoped to see. Upon hearing the news, tears of gratitude bathed their cheeks and they expressed a fervent desire to go to work.

At 6:00 in the morning, the brethren of the priesthood began harvesting bamboo to serve as



a framework for a new greenhouse. A greenhouse was needed to control the amount of moisture and to protect the seeds from the weather.

With the help of a grant from Church Humanitarian Services, the Church members erected the greenhouse and planted packages of seed—cabbage, tomato, lettuce, cucumbers, carrots, and other vegetables.

They hired a tractor to till the earth. The tractor first tilled a five-acre plot that would serve as the Church welfare farm. Then, it went to individual family plots and plowed gardens for them. Men, women, and children worked the soil, planting the shoots that had been grown from seed and tending the young plants.

“You cannot understand what a miracle this was for us,” President Wakolo said. “Because the land could not be worked by hand, and because hiring a tractor was so far out of the realm of possibility, the people had resigned themselves to accepting their lot.”

By the time the Sperrys left, more than 30 individual gardens had been started. The produce from the welfare farm was given to needy families who had gone hungry before.

Not only were the members eating nutritious foods that were a rarity before, now they could

sell a little of what they grew. In Fiji, a head of cabbage sells for \$2. For many, this additional income allowed them to send their children to school, buy shoes and clothing, and provide medical care for their families.

“There are tears of joy in the eyes of the members of the Church in Fiji,” President Wakolo says. “They are so grateful for the welfare program and this opportunity to better their lives.”

There have been other benefits as well. Since the welfare program was announced, some units in the stake have had 100 percent home teaching and visiting teaching. Ninety percent of the members attend sacrament meeting.

“Our members have hope.” President Wakolo relates. “Our faith has been strengthened. The spirituality in the Church and in our homes is greater. The people are so grateful for this miracle that has lifted them from despair and blessed their lives.”

Because of something as simple and miraculous as a garden, the choices members of the Church have to face in Fiji are a little less difficult and deplorable today than they were only a few months before.