

THE BUILDING OF ST LUKES – SUVA POINT By Charles Stinson

1950 story commences.

For many years, the Church of England was anxious to build a hall, a vicarage and a church at Suva Point, but it was not until the arrival of Dr. George Hemming that things really got underway. George was the motivating power. Dr. Hemming managed to lease land in the Suva Point area for which a rental of one shilling per annum was paid. During 1949, George started to seek ideas about the building of the church and he managed to get together one or two meetings and a decision was taken to proceed. On a forgotten date in about March of 1950, the first working bee was set up at Suva Point. This was well attended. Already on the site there was a large heap of coral limestone which could be used for the building of the church. Those who attended the opening day that I can remember were Jumbo Sabben, John Wisdom, Ken Garnett, Claude Garnett, Lionel Hawksley, Colin Young, Arthur Black, Sethi Narayan, Bob Ackland, Bill Garnett, Freddie Beckett, Bruce Southwick, Henry, our Indian helper, John Alexander, George Hemming and the writer. In addition, Sethi had a team to mix concrete. After the first few working bees, the number slowly worked down to a hard core which was made up of George Hemming, Ken Garnett, Arthur Black, Colin Young, and myself with different members of the above mentioned group and sometimes newcomers popping out occasionally to give a hand on the weekend.

It was decided that the church be built of stone. This would involve two walls of stone, one inner wall and an outer wall with the gap between the two filled with concrete. The major job was the facing of the stone and this was carried out by any new volunteers who came out, using cane knives, matches or hatchets they would shape one good face of the stone reasonably flat and then also face the edges around the flat portion. These stones were then ready for the stone masons to fit into place and secure with mortar. One can imagine it was a tedious, tough job, tough because some of the stones were quite heavy and had to be held in place with one hand and then propped up with smaller stones once it had been positioned and finally the mortar would be filled in.

Arthur Black was a great help with stone shaping. He sat on the pile every afternoon throughout the week and by the weekend always had a supply ready.

George Hemming was in overall charge, but he soon handed over to me the foremanship of running the operation and this I took up until the church was finally built. I think my selection as foreman came about when we were pouring the foundations. At one stage during the afternoon, I found that the foundation had been dug eight feet shorter than the plan showed. Dr. Hemming, who was always anxious to get things done did not agree with me that we should correct the mistake and dig the foundations eight feet longer as this meant it would prolong the pouring of the concrete which may have to wait for another day. However, I insisted that we do so and eventually we were able to dig the extension, lay the steel, and pour the concrete before dark. Over the years, Dr. Hemming has often referred to this day and has told the congregation that it would have been a great mistake had we

not made the extension because the little church always proved popular and has always been crowded.

The foundation stone was laid by Bishop Kempthorne on the 24th of February 1951. We set into the east wall of the church a large slab of granite and on this was placed a marble stone with brass letters mounted on the surface. I made the foundation stone at home and it took me some months to cut out the brass plate, file the letters to shape and eventually polish them. At the back of each letter I drilled holes into which I sunk brass welding rods, and sweated them in with solder. These pins at the back of the letters were long enough to extend through the marble and be riveted at the back. Fortunately, the job has stood up and by 1982 there are still no letters broken off the stone.

When all the walls had reached the height of nine feet, the time had come to pour a solid beam around the top of the walling. I told Dr. Hemming that it would be a great pity to finish the wall at the back of the altar at the east end the same height as the side walls as I felt the stonework should go up to the full height of the gable. We had long arguments about this, George was not happy about going ahead with the extra work as it would delay the finishing of the church but I was absolutely insistent and told him that if he agreed to build to the full height, I would personally make a colour glass window to fit in the center of the wall above the altar. George eventually gave in and the work was carried out.

The window which was three feet in diameter was made on my dining room table at Tamavua and Mollie had to give up full use of the table for something like 6-7 weeks while I worked on it. Some people have referred to it as a stained glass window, but this is not correct, it is a coloured glass window, made up of different pieces of coloured glass fitted into lead sealing strips. The window design is of a light blue Maltese cross on a red background and the center monogram showing the letters "HIS". Over the lead I then made a frame of bronze rod for extra strength. Two stones have been thrown through the window and on each occasion it has been repaired, but it is very difficult today to obtain the same coloured glass and any further breakages may make it necessary for a new window to be constructed.

The roof of the church was the next major job and fortunately for us Arthur Kennard, my brother-in-law, who is a master builder, said that he would take control of this job. The materials had come from the old Pro Cathedral in Suva which was being pulled down, and was to have been sold, however, the Bishop agreed that we could have the roofing to use to cover St Lukes. The timber in the old Pro Cathedral which had already stood for over 70 years, was in excellent condition and was high grade New Zealand kauri. Very little of it had to be discarded, so a very solid roof structure was built and this was then lined inside with TNG boarding. Corrugated iron from the old Pro Cathedral finished off the roof.

The consecration of the church took place on the 17th and 19th of October 1953. The building was consecrated by Bishop Kempthorne.

Our family has close ties with St Lukes and I look upon it as a family church. Jeanette and Ian were both christened in the church. Peter and Marnie were

married in the church and Marnie was also confirmed. Ian and Christine were married at St Lukes. The next link was the christening of Katherine Stinson then Charles Stinson, and the last at the time of writing was Robert Stinson's christening.

In August 1953, around about the 23rd, several articles appeared in the Fiji Times about the building and the voluntary work. For instance, the magnificent yaka panelling on the east wall of the sanctuary was provided by Blue Goodsir while Mr LC Bentley donated the timber for the building of the pews. The alter was built by Ken Garnett in memory of his late father and the alter cloths were made by Mrs Sabben and Mrs G Morrison and D Mune, Mrs JA Garnett made up the remaining alter cloths. Possibly the finest piece of craftsmanship will be found in the font which was made by Mr DF Cullen who as a member of the Public Works Department. He presented this to the church, together with a beautiful solid silver bowl, in memory of his mother. It was placed in position in December 1952 and later in 1953 it was severely rocked by the earthquake. At this stage, Mr Cullen set the font firmly in place and concreted it to the church floor. He then built a tile section around it.

Some twelve months after the Church was completed, it was decided that a tower be built. I did not play an important role in the building of the tower as by this time I had become very much involved in the affairs of the city of Suva.

The next move was to buy the old Corbett home which had been badly damaged in the 1952 hurricane. This home was dismantled by volunteers and shifted piece by piece and re-erected beside the church at Suva Point. There was sufficient material left over to build a church hall, so this finally in 1958 completed the work at Suva Point.

One must always take their hat off to George Hemming who persevered from start to finish. I was very pleased to be associated with George and am still proud of the effort we put into the building of the church.