



Reverend Uiva Vagana and his son, Sonny Vagana

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This is a story of people who came to New Zealand seeking new opportunities without forgetting their homeland in the Pacific, and of how the church became a focal point for the North Shore's Pacific Island immigrant community.

Reverend Uiva Vagana has been a leader of the Pasefika community on the Shore and a stalwart of the Samoan community since the early 1980s. He retired as a minister six years ago, having served the community through his ministry for 23 years. Currently he has caretaking responsibilities until the parish finds a new minister.

Uiva came to New Zealand from Samoa in 1964. *I was following my brother who was here before me for work. My dad said, 'If you want to go, just work hard, find your fare, and off you go.' That was while I was teaching back in Samoa.* He first settled in Grey Lynn with his brothers and sisters, who were also first-generation immigrants, and later purchased rentals in Kingsland. Eventually he sold up and settled in west Auckland, where he raised his family and often supported relatives and friends coming to New Zealand from Samoa. Uiva found work as a panel beater, in a factory as a welder boilermaker, a carpenter, and later on as a primary school teacher. He eventually decided to train as a minister at Knox Theological College at Otago University, in 1985.

Both my grandfathers were missionary students in Papua New Guinea. At the back of my mind it was about being able to help the community, bring them up, especially the children. That was my number one thing.

In 1987, Uiva was called to be a minister for the Pacific Island Presbyterian Church (PIPC) in Glenfield on Auckland's North Shore. *The toeina [elder] Reverend Leao Siitia, said to me, 'You have a parish to develop.' I said, 'Whereabouts?' He said, 'You will be based on the Shore.' So I came here and worked together with the people of this community.* Uiva first started ministering to the Glenfield PIPC parish from a nearby Baptist church in Glenfield as the PIPC parish did not own premises at that time.

For many years the Glenfield PIPC parish tried to find suitable premises for worship and to host its community programmes, the Samoan language nest and a childcare programme. Emi Sofai Suanu recalls how hard it was finding community support: *It was hard obtaining Council consent to build a church at Glendhu Road*



The Pacific Island Presbyterian Church in Glenfield, Auckland

in Glenfield. The neighbouring community lobbied against us and signed a petition saying that they didn't want another church here.

With the Glenfield PIPC parish failing on three occasions to gain support from Council and the local community, they decided to sell the section on Glendhu Road and purchase another property with more favourable conditions. The section was eventually sold and, in 1993, the PIPC church acquired a commercial property on a busy main road. The new property, at 198 Wairau Road, was leased to the Fitness Depot franchise. After approximately nine years, the commercial building was freehold and mortgage free. The Glenfield PIPC parish then moved into the warehouse which was worked on by the parishioners every available Saturday until it was fully refurbished. The venue officially opened in 2006 and is the permanent home for the PIPC church.

Reverend Uiva also had the foresight to see a need in his community for social support programmes. He sought to encourage youth leadership as well as cultural and language

education amongst the young people. Many programmes grew out of the church and were led by parishioners, such as a Samoan language nest, Sunday school, a women's fellowship group, an Access Training centre for women's sewing, and a youth leadership trust. Uiva's own children, Sonny and Linda, began the North Shore Pasefika Youth Leadership Programme when they were teenagers. This became formalised as North Shore Pasefika Youth Inc. in 1991 and has run programmes such as youth leadership and community camps, as well as holiday programmes.

Uiva's wife, Akenese, was the tina (mother) of the North Shore PIPC Church, and in this role she founded the Samoan language nest in 1991. She was joined by Vaivase Suaniu, Faasefulu Tupua and Faoo Tapuai, who is still employed by the language nest.

The teachers back then were able to take on the role of nurturers and educators for the first intake of 20 children from the local community and churches. The language nest originally operated from the church manse where Uiva and his family resided. *They were living upstairs and we were doing it downstairs*, remembers Emi Sofai, who is the current supervisor of the language nest.

As the language nest grew, it was fortunate to gain support from Ann Hartley, who was MP for Glenfield at the time. Emi and Sesalina Setu attended a community meeting in Northcote seeking support. *I said to myself, 'Should I stand up or not?' I was too scared. Then I stood up and told them the issue. From there the ball started rolling. Ann got involved and was very supportive of us*, says Emi. In April 2001, the language nest, now known as Ta Fesilafai Aoga Amata, was the first officially licensed and registered Pacific Island preschool in the North Shore. Today Ta Fesilafai is registered for 46 children, employs 11 full-time staff, five of whom are qualified ECE teachers.

*Opposite page, left to right:
Emi Suāniu, Sesalina Setu and Maria Lafaele*



North Shore Pasefika Forum and some of the key players

The majority of the Pacific Island community on the North Shore are based in Beach Haven, Birkdale, Northcote and Glenfield. The earliest church for the Pacific community on the Shore was the Catholic Church and two other Samoan Congregational Churches; these were all present before the PIPC was established. The church is pivotal to community building in the Samoan community. *We think it is one of the backbones of Samoan culture. When you are in Samoa, every village has a church—some of them have two, some have three. You go all around the islands and you see lots of churches. Different denominations could be in one village. Uiva continues, The thing is, if you are looked after properly, spiritually, then you will be happy. Everything surrounding you will be happy; your children will be happy. It was essential to work together to building up the environment, the village, the community; to be well connected, given the small number of Pasefika people living on the Shore at the time.* Pasefika communities on the North Shore grew and by the mid-2000s there was a move to strengthen relationships and work together for the betterment of Pacific peoples in the area.

By 2004, the idea of a formal connection across the various Pacific Island communities of the North Shore was being mooted by church and community leaders. Reverend Larry Samuel Tupa'i initiated conversations between church leaders, the North Shore City mayor's office and some central government agencies to set up the forum. Uiva remembers feeling that it was about making connections and having contact with other ministers on the Shore from the many Pacific Island communities. Reverend Iosefa Rimoni, Reverend Fiatepa Fa'ae and Pastor Muavae Mika were the

church leaders who supported the discussions about establishing the forum. *Being lonely, that was number one. This side of the world was full of Palagis (Europeans). The only communications that we had at the time was at some ministers' meeting or gathering, and funerals. From there we began to see more of each other, the different leaders from the different denominations, and then we started from there, quite a few people came.*

Initially there were meetings between church leaders of all denominations and community organisations to discuss the purpose of having a Pasefika forum, which was then presented to the Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs. The purpose of the forum was to be a voice for the Pasefika community of the North Shore, and to be a point of liaison between the community and North Shore City Council and other government agencies. Mayor George Wood supported the idea. It also aspired to *influence and advance the social and cultural well-being, and the economic prosperity of Pasefika peoples on Auckland's North Shore.* Emi was appointed to the community panel of the Pasefika Forum. *We had monthly meetings at the Council chambers in Takapuna. We launched the opening of the Forum at the Council building in 2005.*

This launch formalised a Community Partnership Agreement to recognise relationships with North Shore City Council, the North Shore police, Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs and other NGOs, agencies and organisations. Maria Lafaele added, *Credit goes out to Reverend Larry Samuel, Sione Tui'tahi, Jerome Mika, George Wood and all our church leaders, for setting up a platform that enabled a pathway to work in collaboration with*

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these organisations to strengthen the vision and aspirations of Pacific peoples on the North Shore.

By 2008, the Forum decided to become a legal entity. Sesalina Setu remembers how she first heard about the Forum. She was listening to the Pacific community radio station 5.31PI. *It was Mum who said to myself and my husband, 'Come to this meeting at Reverend Uiva's church, because they were bringing all the Pacific people together.' We thought we would go and listen.* At the meeting the decision was made to launch the Forum to mark its legal status and the election of an executive team.

The Forum became an incorporated society in 2008. The launch was held at the new Massey University campus in Albany. Mayor Andrew Williams officiated, saying, 'The Pasefika Forum will ensure both Council and the Pacific Island community have a better understanding of each other's needs, as we move and grow together into the future. That is why North Shore City Council has championed its establishment from day one.'¹ Tuifa'asisina Karl Gatoloai was elected the first chair of the Forum.

The Forum has survived the changes of the political landscape on the Shore because it has not been tied to the Council in any formal way, unlike other forums across Auckland. It has always been independent which means it can act autonomously and be a non-partisan voice for the Pacific communities there. One of the first and highly successful things that the Forum brought to the North Shore was the annual North Shore Pasefika Festival, which began in 2006. The festival today attracts up to 30,000 people.

Over the years, the Forum has promoted campaigns on nutrition, living a smoke-free life, physical exercise and health programmes funded by Waitemata District Health Board, and has worked in partnership with the North Shore police to form the

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North Shore Pasefika wardens. Since 2010, the Forum has had a representative on the Pacific Advisory Panel of Auckland Council. Today the Forum is looking more closely at how it can liaise with service providers across sectors in education and health to better serve the needs of Pasefika peoples. Sonny Vagana has been the chair of the Pasefika Forum since 2014. *I think it is an interesting time. We were at a building stage and without any resources, and I think for an organisation that was all based on voluntary effort, with no money, we have been able to retain and maintain our voice and keep our people involved. We've seen the progress. Now it is time for us to get out there and start building and involve more people because that is what our people have been talking about for some time. We are interested in trying to establish a social services*

arm, which has still got to go through a needs analysis of what each ethnic groups wants. Sonny would like to see the Forum employ people locally and liaise with local and central government.

Some of the Forum members, such as Emi Sofai, Maria Lafaele and Sesalina Setu, have represented the Forum at other networks and in their own community involvement. Sesalina has been on the boards of the Beneficiary Advocacy and Information Service, and the Birkdale and Beach Haven community houses. Emi has been a strong advocate for bringing services to the North Shore, including Enea Ola (a health and well-being initiative), Incredible Years (which focuses on how to identify and manage difficult child behaviour), and Mafutaga Tina (which is a mothers' fellowship group that touches on all aspects of motherhood). In addition, Emi is the supervisor of Tafesilafai Aoga Amata preschool.

Maria has been on the board of the North Shore Women's Centre and Healthlink North, and is a current board member

for Auckland North Community and Development as well as a member of the boards of the Birkdale and Beach Haven community houses. She recalls the support that her local MP, Ann Hartley, gave her when she first arrived on the North Shore. Maria had recently graduated from the University of Auckland and was struggling to find a job. Ann recommended that she join the Forum in 2007 to link with other Pasefika peoples on the Shore.

Ann would make me go with her to different conferences, and I would give out my CV. It was great to meet someone like her who was willing to support you, when you were new to the Shore and trying to find your way around the networks here. I could talk about how hard it was being from the Pacific and being new to this place; how hard it was to find a job.

Sesalina describes the North Shore as being a *proper large village. Everyone knows one another through the schools and the churches, and we support one another.* For Maria, it's about the valuable contributions each Pacific Island community brings to the Forum, and the willingness they have to collaborate. *We just call one another up and say we all need to get in behind this event. It's people bringing in their own style, flavour, contribution. It all does add up and it weaves the fabric of our community. It is fantastic!*

The group describes living on the North Shore as great: it is a safe area to live in, has good schools and amenities, and it's wonderful to be close to the beaches. But, as Sonny says, *The whole of the North Shore isn't just beautiful beaches. There are little pockets that are in need.* Some of the more challenging aspects of life in New Zealand as a migrant from the Pacific Islands include housing affordability, finding secure employment, and the cost of education, as well as the need to maintain culture and language and the need to encourage successive leadership in the Pacific Island communities. *The children here are all well behaved,* says Sesalina. *You don't hear of the Pacific Island children getting into trouble here on the North Shore.*

Sonny, who was born and raised in New Zealand, reflects on the challenges that lie ahead for New Zealand-born Samoans. *My thoughts are that many of us New Zealand-born Samoans at times fail to see or acknowledge the struggles that our parents and others before us had to go through in order to build a life here. My mum and dad, like many other new immigrant mums and dads with limited English, were able to come here, to find a job or jobs, send money to their family back in the Islands, provide an education for us, manage to put food on the table, pay rent, buy a house and own a valuable asset. Yet us children, who are supposed to benefit from this opportunity of being Western educated, born in a Western world and benefit from all the opportunities available, struggle to do half of these things. My hope and challenge is that we first acknowledge our parents' sacrifice and determination, and harness it to move it on to the next level. This is my hope and this is my aspiration to bring some balance to the stereotypical thought that has manifested around Pacific Island people in our society right now. It takes a village to raise a child, and North Shore Pasefika Forum hopes to create the gateway to enable this to happen.*

We feel privileged to have two places we can call home: Aotearoa New Zealand and Samoa or whatever Pacific Island. We recognise the benefits that brings. We are kind of lucky because our language and our culture will always be in the Islands. It is not going to be lost here in New Zealand. Let's not forget the humble beginnings that we came from.

Reverend Uiva feels very proud and happy to see the cultures of the Pacific alive on the Shore, through church gatherings, school cultural events, community events and the Pasefika Festival. *Our people are thriving in communities and contributing positively to North Shore economy and identity.* He's known in the community as a church minister, a supportive voice for the people, a father, grandfather and tama (elder father). Uiva's ability to make time to sit and listen, give advice, encourage, preach and be a role model, means he is a valued community servant.

¹ Mayor welcomes launch of Shore Pasefika Forum, Business to business, 2008. Retrieved from <http://www.btob.co.nz/article/mayor-welcomes-launch-shore-pasifika-forum>



Left to right: Sonny Vagana, Emi Suāniu, Reverend Uiva Vagana, Maria Lafaele, Sesalina Setu

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