

For immediate release

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Church Leader Encourages Fijian Latter-day Saints Pioneers and a new convert welcome President Dieter F. Uchtdorf

SUVA, Fiji — President Dieter F. Uchtdorf, Second Counselor in the First Presidency of *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, met with Fijian Church members in Suva this week. His visit was part of a week and a half-long tour of five Pacific nations – American Samoa, Samoa, Fiji, Tonga and Tahiti.

Speaking on Tuesday to an estimated 6,000 members and guests at the Fiji LDS College - and via satellite link to other locations in Fiji, New Caledonia and Vanuatu - President Uchtdorf encouraged Church members to live their lives more closely aligned with the principles of the gospel.

“The greatest blessings come from obedience to the commandments of God,” he said. “Become more perfect in studying the scriptures, in abstaining from harmful substances such as alcohol and tobacco, and in being chaste. We should not rationalize one glass of wine or other sins. We should do these things because our Heavenly Father instructs us to do so.”

Prior to his call in 1994 as a Church leader and, ultimately, Apostle, President Uchtdorf was chief pilot for Lufthansa Airlines. During his remarks he related his own professional experience in navigating through the skies with those of the seafaring peoples of yesteryear, the ‘wave-finders’ who were ancestors of today’s Pacific inhabitants.

They were able, he said, to use the signs of nature to help them navigate their way from shore to shore in the vast Pacific Ocean.

“Just as these ancients could read the movements of oceans and the stars in the constellations, the Gospel of Jesus Christ offers the tools for us to find our way back to our Heavenly Father,” he said. “It allows us to chart our way through any circumstance, any challenge, in our lives.”

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is one of the fastest growing faiths in the Pacific. This is in part attributable to its worldwide missionary program featuring over 50,000 young men and women who labour at their own expense to share the gospel of Christ and perform humanitarian service.

President Uchtdorf said that, often, those who are not Latter-day Saints will ask why the Church has such a vast missionary effort when so many of those to whom they will talk already believe in Christ.

“We praise those of other faiths who are endeavoring to be true to the principles taught by God,” he said. “We love the people of all faiths and the good they do. We honour the work of those who established the Christian denominations. We do not stand in opposition to any other church. We simply want to share with them additional knowledge and great truths revealed through latter-day prophets to the people of the world.”

He said The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is not an American faith. “It is not a church of one nation. It is a universal church, the church of our Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ.”

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On Wednesday night, President Uchtdorf attended a cultural celebration at the Fiji LDS College which featured performances by Latter-day Saint youth and adults of dance and song unique to many of the Pacific Island nations. A large crowd, including those viewing by satellite link, expressed loud enthusiasm for the performances.

The cultural celebration was preceded by the traditional presentation of a whale's tooth to President Uchtdorf and other dignitaries who were travelling with him. These included his wife, Harriet, and their daughter, Antje Evans. Also accompanying President Uchtdorf were senior leaders of the Church based in the Pacific region, including Elder James J. Hamula and Elder Taniela Wakolo. President Uchtdorf also met with local Church leaders and missionaries during his visit to Fiji.

Pioneers and a new convert welcome President Uchtdorf

Sitiveni Bale and his wife, Vasiti, are feeling the effects of a long life. Aged 79 and 77 respectively, they are pioneers of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Fiji having converted to the Church in 1976 when there were barely 1,000 Latter-day Saints throughout the tropical islands that make up the Fijian archipelago. The Church was first established in Fiji just 22 years before in 1954.



Jese and Sulueti Kama Sitiveni and Vasiti Bale plan to attend member meeting

Now suffering a debilitating form of arthritis, Brother Bale was still anxious to go to the Fiji LDS College auditorium last night (10 November 2009) to hear President Dieter F. Uchtdorf, Second Counselor in the Church's First Presidency, speak to the gathered Saints. With the broadcast of the meeting being transmitted throughout Fiji, and also to New Caledonia and Vanuatu, the Bales were among many thousands of Church members who had the opportunity of hearing a member of the First Presidency speak directly to them. Fiji has 15,400 members, while there are 1,900 members in New Caledonia and 3,900 in Vanuatu.

The Bales were the first Temple President and Matron of the newly dedicated Suva Fiji Temple in 2000. Temples are unique in Latter-day Saint theology. While Church members hold their regular Sunday worship services and weekday cultural activities in their many chapels, their temple in Suva is regarded as a House of the Lord where families are united together eternally, not just for this life. Because of their special nature, there are just 130 temples throughout the world.

Having served as a branch president and stake patriarch before his call as temple president, Brother Bale exhibited the humility and forbearance of one who has lived a long and fruitful life in the service of the Lord. He especially saw the parallels between his own life and the early experiences of President Uchtdorf.

“President Uchtdorf came through hardship as a young boy in East Germany to become an active member of the Church,” said Brother Bale. “For us, there also were challenges and President Uchtdorf’s example shows that others can do the same, too. It is special to have him in our part of the world because he is a man called of God. We are privileged that he would come to our shores. By listening to his words and those of our other Church leaders who will speak to us, this will bring blessings to us who are already members of the Church as well as people of other faiths who hear him.”

Brother Bale had been employed as a civil servant and printer for 40 years before his retirement in 1990. Sister Bale had been a typist in private companies before retiring in 1988. She raised two children, one of whom, a son, passed away a few years ago. Their daughter, Sulueti Kama, is married to Jese Kama, president of the Lautoka Fiji Stake.



Dharmendra Sharma, Vasiti and Sitiveni Bale stand to Welcome President Uchtdorf

For Sister Bale, President Uchtdorf’s words to the Saints about the importance of paying tithing resonated with a significant event in her own life. Before attending the member meeting where President Uchtdorf was due to speak (Tuesday 10 November, 2009), Sister Bale had related her own conversion story, a conversion that wasn’t completed until nearly three years after her baptism.

“One day, a lady came to our Relief Society and encouraged us to pay our tithing,” said Sister Bale. “She told us that if we have no food in our cupboards after we pay our tithing, don’t worry because the Lord will provide. That day I committed to live the principle of tithing and found the promise to be of God! We never wanted for anything in our life. I knew for sure that the gospel was true.”

President Uchtdorf's words at the evening meeting directly echoed Sister Bale's own experience. "Being a full tithe payer is a matter of faith," said President Uchtdorf. "The greatest blessings will come from obedience to this and other commandments of God. Pay your tithing and you will walk tall. There will always be food on your table. And, if you feel you are struggling, go to your bishop. He will assist you. But paying tithing should be your first priority."

Dharmendra Sharma, 29, joined the Church just one year ago. He runs his own grass-cutting business while studying for a Bachelor of Science degree part-time at the University of the South Pacific. After finishing his under-graduate degree he wants to do post-graduate study as well. One of Brother Sharma's greatest regrets is that he hadn't bothered speaking to the missionaries much earlier. He had certainly seen them around Suva.

Twelve months ago, he saw some elders on the road and approached them to ask about their black badges. He had converted from his native Hindu faith to one of the Christian denominations as a 15 year-old and had always had a keen interest in religion and, in particular, the life of the Saviour.

Yet, he was still searching and wanted to know what they thought about Jesus Christ. "I could not find answers to certain questions in my heart," Brother Sharma said. "But within weeks of talking to the missionaries, I was studying the Book of Mormon (I had one in my house already) and praying about the Church. I received a wonderful answer that it was true. I joined two months after that time on the street."

"The visit of President Uchtdorf is an exciting time for me," said Brother Sharma, a very articulate and intelligent young man. "What President Uchtdorf is saying is what we should be doing. He is giving us precautions about the things we should not do, as well as those things we should do."



Dharmendra Sharma, Vasiti and Sitiveni Bale sing during member meeting

Brother Sharma, who is single and has been serving as a Ward Mission Leader in the Suva First Ward of the Suva Fiji Stake, expressed sincere gratitude for President Uchtdorf's

remarks. Taking notes throughout the meeting, Brother Sharma especially found relevance in President Uchtdorf's encouragement for members to let others know about the gospel through their own actions and example. "He told us to be humble and forbearing towards others and to avoid anger and pride," said Brother Sharma. "When we are humble we are more susceptible to the teachings of Christ."

Brother Sharma spoke of the joy in seeing a member of the First Presidency in the flesh. "When you see the General Conference by video, you can really feel the Spirit, but when they are here with you, you feel like they are looking into your soul."

Dharmendra Sharma's next goal in his Church progression is to take his parents and grandparents names to the temple. A single man with no living relatives in Fiji, Brother Sharma has just completed the family history research on them. He loves going to the temple to perform baptisms for the dead. "When I first went to the temple, there was this peace. People, including my family, are waiting on the other side of the veil for the ordinances to be performed. I am so looking forward to my own forbears having that opportunity and for me to do it for them."