

instigation of capitalist-oriented agriculture.¹⁵ Thus, between 1879 and 1917, over sixty thousand Indians from all castes were brought to Fiji.¹⁶ Although the indentured system focused on bringing young, single male adults to Fiji, the British Indian government wanted some 40 percent of those leaving for Fiji to be female so that families could be established.¹⁷ Indentured servitude lasted for a period of five years, at which time individuals were given the choice of remaining in Fiji or returning to their Indian homelands. If Indians desired to return to their homelands, they would have free passage return after working a period of an additional five years in Fiji. After seeing firsthand the richness of the land and recognizing other potential economic ventures, most Indians opted to stay and make Fiji their permanent home. At the turn of the twentieth century, an influx of Indian, European, and Chinese merchants catered to the growing Indian population and had established themselves as the leaders in the local business community centers in Suva, Ba, Lautoka, and Labasa.

The Early Years: Pioneer Latter-day Saints

When The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints came to Fiji, a large majority of ethnic Fijians were Christian (see table 1). Of the Indians residing in Fiji, 81 percent adhered to Hinduism, 15 percent were Muslim, and only 4 percent had converted to Christianity. Largely because of the strong Methodist influence in Fiji, 85.7 percent of ethnic Fijians were members of the *Lotu Wesele* and 11.7 percent were Roman Catholics.¹⁸ Most schools in colonial Fiji were owned and operated by these religious institutions.¹⁹

Unlike its Polynesian neighbors—French Polynesia, Hawai'i, New Zealand, Sāmoa, and Tonga—Fiji did not have any Latter-day Saint members until well into the twentieth century. The first known member to live in Fiji was Mary Ashley, who moved with her small family from

Tonga to Suva in 1924.²⁰ Known to friends and family by her Tongan name, Mele Ve'a, Sister Ashley lived a long distance from Church members for nearly thirty years before the Church was formally established in Fiji. Throughout this time period, Sister Ashley paid her tithes and contributions through correspondence to mission leaders in Tonga. Primarily because of her connections with the Church in Tonga, Fiji was included as part of the Tongan Mission from 1924 to 1953. In order to better accommodate the needs of Sister Ashley's family in Fiji, the country was assigned to the New Zealand Mission on June 8, 1953.²¹ Though New Zealand was farther away, the change allowed regular missionary visits to Suva once every three months. During the earlier period of geographic isolation, the Ashleys kept in contact with Church leaders through correspondence and periodic member visits to Fiji. For instance, while journeying to visit members in Tonga, Emile Dunn stopped in Fiji to see Sister Ashley in 1936. The occasion brought comfort to Sister Ashley since she had prayed for a servant of the Lord to come and bless her children.²² On January 23, 1954, Sister Ashley's eleven-year-old daughter Margaret was baptized at Laucala Beach Estate. This is the first recorded baptism of the Church performed in Fiji.

A series of mission boundary reorganizations transferred Fiji from the New Zealand Mission to the Samoan Mission in 1954 and once again to the Tongan Mission in 1958. Positioning

Table 1. Percent of population by religious group, 1956

Religious group	Percent
Methodist (<i>Lotu Wesele</i>)	40.0
Hindu	39.7
Roman Catholic	8.0
Muslim	7.3
Church of England	1.5
Seventh Day Adventist	1.2