

Church in the Orchards; Seeking to be Faithful

Rev John Carr, Western Bay of Plenty — Feb 24, 2026

In December, beneath the canopy of kiwifruit vines in the Bay of Plenty, a group of Pacific men gathered for Holy Communion. The story behind that gathering is one of hope, faith and connection.

The men came from different parts of Fiji and didn't know each other before coming to Aotearoa. They had spent the week pruning, thinning and harvesting. And on that early December Sunday afternoon, shaded by the vines they tend, they sang hymns that echoed through the orchard rows. Our RSE Pastoral Care Worker, **Viliame Naliva**, has begun calling this ministry "Church in the Orchards."

It is a name that tells a deeper story.

Across the motu each year, thousands of Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) workers arrive to support the horticultural industry. Many are deeply rooted in Christian faith traditions. Yet long work hours, limited transport, unfamiliarity with local churches, and the emotional strain of being separated from family often leave them spiritually disconnected.



[Each year, thousands of Recognised Seasonal Employer \(RSE\) workers arrive in Aotearoa to support the horticultural industry. Despite having strong faith traditions, many factors impede their ability to attend church.](#)

Over the past several years, conversations began emerging across our parish, where people kept noticing the same thing: these workers were present in our communities, yet pastoral support and advocacy was inconsistent if it was present at all.

Some RSE workers would occasionally attend worship. Many did not. Not because faith was unimportant, but because connection was difficult. Or they were unable to leave work on a Sunday, or they didn't know how to get to the church.

Gradually, an idea began to form. If these workers were part of our region's life, they were part of our pastoral and advocacy responsibility. That famous quote from John Wesley comes to mind, "I look upon all the world as my parish." But we were just trying to be a faithful parish in our small part of the world.

Our parish began having honest conversations about ourselves.

Like many parishes, we are ageing. Congregations are smaller than they once were. Energy and capacity shift over time. It would have been easy to turn inward.

Instead, we kept asking a harder question: *How do we remain faithful to what God is calling us to do as we age and shrink?* How do we continue to stand on the side of justice, compassion, and presence when our own resources feel thinner?

The RSE ministry emerged as an answer to that question.

It was not born out of surplus, but out of conviction.

For more than three years, we talked with community groups, within our parish, to friends, to family, we prayed, consulted, and discerned. We spoke with those already supporting workers. We listened to community insights. We reflected theologically on what it means to be a Church for others.

Out of that slow and careful process, a dedicated pastoral and advocacy role began to take shape.

While all this was happening I was approached by Viliame Naliva. He told me that he was called to ministry but didn't know what it looked like. We kept the conversation going but it was clear that God was stirring something up. Vili had long been part of our parish story. A lay preacher. A faithful leader. A man known for his compassion, steadiness and deep trust in God. He's always been an advocate and a justice seeker.

Then things started to make sense. We needed someone to take on this role. Viliame was looking into what God was inviting him to do. We did not need to search far.

His life experience, cultural grounding, and pastoral gifts aligned profoundly with the emerging need. Conversations with Viliame confirmed what many of us were already sensing: this was more than a job opportunity. It was a calling.



[Viliame Naliva has been engaged by the Western Bay of Plenty parish for dedicated RSE pastoral care ministry. He brings a deep sense of compassion and faith to his work.](#)

Viliame began half-time, funded through the Christian Estate, a legacy gift established years ago by a faithful member of our congregation. In many ways, that first year was sustained by a grant and a prayer. As the ministry grew, so did the clarity of its importance. By February 2026, the role expanded to full-time. The Christian Estate continues to fund half his salary, with the remaining portion supported by the Moemoeā Ministry Development Fund.

We've seen firsthand how valuable Viliame's ministry is and our hope is that this ministry will continue indefinitely.

The role now extends across the Bay of Plenty.

It includes advocacy, assisting workers as they navigate complex systems, including the legal system, offering support when issues arise, and helping ensure their dignity is upheld.

It includes pastoral care, listening to stories of homesickness, family strain, financial pressure, and faith lived at a distance.

And it includes worship.

Recently, Vili celebrated his first communion service of 2026 with several workers. For some, it had been months since they had celebrated communion. The experience

was described as deeply moving, a reminder that even far from home, they remain part of the Body of Christ.

In orchards, hostels, and gathering spaces across the region, community is forming.

“Church in the Orchards” is not simply a creative title.

When Vili was a child in Fiji, his parents planted a church in the sugarcane fields of their community. They called it “Church in the Orchards.” What began as a small gathering among crops has since grown into a fully organised congregation.

As a boy, he could not have imagined the long arc of that faithfulness.

Now, decades later, he finds himself administering Communion beneath kiwifruit vines in Aotearoa. The parallels are striking. Sugarcane fields and orchards. Crops and communion. Labour and liturgy.

The ripple effects of his parents’ faith are being felt across the moana.

It is a powerful reminder that when the Church steps beyond walls and meets people where they are, something special is planted.

This ministry is not without its challenges.

Schedules are demanding. Access requires relationship-building with employers.

Workers come from various backgrounds. Trust must be earned patiently.

Yet again and again, what we are witnessing is this: when the Church shows up consistently, gently, and without agenda, space opens for grace.

“Church in the Orchards” is not confined to orchards. It is a theological statement about who we are called to be.

The Gospel is not limited to sanctuaries.

As a parish, we asked how we might remain faithful in a season of change. In responding to the presence of RSE workers among us, we discovered that faithfulness was already waiting.

Sometimes the Church grows not by gathering more people into buildings, but by carrying grace into the fields.

And sometimes, beneath fruit-laden vines, we glimpse again the God who is always planting something new.

Viliame Naliva reflects on his first Sunday communion service in a kiwi orchard.

Praise and thanks be to God for His calling, His plan. This is a new journey. He is God of the New! New life, new hope, new peace, new love, new everything.

Sitting with this group of cheerful souls in the middle of the thick kiwifruit orchards, yesterday (Sunday), the summer sun beating down on us, was one of the most amazing experiences of my life. Who would have thought!

We came from different parts of Fiji, Vanuatu and Tonga, different backgrounds, different upbringings, different everything, but in that moment, we gathered as one, shaded by the very fruit trees they had come all the way to tender. The warm summer afternoon breeze was cooled by the windbreakers that protect the orchards.

in retrospect, I can only marvel at what God is planning and allowing to happen here.

The sound of Fijian hymns echoing in the miles and miles of kiwifruit vines was outstanding and amazing; these men did not hold back. The words of the Psalmist come to mind: "How can we sing the Lord's song, in a strange land".

But this is not a strange land! Aotearoa New Zealand is God's own Land, and we are blessed to be here.