

Fiji

family

Everyone has a ministry when the 'Slater Six' come to town

BY SCOTT HARRUP
PHOTOGRAPHY BY AUBRA GEORGE

The breeze carries a hint of salt as it blows through this South Pacific village. Little else is moving. The hushed staccato of palm fronds mingles with snatches of conversation. But there's also that quiet, rhythmic tapping.



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As colorful puppets are unpacked and team members go house to house to announce the afternoon's outdoor service, the almost inaudible tap/slap catches the attention of two then four then six boys and girls.

Follow the source of the sound and you'll see 14-year-old Seth Slater in concentrated motion. The three stones he's juggling slap like clockwork against his palms. The kids chatter among themselves, trying to predict when the smiling, blond American will slip up.

But when the stones plop into the dust, it's a deliberate transition. Seth joins his parents, Steve and Nola Slater, and siblings Savannah, Susie and Sam. Minutes later, this Fijian vil-

lage is hearing the greatest story ever told. At Steve's invitation, several adults join children in coming forward to acknowledge Jesus Christ as their Savior. During prayer time others come for personal needs.

"Our kids will ask how they can pray for you, so think about that as you're coming forward," Steve says to the small crowd. "If you need Jesus, come to Auntie Nola or me. If you want prayer for healing, go to one of my children and they will pray for you."

The Slaters are careful to observe traditional protocols. An adult confessing his or her need for salvation is only comfortable praying with another adult. But those with other needs are only too willing to pray with the children.

"We received an e-mail just a few months ago," Steve says after the service. "A woman shared how she had come to a service very depressed. 'When your daughters prayed for me,' she said, 'I was healed. I no longer take any medication for depression.'"

Mending lives

Spread among Fiji's 322 islands, about 110 inhabited islands are home to some 900,000 people. Of these, nearly half are Indians descended from Southern Asians who came to Fiji as contract laborers during the British colonial period.

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“About one-fourth of the 52 Assemblies of God churches in northern Fiji are Indian congregations,” Steve says. “But they represent just a tiny fraction compared to the Indo-Fijian population that visits the local Hindu temples.”

On the other hand, the great majority of native Fijians identify themselves as Christian. But Steve doesn't view that statistic as accurate.

“The churches that sent missionaries in the 1800s had an impact on a culture that at one time was involved in cannibalism. But for the most part, Christianity became an empty tradition for Fijian communities. You can drink all the kava¹ you want during the week, then put on a shirt and tie for church on Sunday.”

Many Fijians are living with a disconnect between the moral standards of the gospel and their own traditions. Adultery is prevalent, with long-married men commonly keeping girlfriends.

“In Fiji,” Steve explains, “Valentine's Day isn't just for a husband and wife. It's actually a day for the husband and his 'sweetheart.'”

“We are finding, sometimes even in the church,” Nola says, “that people aren't staying pure to their marriage partner.”

The Slaters have watched with concern as permissive attitudes toward sexual purity have joined Fiji to the world AIDS epidemic.

“AIDS is becoming a killing disease in Fiji,” Steve says.

A new generation

About a third of Fijians are under age 14. Steve and Nola see the greatest potential for effective ministry in this group.

“We had the privilege of speaking at three youth conventions,” Nola says. “We shared with young people that true love means waiting for that special mate. Many of the pastors came up afterward and wanted our notes on how to present this to their young people.”

In order to multiply their outreach among young Fijians, the Slaters have opened their home in Labasa for weekly leadership training sessions for older teens.

“Our Young Believers group allows us to train and disciple future leaders for youth groups and





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churches,” Steve says. “We’ll have a devotional, then team members will practice with puppets, run through some action choruses and get ready for ministry.”

The Tuesday night gatherings help establish a plan for KICK, a Wednesday night children’s outreach, at CBM Revival Centre where the Slaters attend when they are in Labasa. The Slaters serve the local church in leadership roles, with Nola leading worship and Steve preaching and teaching. KICK, Kids In Christ’s Kingdom, draws children from across the community and from surrounding villages.

“Every week at KICK we ask the kids, ‘Do you want to give your heart to the Lord?’ ” says Savannah, 12. “A lot of them raise their hands, even

when they are already Christians.”

“It is just so sweet that they do that,” says Susie, 9, “because they want to know God more.”

KICK creates another opportunity for family ministry. Seth and Sam, 6, help youth team leaders set up props. The girls dress up as clowns and hit the streets to announce the next meeting.

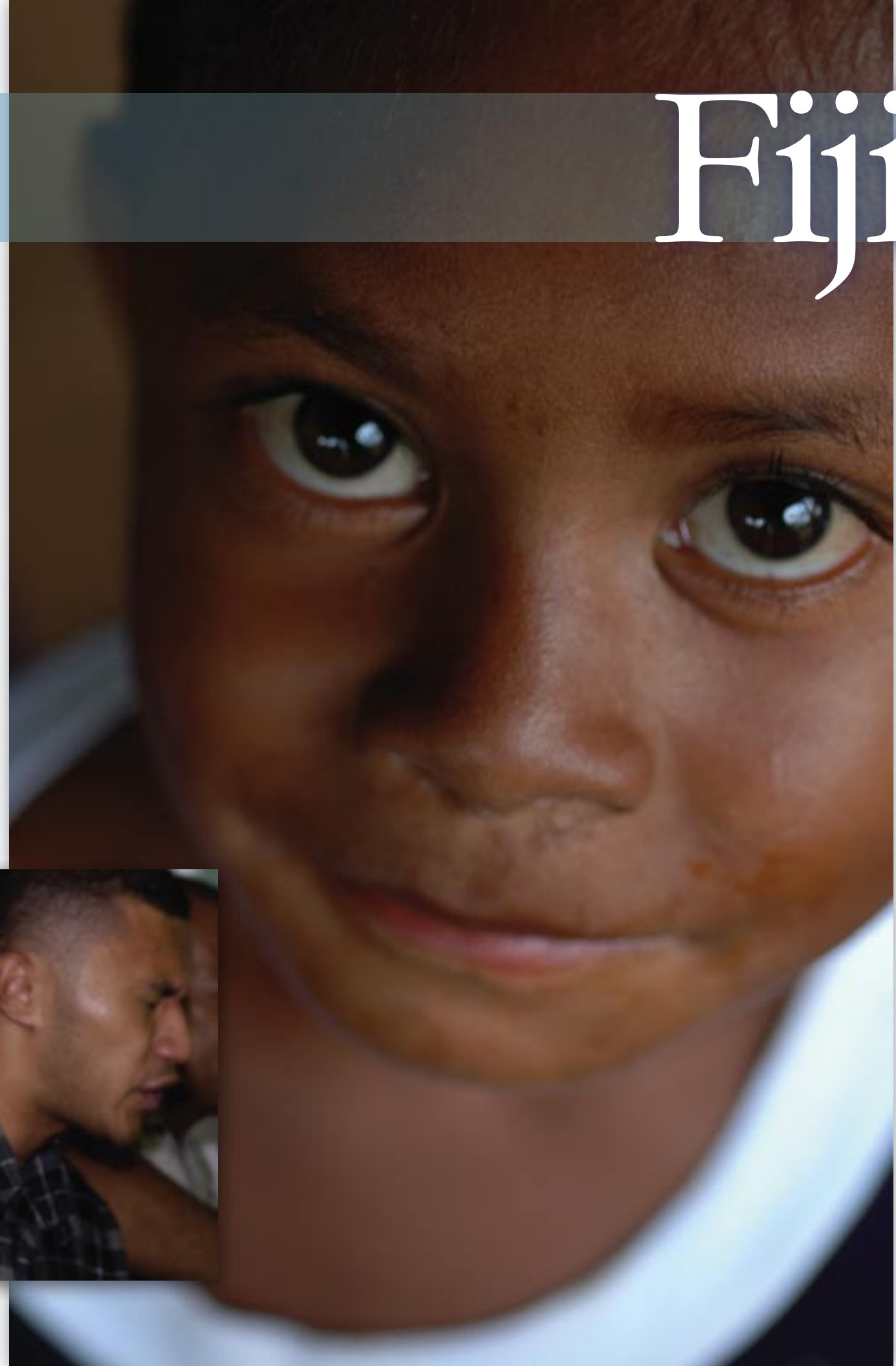
“We work as a team,” Savannah says. “It’s awesome! We get to do things together we weren’t able to do in America, which is pretty cool.”

Family on a mission

“Recently we started signing our newsletters ‘The Slater Six,’ ” Steve says. “We wanted everyone to understand it’s not just ‘Steve and Nola Slater, AG missionaries.’ It’s not ‘Missionary Steve’ with his family. Everyone in our family is a missionary. So Steve, Nola, Seth, Savannah, Susie and Sam — all of us are working together at this.”

The roots of that commitment go back to Seth and Savannah’s early childhood. Pastoring in Oregon, Steve and Nola had a call to missions but believed God would fulfill that desire after their children

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were raised. Then Seth came home from a missions convention at their church with an announcement.

“‘Dad,’ he told me, ‘I think God’s telling me we’re going to be on the mission field before I’m 10,’” Steve remembers. “I told Nola, ‘You know, we shouldn’t wait until they grow up.’”

When Savannah told her parents about a similar experience, the family was committed. Initially, they prepared to go to the Solomon Islands. When that opportunity closed, another opened in Fiji. The Slaters have spent more than three years pursuing what feels like a dream come true.

On Saturday nights, family devotions become an opportunity to seek God’s leading for Sunday and the week of ministry ahead. Steve shares prayer needs of local pastors and congregations, then the family begins to intercede.

“Lately we’ve been praying for a pastor whose daughter died of cancer,” Nola says. “We keep a big map on the wall, and the kids will look at it and say, ‘Oh, yeah, I know where that village is. I remember that pastor. I remember that daughter.’”

The Slaters have also been on the receiving end when it comes to effective prayer.

When Savannah became very ill, Steve planned to fly her to the main

island of Viti Levu to the hospital in Suva, Fiji’s capital. Normally, making such arrangements would have been easy.

“I couldn’t find a flight,” Steve says. “It’s the only time I can remember when there were no bookings available for four days. All the flights for both airlines were full. So we just went to the Lord and prayed, and we took her to the local hospital.”

A doctor visiting from overseas diagnosed the problem. In a matter of days, Savannah was back in ministry.

“That was a testing time for us,” Steve says. “But we knew people back home were praying. We could sense the power of those prayers. It became a great opportunity for us to minister to other families in



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the children's ward. We did some of our clown ministry and handed out simple gifts."

Planting churches, reaching neighbors

Toothbrushes and other toiletries paved the way for evangelism at the hospital. Similar gifts play a key role in ministering to the churches among Fiji's northern islands where the Slaters are concentrating their outreach.

Steve often travels on scouting trips to outlying islands. Sometimes Seth or the entire family joins him. Whether it is their first visit to a village or a return trip, they take practical gifts for the local ratu, or chief. By building relationships, they have received permission to build churches.

"We can build a small church for

about \$10,000," Steve explains. "Once a site is selected, the local congregation can supply much of the labor and lumber."

The Slaters also look for opportunities to bless local pastors and their families, who may be eking out a living on the tithed produce of church members.

Although the Pacific Ocean is named for its "peaceful" currents, storms are an annual risk for Fiji's islands. After a storm, existing churches often need repair.

A new church in Waininandru is the result of one such storm.

"That church used to be over in Kendra," Steve explains, "but it was totally demolished during a cyclone a few years ago. They are building it here as well as rebuilding in Kendra."

Storms have also created evangelism opportunities closer to home. Savannah remembers when the weather hit hard enough to cut out the water supply.

"Everybody in our neighborhood had to go and get water," she says. "We went with Mom to get some, and our neighbors came too. We hadn't really met them up to that point. Suddenly we started talking."

The neighbors showed up at the Slaters' home a few evenings later with a meal they had prepared.

"It was the most delicious food we'd ever had," Savannah says.

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One of the family's daughters befriended Savannah and Susie. When Savannah offered her a Bible, she accepted it. Nola helped her understand the gospel. The girl accepted Christ as her Savior. The mom and other children soon made similar decisions.

"Everybody in the family is a Christian now except for the dad," Susie says. "And now he's reading the Bible."

Outside the box

In the 1990s Steve and Nola only dreamed of missions ministry. Fiji was an unknown destination half a world away from their Oregon home. Now their new home offers daily opportunities to live out their missions dream. Having their children as ministry partners takes the joy of ministry to the next level.

The Slaters believe God has a similar experience in store for families willing to step out in a new faith direction.

"We've had people say to us, 'We'd like to become missionaries, but we have too big of a house payment,'" Steve says, "or 'We'd like to become missionaries, but we want our kids to go to this or that school.' And I want to ask them how they can say they are willing to follow Jesus if they also have an exception clause? How can

you say, 'Yes ... but' to God?

"When you say yes to the Lord, you are saying yes 100 percent. And when you say yes to Him 100 percent, He is going to take care of everything. He is going to take care of the house payment; He is going to take care of finding the right school for your child. Don't put yourself in a box. See what God can do with you, how He can help you and where He might want you to go." **tpe**

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E-mail your comments to tpe@ag.org.

¹ Kava is a narcotic drink prepared from a local pepper plant.

