

# Up From the Ashes

by Mahina-a-rangi Baker.

**On Saturday 7 October 1995, Rangiātea Church was destroyed by fire. The church was one of the most historic and sacred Māori churches in Aotearoa New Zealand. It was completed in 1851 and had stood at Ōtaki, on the Kapiti Coast, for nearly 150 years.**

**The people of the local community were devastated, but they were also determined that they would not be defeated by the tragedy. After a lot of work and planning, they began to build a new church – a replica of the one that had been burnt down.**

**On Sunday 23 November 2003, a huge crowd of people came to celebrate the opening of the new Rangiātea Church. Mahina-a-rangi Baker was among them.**

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The burning down of Rangiātea was a terrible tragedy. When I was in year 12 at Ōtaki College, I wrote down what I felt about it and about how my contribution to the rebuilding of the church was having a positive effect on my life. This is what I wrote...

*Have you ever been woken by something really shocking?*

*“Bub, wake up – the church has burnt down!” It was one of the most dreadful things I’ve ever heard. I asked Mum what she’d said a few times, in pure disbelief.*

*Because I wasn’t properly awake, it didn’t truly hit me until I saw the charred remains. Even hearing the bulletins on the transistor radio as we ran through Ōtaki township to get there didn’t prepare me for the sight.*

*As we turned into Te Rauparaha Street, I looked up and saw the remains of the church standing like the bones of a bare skeleton. I just remember seeing emptiness and feeling emptiness. How could this happen? Why did this happen?*

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*There was nothing left. It hurt to hear my mother weep and say "It's all gone, all of it."*

*It was then I realised that it wasn't just beautiful and historical artwork that had been lost. Everyone who had ever been inside the church had a special memory of Rangiātea – what they had seen, the tangi they'd heard, and the happiness they'd shared. Now they were left without any reminder except a black, deathly shadow of what Rangiātea used to be.*

*A large crowd had gathered around the burnt-out remains. Seeing so many people come together over a common loss was both heartbreaking and inspirational.*

*This was reinforced over the next couple of days. I spent them at the church with my Dad. He was busy in the office, making calls or talking to officials and visitors. I sat outside next to where the church had stood. A visitors' book was propped up on an old chair, and hundreds had written their condolences in it. It contained some very touching stories. The most frequent comment was "What a tragedy." No matter how many times I read the same comment, its meaning never came unstuck or grew tired.*

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*I thought a lot of new thoughts. This was big for me. It meant something – a tragedy in my life. It was a big change – one of the first times I'd experienced such an unexpected loss. My life is now divided between before Rangiātea burnt down and after Rangiātea burnt down – between being slightly naive and realising how precious things are.*

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*I've always thought my walk home on the day it happened to be very peculiar. On the way, I found money in three separate places – at least forty dollars altogether. We had so many visitors in the following days that I gave it to Mum to help pay for food. I remember being happy at the time, thinking that it was compensation for the tragedy. I realise now that forty dollars' compensation is more like an insult than anything. Perhaps the thought could be forgiven because I was only a kid. Or perhaps I have learnt the value of the church the hard way.*

*Rangiātea was so special to me. My ancestors are buried there, my parents were married there, my brother was christened there, and I hope to marry there some day. But the main reason Rangiātea has become so important in my life is because of my Dad.*

*My father has been chairman of Rangiātea's Vestry committee since the church was burnt down, and his main commitment since then has been to rebuild it. He has been involved in the insurance settlement and in finding a source of native timber, employing and managing staff, investigating carpentry techniques, and searching for the correct design. He has been at the site almost every day.*

*Through him, our family has been involved in the project, and this has meant that things can get quite stressful. On the other hand, the project has been really exciting as well.*

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*I enjoy the memory of travelling on the back of a ute through the brisk morning of the Mount Titiraupenga forest in the search for the perfect tōtara (although I didn't enjoy the harsh windburn at the time). Weaving the very last whetū and the border for the tukutuku was such a privilege. Tramping through the Papaitonga bush in search of harakeke was fun, and I learnt so much. And although it was a tedious task, staying up late into the night with my brother staining endless kākaho panels is something that I'll always remember. We were so yellow, you could've mounted the tukutuku on our fingers. Months later, when the giant panels were woven, we had to sort them into their groups according to shape and size.*

*The committee also set up a website to give information about the church and the rebuilding process. Contributing to the design of the website was a cool experience, and just trying to explain the concept of a website to my kuia was a cool experience, too. All these things I am so grateful for. I hope it's these things I remember more than the pain of the loss.*

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*Seeing the footage of the fire was like seeing a murder. Thinking of what was actually burning was too painful. Every hand-woven whetū, every admired inch of kōwhaiwhai, and every comforting page of prayer – I know the work that they involved now – gone forever.*

*I remember that morning more like a bad dream than a real event. Whether that's because my memory is not too good or because it was so surreal, I'm not sure. But I will never forget it. It's amazing how unaware you are of those life-changing moments when they actually happen.*

*Looking back, I sometimes regret not making as big a deal of it then as I would if the church burnt down now. I realise that I didn't have any idea then of how significant an event it was. I could say that this was because I was only nine years old, or I could say that the last seven years have given me an appreciation of responsibility and consequence. Either way, I have grown because of it. It's just a shame that the price of the lesson was so high. Seeing Rangiātea grow now is like seeing a ghost emerge. Its mana is becoming visible again. Powered by the hope and expectancy of its people, Rangiātea will stand tall and gallant once again.*

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*When Rangiātea was finally completed, the opening ceremony was overwhelming for my family and me. I hope that this story gives you an appreciation of the strength and courage in people and communities, especially in times of tragedy.*

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