



Tonga

A LAND DEDICATED TO GOD

By Harvalene K. Sekona

Principal of Liahona Middle School, Tonga

Less than a decade after The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was organized in New York, USA, an island kingdom thousands of miles away in the vast Pacific Ocean turned toward Christianity. In 1839 King George Tupou I of Tonga committed his country, his people, and his posterity to God's protection. The king's proclamation "God and Tonga are my inheritance" became Tonga's motto. Religion plays a great role in Tonga because of this legacy; to this day, every Tongan observes the Sabbath as a day of worship.

The First Missionaries

While serving in the Samoa Mission, Elders Brigham Smoot and Alva Butler were assigned to take the restored gospel to the islands of Tonga. Upon their arrival in 1891, they held an audience with King George Tupou I, who granted them permission to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. With encouraging prospects, more missionaries were called to the islands and were anxiously engaged in spreading the gospel. Unfortunately, the growth of the Church was not as fruitful in Tonga as in the other Polynesian islands of Tahiti, Hawaii, New Zealand, and Samoa. In 1897 the missionaries were ordered to



In 1891, Elders Brigham Smoot and Alva Butler met with King George Tupou I and received permission to preach the gospel among his people.

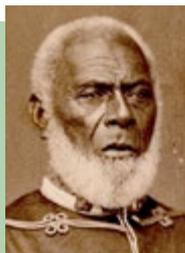
Building Up a Christian Civilization

As the gospel spread throughout the islands, various Church schools were established. In 1947 the Church leased a large piece of land and began building a new school, Liahona College, now known as Liahona High School.

Dedicated in 1953 by Elder LeGrand Richards (1886–1983) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, it was to become a “guiding light” to all who would enter, and it was to prepare young people to become leaders and to influence others for good. Present also at the dedication was Queen Salote Tupou III, who endorsed the school as an instrument for building a “Christian civilization” that

TIME LINE

► 1839: King George Tupou I commits Tonga to Christianity.



1891: First Latter-day Saint missionaries are sent to Tonga.

1892: First convert, Alipate, is baptized and confirmed.

1897: The mission is closed and the missionaries return to Samoa.



◀ 1907: Missionary work resumes; the Church opens a school in Neiafu.

return to Samoa, and the few converts in Tonga were left without Church leadership for a time.

A People Remembered

“Know ye not that I, the Lord your God, . . . remember those who are upon the isles of the sea?” (2 Nephi 29: 7).

The Lord did not forget the Saints in the island kingdom of Tonga. In 1907, Elders Heber J. McKay and W. O. Facer arrived in Neiafu, Vava’u, where they started a branch and a small school. Soon missionary work began to prosper, and several branches and Church schools were established throughout the islands over the next few years.

As in other parts of the world, the Church in Tonga had its share of opposition, but this time the gospel was here to stay. As missionary work flourished, Church leaders were called from among the local Tongan members so that when foreigners were evacuated, as during World War II, the Church could continue to thrive.

unites people of all walks of life. Since the school’s establishment, thousands of Liahona High School graduates have served as missionaries, Church leaders, and prominent community leaders.

Today there are two Church-sponsored high schools in Tonga: Liahona High School, on the main island of Tongatapu, and Saineha High School, on the island of Vava’u. There are also five Church-sponsored middle schools: three in Tongatapu, one in ‘Eua, and one in Ha’apai.

A Prophecy Fulfilled

When President David O. McKay (1873–1970) and his wife, Emma Ray, visited Tonga in 1955, the Saints treated them like royalty. This was the first visit of a Church President to the islands. During their short visits to Tongatapu and Vava’u, they held meetings with the members and felt of their love and devotion as Tongans performed music and dances and gave speeches and feasts.

During President McKay’s visit to the Saints in Vava’u, he was inspired to reveal that he had seen a vision of “a temple on one of these islands, where the members of the Church may go and receive the blessings of the temple of God.” One member recorded the Tongans’ response: “The entire congregation burst into tears.”¹

Nearly 30 years later, in August 1983, the Nuku’alofa Tonga Temple was dedicated by President Gordon B. Hinckley (1910–2008), then a counselor in the First Presidency. I remember as a teenage girl how Latter-day Saints from the outer islands and Tongans from overseas came for the auspicious occasion. I was privileged to attend one of the dedicatory sessions and be part of the

from the stakes in Tongatapu and to come up with a presentation that would spiritually prepare the Saints for the temple dedication the next day. The event would be broadcast and televised live to the outer islands as well as to Tongan stakes around the globe, so this was a mighty task.

The production was titled “The Treasure That Lasts.” It consisted of cultural dances from Tonga, Hawaii, Tahiti, New Zealand, Fiji, and Samoa. The story line was that of a couple who, having lost their young child, searched the many Polynesian islands for a treasure that would appease their loss. Although they found gifts at each island, none could soothe their pain. When they returned to Tonga,

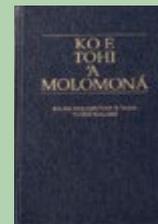
1916: *The Tongan Mission is organized.*

1922: *An exclusion law prohibits foreign missionaries from entering Tonga.*



◀ 1924: *The exclusion law is repealed due to efforts from local members and mission president M. Vernon Coombs.*

1926: *The Church opens a school called The Makeke, meaning “arise and awake.”*



◀ 1946: *The Book of Mormon is published in Tongan.*

choir. I remember the warm feeling I felt when I heard President Hinckley speak, and I knew then that he was called of God. When we sang “Hosanna Anthem,” I understood too how much the Lord loves His children.

The Savior has always remembered the people on the isles of the sea, and on that day President McKay’s prophecy was fulfilled.

Rededication of the House of the Lord

Because of the increasing Church growth in Tonga, the temple was closed for about two years for renovation. Among other work, rooms were enlarged, a sealing room was added, and Polynesian motifs were added to walls and ceilings.

At the beginning of 2007, my husband and I were called to produce a cultural celebration for the rededication of the temple. The event was to be held on November 3, a day before the rededication sessions.

Our aim was to involve as many youth as possible



As a young Apostle, President Thomas S. Monson (center) visited Tonga in 1965. With him are the mission president and his wife, Patrick and Lela Dalton.



they were introduced to the gospel by missionaries and learned of “the treasure that lasts”—eternal families and the blessing of someday being reunited with their child who had passed away.

During the week of the rededication, it rained heavily. At our final rehearsal, on November 2, the skies were overcast. I asked the youth to return to their homes and pray for good weather so they would be able to perform for Tonga and for those who would be watching via satellite, especially the prophet. That night it rained hard,

that eternal families are the treasure that lasts and that temples are built to bring such blessings to pass.

A People Dedicated to the Lord

Today the Church continues to grow in Tonga, and leadership positions are held by native members. Chapels dot the islands, and the increase of missionaries is hastening the work. The Church schools are firmly established and continue to prepare valiant missionaries, future leaders, and worthy mothers and fathers.

► 1953: Elder LeGrand Richards dedicates Liahona High School; it becomes one of the largest and most successful schools in Tonga.



► 1955: President David O. McKay visits Tonga.



1960: *The Doctrine and Covenants and the Pearl of Great Price* are translated into Tongan.

1968: Tonga's first stake, the Nuku'alofa Stake, is created.



and the next morning the weather was still foreboding.

On Saturday evening, 3,000 young people gathered at Teufaiva Stadium to hear from Elder Russell M. Nelson of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, who had been sent to rededicate the temple due to President Hinckley's frail health. I will never forget the performance. Everything fell into place. The weather was perfect, the sound system that had malfunctioned earlier was excellent, and those young men and young women danced their hearts out.

We had witnessed a miracle. Heavenly Father heard the prayers of His children and kept the rain away. At the same time, we were able to set the tone for the temple dedication the next day, reminding members



Missionaries help load relief supplies that were sent from Tongatapu to Ha'apai after a cyclone hit Tonga's northern islands in January.

The Saints are no longer required to make that long journey by boat to the main island for general conference. Instead, technology has enabled members to remain within their stakes to watch general conference and the area conferences broadcast from New Zealand.

Amid the turmoil of changes arriving on Tonga's shores, the Saints continue their legacy of faith. They are a people who were committed to God 175 years ago. They are a people who today continue to dedicate their lives and all that they have to the Lord. ■

NOTE

1. R. Lanier Britsch, *Unto the Islands of the Sea: A History of the Latter-day Saints in the Pacific* (1986), 472.

GROWTH OF THE CHURCH IN TONGA *

15	517	1,185	2,975	15,842	35,227	46,623	61,470	Temples: 1
1897	1917	1930	1950	1970	1990	2000	2013	Stakes: 19
								Districts: 2
								Missions: 1



* As of January 2014



◀ 1976: President Spencer W. Kimball visits Tonga and speaks to 10,600 members at an area conference in Nuku'alofa.

▶ 1983: The Nuku'alofa Temple is dedicated.



1991: 3,000 LDS youth perform for King Taufa'ahau Tupou IV in a Church centennial celebration.

1997: President Gordon B. Hinckley visits Nuku'alofa, speaks to some 11,400 people, and meets with the king.

2007: The Nuku'alofa Temple is rededicated.

THE FAITH OF HIS FATHERS

Since the arrival of the first Mormon missionaries, many great miracles have come to pass in the Lord's work in Tonga. One such miracle occurred on June 13, 2010, when Lord Fulivai and his family were baptized. Lord Fulivai is the first Noble of the Realm to join the Church. He is a great-great-grandson of 'lki Fulivai, a noble from Vava'u, who invited the Latter-day Saint missionaries to return to Tonga in 1907.

Lord Fulivai was baptized along with his wife, Lady Helen, and their two older children; the youngest was not yet eight. Attending this historic event were the temple, mission, and stake presidents, along with

prominent government leaders, other nobles, and family members.

One year later, on June 16, 2011, the Fulivai family was sealed for time and all eternity in the Nuku'alofa Tonga Temple.

I had the privilege of talking with the Fulivai family recently. When asked to identify the greatest blessing of joining the Church, Lady Fulivai replied without hesitation that it is the eternal blessings for families. Lord Fulivai expressed that the gospel provided him with answers to lifelong questions. He believes the gospel is the doorway for his posterity to partake of God's greatest blessings.