The Expansion of Mormonism in the South Pacific

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SINCE THE FIRST encounter between Latter-day Saint missionaries and the peoples of Polynesia 136 years ago, there have been inevitable changes in both the methods of missionary work and the adaptation of the island members to the Church. Problems of cross-cultural encounter are not peculiar to any particular religious group or to any geographical region. They are a natural result of the clash between various traditions. It is natural for people to love their own country and customs. Patterns and traditions bring order and sense to life. Alien beliefs and products threaten old ways and often demand accommodation. At times the new ways are more attractive than the old. This has been true in the Pacific.

The various island groups have presented different linguistic and societal challenges to the Church. It is possible, however, because of basic similarities, to consider the entire area as a whole. Among the matters that can be considered here, I have chosen to focus on two parts of the interaction with the Pacific peoples: the theory and method of missionary work; and the Church as an agent of culture change and adaptation.

MISSIONARY WORK

Students of mission history have devoted considerable time and innumerable printed words to the analysis of mission theology and mission theory.

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Since the thirteenth century, devout missionaries and their sponsoring denominations and agencies have grappled with the problem of how best to carry the Christian message to the heathen, the unbelieving, the unchurched, the unreached peoples of the world. Considering the current advanced state of the social sciences, contemporary missiologists look at the problem of church growth through sophisticated eyes. They are concerned with problems of culture, context, linguistics, indigenization, cultural imperialism, history of religions and a variety of other challenges.

Current theories of missionary work are almost too numerous for one to generalize meaningfully about the state of the field, but a few ideas are accepted by most Protestant and Roman Catholic workers. William Carey (1761–1834), sometimes called "the father of modern missions," summarized mission purpose and theory in a five-pronged program extraordinarily modern in outlook. The elements were these: "(1) the widespread preaching of the Gospel by every possible method; (2) the support of the preaching by the distribution of the Bible in the languages of the country; (3) the establishment of a Church, at the earliest possible moment; (4) a profound study of the background and thought of the non-Christian peoples; (5) the training at the earliest possible moment of an indigenous ministry."[1] In 1854, only twenty years after Carey's death, Henry Venn, Secretary of the (Anglican) Church Missionary Society in London, set forth what has come to be called the "three-self" theory of church propagation. The goal was to make mission churches "self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating." The mission itself, said Venn, was to die a natural death. The main criticisms of his plan relate to the sharp separation he proposed between the church and the mission.[2]

Around the turn of the century, Anglican Bishop A. R. Tucker came close to the mark when he "envisaged a church in which African and foreigner would work together in true brotherhood, and on a basis of genuine equality."[3] But as Bishop Stephen Neill declared, "for the most part missionaries of almost all churches were blind to this kind of possibility." The ongoing issues of mission methodology as well as of mission history still relate to the problems with which Carey, Venn and Tucker struggled. It is somewhat comforting that even though their ideals have not been achieved in all instances, their visions of missionary work are now accepted by most missionaries and mission agencies.

Since the 1930s, when Hendrik Kraemer and William E. Hocking debated the virtues of old-style evangelization (the direct witness of the saving grace of Jesus Christ) versus the more contemporary approach (called "equal dialogue"), elaborations on mission theories have become ever more numerous. I will not further muddy the waters.

I believe it can be a useful exercise to consider the expansion of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the South Pacific (and in Hawaii in the North Pacific) by using Carey's, Venn's and Tucker's theories as an ideal scale. It is useful to ask, how did the Latter-day Saints' missions measure against the most advanced ideas of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries?[4]

Mormon missionary work began in the Pacific Islands in April 1844, when Addison Pratt, Benjamin F. Grouard and Noah Rogers landed at Tubuai, south of Tahiti.[5] They had been sent from Nauvoo by Joseph Smith, Jr., president of the then thirteen-year-old Church. Total Church membership was hardly more than thirty thousand,[6] and problems at home were serious. Two months after missionary work began in what is now called French Polynesia, Joseph Smith was murdered. Addison Pratt and his companions, however, did not learn of that or of the persecutions at home for two more years. They were almost beyond the bounds of communication with the outside world and dependent on themselves, the local people and the mercies of the Lord. In those days the Church was financially incapable of sustaining the lay missionaries even if its leaders had desired to forego their policy of sending missionaries out without "purse or scrip."

Between 1844 and 1852, when the mission was closed because of pressure from the newly established French government, Pratt, Grouard and others who joined them in 1850 managed to establish a number of small units or groups on Tubuai, Tahiti and many islands in the Tuamotu Archipelago. Well over two thousand Polynesians became baptized Latter-day Saints. Pratt and company accomplished this almost without prior knowledge of the area, the language or the people. I say "almost" because Pratt and Grouard had both spent time in Hawaii long before their mission calls. Pratt knew some Hawaiian but was far from being an expert in its use.

The later group of missionaries to French Polynesia, those who arrived in 1850, were somewhat better prepared because Elder Pratt had taught some of them to speak Tahitian in Salt Lake City during the winter of 1849. But the mission produced no printed literature, and it used only the London Missionary Society version of the Bible. Their limitations notwithstanding, they established a church that remained active in secret for forty years while foreign missionaries were absent from the country. Even though the covert nature of the Church helped it to survive, the early missionaries had ordained members to the priesthood and trained them in simple matters of Church administration, leaving them somewhat prepared to continue the affairs of the Church.

In 1892, Mormon missionaries once again found their way to French Polynesia. This time they were sent from Samoa, where the Church had been established for four years. The second mission has remained to the present and now has more than five thousand members. Over the years, missionaries there have used many different methods to propagate the faith. Most common have been door-to-door tracting and distribution of printed literature. But since 1955, the missionaries, and the Church in French Polynesia, have made long strides toward more sophisticated methodology. Missionaries have used new lesson plans for teaching investigators and modern media presentations to help accomplish their goals. Tahitian and French language materials are used widely. There are modern chapels throughout the land, some built by "labor missionaries" who contributed two years as carpenters, masons or electricians. In 1964, the Church opened the LDS Primary School in Papeete. Older students have been sent to Tonga to attend the Church-

supported Liahona High School. and more recently, the Church has established the Home Study Seminary program, a secondary-level system of religious education. The mission and the Church have also used public radio and a small newspaper to inform potential Latter-day Saints as well as members about church matters and teachings. The foregoing is but a partial list of methods used by the missionaries to spread the restored gospel in French Polynesia and, I should add, throughout the Pacific. I believe William Carey would agree that the Mormons were quite advanced in their use of "every possible method" during the nineteenth century and have been very up-to-date since 1950.

Carey advocated distributing the Bible in the languages of the people. Mormon missionaries used the Bible in their teaching of course, but they were far more concerned with the problem of translating and printing Latter-day Saint scriptures in Tahitian and other island languages. Addison Pratt and his co-workers were too busy trying to build and then preserve the mission to expend much time working on translations. Soon after the mission was reopened in 1892, however, elders went to work on a Tahitian translation of the Book of Mormon, published in 1904. Before that it was printed in Hawaiian (1855), Maori (1899) and Samoan (1903), and since then, versions have been published in Tongan (1946) and Rarotongan (1965). Polynesian language versions of the Doctrine and Covenants and Pearl of Great Price were produced in each language after the Book of Mormon was in print.

William Carey suggested that missionaries should establish a church as soon as possible and train an indigenous ministry to direct the affairs of the church. As I have already noted, the missionaries to French Polynesia (and everywhere else they served) ordained local men to the priesthood and placed them in charge of groups and branches. More recently, since stakes have been organized in Tahiti and almost all other parts of the Pacific, local men have been placed in charge of all ecclesiastical affiars in their areas. Stake presidents are responsible only to Regional Representatives and area executive officers who are General Authorities of the Church.

It would be pleasant if I could report that the foreign missionaries always treated local priesthood leaders as complete equals. Unfortunately there was, until after World War II, a good deal of paternalism. A much smaller number of Polynesian men were ordained to the Melchizedek Priesthood than were actually needed to operate the Church. Too many missionaries barely out of their teens directed the work of island men who were many years their senior in both age and administrative and ministerial experience. In the past thirty or so years, proportionately larger numbers of Polynesians have been placed in responsible leadership positions, not only in the ecclesiastical part of the Church, but also in temporal areas, such as in Church schools, seminaries and institutes, in the Church building area, welfare services and the Translation and Distribution Department. Although the missionaries started in the nineteenth century by creating local churches and staffing them with almost untrained local priesthood leaders, in recent years the Church has gone far beyond what Carey probably imagined.

It is appropriate here to consider a related matter, the mission-church

issue. In the Protestant churches, there has been an ongoing debate on the appropriate relationship of the mission-created church to the mother church or the church which sent the missionaries. Should the mission church drop its ties to the mother church as soon as possible? Is there any reason for the two churches to continue their relationship once the mission church is mature enough to handle its own government, financial support and propagation of the faith? (We are speaking here of groups of church units, not of totally independent groups in one chapel.)

Because there have sometimes been significant theological and cultural differences between the national churches and the sending churches, and because there are few theological reasons for new churches to hold onto their relationships with the old, many mission churches have broken away from mother churches and established new national or regional ones. Venn's ideal of making mission churches "self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating" has been achieved in many parts of the Protestant world.

Does this ideal apply to the Latter-day Saints' missions? Yes and no. The theology of the Latter-day Saints is based on the belief that the Church was founded by a prophet who represents Jesus Christ on the earth. Since the organization of the Church, his successors have been sustained in Polynesia as prophets, seers and revelators. The members of the Church in the missions do not desire to cut the umbilical cord to Salt Lake City. Rather, they hope for the day when they can become a stake and therefore an ecclesiastical organization identical to those in Salt Lake City and elsewhere. The ties with the mother church thus become stronger rather than weaker.

On the other hand, local branches and districts have great autonomy. They are self-governing in that they select and call virtually all local officers and teachers (and have done so since early times). They are self-supporting in that each member pays tithes, budget and fast offerings in the same proportion as members at the center of the Church. Because of the smaller economic base in the islands, however, Church headquarters finances a larger share of construction costs and maintenance of physical facilities than elsewhere.

The Saints in the outer areas, such as Polynesia, have always recognized the necessity of teaching the restored gospel within their own lands. It is true, however, that until recently the major burden of missionary work has been carried by the Saints in the United States.

Carey suggested that missionaries should pursue "a profound study of the background and thought of the non-Christian peoples." This idea had only partial application for the Mormons in the Pacific. By the time Mormon missionaries arrived in the various island groups, the local peoples were at least nominally Christian. It is true that when Pratt and his companions arrived in French Polynesia, there were still living many warriors who had tasted human flesh. Although the social systems of the various Polynesian peoples were often complex, the fact remains that there was little need for a "profound study of the thought" of the Polynesian peoples. On the other hand, there was great need for careful observation of the customs, traditions and mores of the people.

It can be accurately said that few missionaries have lived closer to the

people they have served than the Mormons. Whether in the back tracks of New Zealand among the Maoris, in the tiny atolls of the Tuamotus in French Polynesia, Tonga or Micronesia, or on the volcanic mountains of Samoa, Hawaii, Fiji, New Caledonia or other parts of Melanesia, the Mormon missionaries have lived with the people, learned their languages, eaten their foods, slept in their homes, blessed their babies, buried their dead, listened to their complaints, savored their tales, copied their mannerisms and sung their music. Perhaps living the lives of Polynesians was the most effective method the Caucasian missionaries could employ in order to learn the "background and thought" of the peoples. More recently the foreign missionaries have lived closer to the standards of the developed nations, but they still spend countless hours in the homes of the common people and participate in almost all aspects of their lives.

Few Mormon missionaries to Polynesia and the Pacific have made more than a superficial study of the background of the people *before* they have entered their mission fields. In early times, in fact, they went to the Pacific without much knowledge of what they would encounter. During the past decade or so, however, missionaries to non-English areas have gone such places with eight weeks of language and cultural training; but Carey would probably be less than satisfied with the formal training in Polynesian cultural matters that Mormon missionaries receive before they begin their missions.

Theoretical and methodological strengths and weaknesses aside, the Latter-day Saints have succeeded in planting their form of Christianity in all parts of Polynesia and in an increasing number of countries elsewhere in the Pacific. In sum, the Mormons have come close to meeting the ideal conceptions of missionary work as conceived by Carey, Venn and Tucker.

THE CHURCH AS AN AGENT OF CULTURE CHANGE AND ADAPTATION

But what of the recent past and the difficulties and successes that relate to the contemporary era? What kinds of adjustments, if any, has the Church made to fit in well with the realities of present-day island life? How much impact has modernization had on the local peoples? Mormon intellectuals frequently ask how peoples "out there" are adjusting to programs that reflect a "Wasatch Front mentality." In the Pacific the answer is "quite well." Latter-day Saints in Polynesia are generally as eager to be modern, particularly in Church programs, as are members of the Church anywhere. In fact, they may be more willing to change than are some Saints in parts of the world where members are more ethnocentric and aware of their own cultural accomplishments.

Ever since the early explorers discovered the islands of the Pacific (a feat the Polynesians had accomplished much earlier), the island peoples have sought to emulate the example of the modernized world. This has been especially true of technological advancements. But Polynesia has few natural resources, and the people have been able to make only a limited accommodation with the modern world. Ever-improving transportation and communica-

tions have encouraged change, but isolation and depressed economies have held the island peoples back. Throughout Tonga, Samoa, French Polynesia and the smaller islands, life is almost always lived on a near-povery level.

But there is a distinction between technological modernity and modernity in the Church. The truth is that the island peoples generally use modern Church programs well, adjust to the spirit in which they are given and quietly set aside that which does not work in their situations.

Some parts of modernity have tremendous appeal to the island Saints, for example, modern chapels and schools. Since World War II, the Church has constructed hundreds of small churches in the islands. Generally each of these buildings contains a chapel, a small cultural hall, classrooms, offices and a kitchen. When the ward or branch needs more classrooms, the members frequently build a *fale,* native-style house, somewhere on the grounds. Probably one-fourth of the Church units in the Pacific area are housed today in fales, but during the past year many of the fale chapels have been replaced by small prefabricated buildings that have been shipped in from New Zealand. Most chapels, both brick and prefabricated, are small because they serve fairly small wards and branches. Because most islanders do not have access to automobiles or public transportation, and because most wards and branches are made up of the people from one village area, chapels are generally constructed within convenient walking distance from the most distant members served. Dual and triple chapels are a rarity. By building small chapels the Church has adapted to the local situation.

The Church has operated schools in the Pacific since 1850. Most of them have been conducted by missionaries, but in the late 1950s the teaching responsibility was shifted first to professional teachers from America, New Zealand, Australia and France, and more recently to professional teachers native to the various island groups. Because education is expensive, the Church has tried to avoid involvement in all areas where the local governments provide adequate schooling. But in Samoa, Tonga, French Polynesia, Fiji and even in New Zealand there has been a pressing need for elementary and secondary schools. At the end of 1978, 5055 students were enrolled in LDS schools throughout the Pacific. When post-secondary and seminary and institute students are added, the number swells to 18,291.

Most of the problems the Church schools have faced have come from attempts by American administrators to impose their system on schools that are in the Euro-British sphere of influence. As British educational traditions have been followed, the graduates of LDS schools have found greater success in the job market.

Island Saints take well to modern buildings and education, but what about basic priesthood responsibilities, such as home teaching, welfare, genealogy and temple work and missionary work? Perhaps because of their close family ties and the near-clan tradition (it is called by different names in different areas), priesthood quorums of Samoa, Tonga, French Polynesia and Fiji have greater meaning and act as a more cohesive force in the lives of island members than among other groups elsewhere. Quorum officers assume a stronger

role in leading their members than is usually true in Utah and the supposedly more developed parts of the Church. Some island leaders do not take well to committee work or to reports or goal setting. (Why set goals, they ask, when 100 percent is the only acceptable goal?) But they like to visit the members, which makes home teaching easier to accomplish, and they prefer taking care of each others' needs to talking about them in meetings. Welfare projects in the islands are usually different from those in the United States. Instead of establishing welfare projects, local Church officials set aside tracts of land to be used by needy families. In emergencies the bishop and Relief Society president see to it that needs for food and other necessities are met. Extended families also usually feel a greater responsibility for their own than is often true in the United States.

Since the 1920s the priesthood men of Tonga have carried the major burden of missionary work in their country. Local missionary work has accelerated so rapidly since the mid-1960s that it is now necessary to send many missionaries out of Tonga simply because there are too many of them for such a small country. The same can be said for Samoa.

The parts of Polynesia where the Church has not done as well in taking care of priesthood responsibilities are those where the *haole* (Hawaiian for white foreigner) and *pakeha* (Maori for white foreigner) have had the greatest cultural influence, especially Hawaii and New Zealand. In both of these areas the natural cultural tendency to care for the whole group has been diminished somewhat by the force of individualism. The Church works best in areas where the Polynesians are still in command of their lives. In Hawaii and New Zealand the Polynesians have had to compete according to different cultural rules, and they have not done as well either inside or outside the Church.

In Hawaii the racial Hawaiians now number fewer than fifteen percent of the population. Within the Church, what was at one time a "Hawaiian church" has now become the domain of Caucasians, Japanese, Filipinos, Chinese, Tongans, Samoans and others. Hawaiian culture is only a memory. In New Zealand the relationship of the Church with the Maori people has been somewhat more successful. One reason is that the Maoris have not been so severely reduced as a race. Before World War II, the LDS Church in New Zealand was a "Maori church." The pakeha did not join the Church in significant numbers because the Maoris and the missionaries did not usually go to any pains to attract them. Chapels were humble, and the cultural division between the two races did not make joining a Maori church attractive.

But since World War II, the Church's image has changed. The mission presidents have insisted that the missionaries work with the pakehas. Modern chapels, the Church College of New Zealand (CCNZ), and the temple have also helped to enchance the attractiveness of the faith. As the number of pakeha in the Church has grown, the ratio of Maori to pakeha has reversed. This has caused a leadership shift from Maori to pakeha. One writer has interpreted this shift as an abandonment of the Maoris by the Church.[7] But a more accurate assessment would have noted that the temple, CCNZ, and the move to build modern churches all began before the pakeha part of the Church began to grow. The pakeha members have helped the Church to

adapt to the American system of committees, reports and goal setting, but the Maori part of the Church still provides the element of family-like concern that is found in other parts of the Pacific. The Maori, however, have had to adapt more to pakeha ways than vice-versa.

Over the years the Church in New Zealand has gradually eliminated many Maori traditions. One that ended in the late 1950s was the *Hui Tau* or large tent meeting. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, it played the role of general conference for all New Zealand Saints. As the Church began to grow rapidly after 1950 and the costs and logistics of such an affair became enormous, it became difficult to care for all members who wanted to attend. But it was the creation of the Auckland Stake in 1958 and the division of the mission that brought the Hui Taus to a close. Stake and district conferences have tried unsuccessfully to fill the gap. Only the Area Conferences of the Church have come close to replacing the excitement of the old days. But the Church is now too big for the communal feeling of the Hui Tau to be restored. The Church has done its share to destroy *Maoritanga,* Maori culture, part of which was at odds with the principles of the gospel. Institutional changes both in and out of the Church have occurred in all parts of the world and all societies have been affected, America included. Cultural changes have been all-pervasive. But it is well to remember that the Polynesians too believe that the programs and principles that come from Church headquarters are inspired. They want to adapt whenever and wherever it is necessary to conform to the purposes of an expanding Church.

The Polynesian Cultural Center in Hawaii has attracted much attention both inside and outside of the Church because it is a living ethnological museum. It is an indication that the Church has a concern for the ways of local peoples. Many students at the Brigham Young University—Hawaii Campus learn much about the languages and ways of their ancestors (including their own parents in many cases) through courses there and through affiliation with the Cultural Center. But those people who remain in Tonga, Samoa, Fiji, French Polynesia and in other island groups do not need to be taught the ways of the past; it is still close to them. Their homes are fales, many of the people still make tapa cloth from mulberry bark, they still cook in *imus* or *umus,* underground ovens, they still fish, they still work the land and glean coconuts and sweet potatoes. There is no need for another Polynesian Cultural Center in other parts of the islands. The people live much as their ancestors did.

All things considered, the members in the islands have made a healthy accommodation with the present order of the Church. They may be doing better in adapting to the central principles than their American brothers and sisters.

NOTES

[1]Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1964), p. 263.

[2]*Ibid.*, p. 260.

[3]*Ibid.*

[4]For a discussion of LDS mission methodology see R. Lanier Britsch, "Mormon Missions: An Introduction to the Latter-day Saints Missionary System," *Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research* 3 (January 1979): 22–27.

[5]Information for this essay has been taken from my forthcoming book, *A History of the Latter-day Saints in the Pacific* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, expected 1981).

[6]Deseret News, *1979 Church Almanac* (Salt Lake City), p. 222.

[7]Ian R. Barker, "The Connexion: The Mormon Church and the Maori People," (M.A. thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, 1967), passim.