

Fowler, T.

1 Pacific islanders as international missionaries

Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands

Sione Latukefu and Ruta Sinclair

The first Christian mission to employ Polynesians as missionaries in Papua New Guinea (PNG) was the London Missionary Society (LMS) mission to Papua, which was called the New Guinea mission. It started on the Torres Strait Islands in 1871.¹ Two European missionaries, A. W. Murray and Samuel Macfarlane who were working in the Loyalty Islands were asked by the LMS Directors to go to New Guinea to begin work there.² Murray, who was sixty-one years old then, had had experience using Samoans to take the Gospel to the New Hebrides,³ the Loyalty Islands⁴ and Ellice Islands,⁵ so he was convinced that in many respects the best missionaries to Papua would be Christians from other Pacific Islands. When he and his fellow missionary set out on their first trip to New Guinea, they took with them eight men and their wives who had volunteered from the Loyalty Islands.⁶ These were the first of hundreds of South Sea Christians to become missionaries to New Guinea.

The Reverend John Williams was the first to use "native agents to pioneer the way for more cultured workers"⁷ in 1821.⁸ Because of the limited numbers of European missionaries while there was a great demand for religious instructors from the many islands where news of the new religion (and the material advantages its missionaries brought to the people) had spread, the missionaries had no choice but to send islanders although they were only recent converts with very limited knowledge of their new faith.⁹ Although many of these were "truly pious persons", the missionaries soon realised the need for a better system of training if maximum results were to be achieved.¹⁰ The first trained Polynesian missionaries went "to the west" from the

-Pamuru
-Preston
-Pondok

1854

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received good general education, proper theological training, and some have been experienced teachers. Many of the changes introduced by these Polynesians were easily comprehended, readily welcomed and easily adopted by Melanesians. A simple illustration of this is the adoption of prophet songs by the Motu people of the Central District of Papua, making them an integral part of their culture. These prophet songs were introduced by Cook Islands missionaries. As will be seen in the following chapters, hardly any facet of the traditional way of life of the people among whom these Polynesian missionaries lived and worked were left untouched by their influence. In this way they have contributed significantly to development in Melanesia.

NOTES

1. R. Lovett, 1899. *The History of the LMS 1795-1895*, London, vol. 2, p.431.
2. G.L. Lockley, 1872. *From Darkness to Light*, Port Moresby, p.5.
3. Lovett, *op. cit.*, 405
4. *Ibid.*, 410.
5. K.T. Falotese, 1959. *Talata asolopito o le Ekalesia Samoa*, Malua, p.58.
6. Lovett, *op. cit.*, 432.
7. J.J. Ellis, 1889. *John Williams, The Martyr Missionary of Polynesia*, London chapter 8.
8. J. Williams, 1837. *Missions to the South Sea Islands*, London, p.52.
9. *Ibid.*, 54.
10. M.F. Chambers, 1979. "Polynesian Missionary Teachers in the Western Pacific 1830-1870." M.A. thesis, Melbourne.
11. *Ibid.*, 87.
12. Falotese, *op. cit.*, 54.
13. *Ibid.*, 54.
14. *Ibid.*, 57.
15. Lockley, *op. cit.*, 7.
16. Lovett, *op. cit.*, 439.
17. *Ibid.*, 439.
18. J. Chalmers, 1875. *Pioneer Life and Work in New Guinea, 1877-1894*, London, p.24.
19. Falotese, *op. cit.*, 59.
20. Lockley, *op. cit.*, 13.
21. D. Wetherell, 1974. "Christian Mission in Eastern New Guinea 1877-1942", Ph.D thesis, Australian National University, Canberra, p.67.
22. This was Faiva Salaga, his wife So'o and their four sons.
23. Informant, Rev. S. Kami.
24. Fijian and Tongan missionaries are still working in Papua New Guinea today — mostly in the Highlands.
25. Brown, George, 1908. *George Brown D.D.: Pioneer-Missionary and Explorer: An Autobiography*, London, p.69 f.

26. Latoketu, S., 1978. "The Impact of the South Sea Islands Missionaries on Melanesia," in Brouillet J.A., Hughes D.T., & Tiffany S.W. (eds), *Mission, Church, and Sect in Oceania*, Michigan, p.93.
27. Brown, *op. cit.*, 465.
28. *Ibid.*, 488.
29. Bronnlow, W.E., 1929. *Twenty Years Among Primitive Papuans*, London: "New Guinea", Colwell, J. (ed), 1915. *A Century in the Pacific*, Sydney, p.547.
30. Brown, *op. cit.*, 519.
31. Godde, J.E., 1909. "The People of New Georgia: Manners, customs and religious beliefs." *Royal Society of Queensland Proceedings*, vol. 22, p.23-30. Colwell, *op. cit.*, 566.
32. Threlkell, N., 1975. *One Hundred Years in the Islands*, Rabaul, p.249-264.

Rarotongan Institution at Takamoa in 1842.¹¹

Samoans were first used as missionaries in 1839 — only nine years after John Williams himself landed Tahitian missionaries to spread Christianity in Samoa.¹² Most of those first Samoan couples who went with John Williams in 1839 were killed, together with him and Mr. Harris at Erromanga in the New Hebrides in the same year.¹³ But many more were sent again to the New Hebrides and to other groups such as New Caledonia, Loyalty, Tokelau and Gilbert and Ellice Islands.¹⁴ Those who went before the establishment of the Malua Training Institution in 1844, received no special training, but soon, only Malua trained men were allowed to go. All the Samoan missionaries who came to Papua were graduates of Malua.

During the first visit of Murray and MacFarlane in 1871, they visited a number of places in mainland New Guinea, but no island missionaries were left there.¹⁵ The missionaries also discovered then that the appearance and language of the inhabitants of Eastern New Guinea resembled Polynesians.¹⁶ This led them to recommend that the Directors appoint a couple of missionaries from Eastern Polynesia, with a staff of native teachers to begin the evangelisation of Eastern New Guinea.¹⁷ So in 1872, the Rev. Dr. W. Wyatt Gill who was working in the Cook Islands delivered six Cook Islanders, and in October 1874, the Rev. W.G. Lawes arrived with Niuean missionaries.¹⁸ No European missionary came then from Samoa to New Guinea, but the Samoan church was asked for Samoan missionaries, so the first two Samoans, Timoteo and Sumeo and their wives arrived in February 1884.¹⁹ Later, missionaries also came from the Society Islands, Gilbert and Ellice Islands, Niue, Tokelau and also from Nauru.²⁰

Although the Samoans did not start coming to Papua until the mission had been going for a dozen years, "... on the Melanesian frontier, they were no less pioneers than any other."²¹ Samoans soon outnumbered all the other Pacific Islanders put together, and the supply from there continued for the longest period. The last Samoan missionaries to serve in Papua left for home at the end of 1977,²² and the United Church asked Samoa in 1979 for two more missionaries.²³

The other Christian mission that employed substantial numbers of Polynesians in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands was the Methodist Overseas Missions of Australasia. It employed hundreds of Polynesian missionaries from its inception in 1875 up to the present.²⁴ Like the ones employed by the LMS in Papua, they were called native teachers and not missionaries.

The first mission was established in the New Guinea Islands Region in 1875, and the vision of establishing that mission belonged to the outstanding, vigorous and tireless pioneering Methodist missionary, Dr George Brown, who was then a missionary in Samoa. For several years he had advocated the need to establish a mission in New Britain and the surrounding area. In 1874 he left Samoa for Sydney where he continued to apply pressure on the Mission Board to give his suggestion serious

consideration, arguing vigorously that such a mission could be established and maintained relatively inexpensively by employing missionaries from the South Sea Islands with or without supervisors on hand.²⁵ The Board accepted his suggestion and invited him to take charge of the new mission. In the following year he established the mission in New Britain with missionaries recruited from Fiji and Samoa, who were joined later by recruits from Tonga.²⁶

About a decade and a half later, Sir William McGregor, the then Governor of British New Guinea (later Papua) who had received a favourable impression of the effects of the Wesleyan mission among the Fijians during his term of office there, urged the Wesleyan Methodist Overseas Mission Board to establish a mission in the eastern end of this Territory.²⁷ In 1891 after some preliminary investigations by Dr. Brown, who had now become General Secretary of the Mission Board, a mission was established in the eastern end of the mainland of British New Guinea and its adjacent islands, under the leadership of Dr. William E. Bromilow.²⁸ Following Dr. Brown's earlier lead in German New Guinea, missionaries were recruited from Fiji, Tonga and Samoa to help Dr. Bromilow with the new mission.²⁹

After several unsuccessful petitions from some Solomon Islands labourers converted in Fiji to establish a mission in their group of islands, the General Conference of the Methodist Church of Australasia discussed the issue in 1901 and approved the motion to establish a mission in the Western Solomons.³⁰ The General Secretary, Dr Brown, was again instructed to carry out preliminary investigation and to discuss the matter with the leaders of the Melanesian Mission, who had already established a mission in the eastern Solomon Islands. In the following year, 1902, Dr. Brown took the group of missionaries to the Solomon Islands and established the mission in the Western Solomons under the leadership of the Rev. J.F. Goldie.³¹ The majority of this first group were Fijian and Samoan missionaries. They were later joined by Tongan missionaries.

From 1875 until World War I, most of the missionaries in New Guinea, Papua and Solomon Islands came from Fiji, Tonga and Samoa. Their numbers gradually declined after World War I as more and more missionaries were recruited, mainly from Australia and New Zealand.³² After World War II the Methodist Church in Samoa ceased to send missionaries, but Fiji and Tonga continue to the present. They have provided the newly established United Church of Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands with three Bishops, one from Fiji and two from Tonga.

There were certainly some unfortunate and even disastrous episodes among these Polynesian missionaries due, in many instances, to lack of proper training, human frailty, and personality or health problems. At the same time there have been among them, men and women of complete dedication and industry, who were adequately trained, particularly the post World War II recruits. Many of them