

CH 402 History of the CCCS 1962 to the present

Rev. Suitoanu Suitoanu and the American District

In 1959 Mile Lili’o, the Chairman of the Samoan congregations in the United States, reported to Vavae Toma about people eager to align with American Congregationalists in California and to form separate congregations.¹

The Church’s response to these reports focussed increasingly on the former lay preacher Suitoanu Suitoanu. He had created controversy in Hawaii in 1953 when he put his name forward as a pastor of the first Samoan congregation in Honolulu, Hawaii.² It caused such a commotion that a lay preacher would consider putting himself forward as a pastor that it forced Suitoanu to migrate to California.³

- In California he became responsible for the first Samoan Church service on **the 23 January 1955 in San Diego**.⁴ To assist in the formation of the first Samoan Church (LMS) in California, the CCCS Church officially ordained him a year later and appointed him pastor of the San Diego parish in February 1956.⁵
- His promotion from a lay preacher to a pastor was one which suited both the Samoan Church and Suitoanu’s aspirations, although it was unprecedented for the Church to ordain a lay preacher as a pastor, without formal theological training. His ordination created controversy when other lay preachers also wanted to be ordained.⁶ However the Samoan Church needed a clergyman loyal to the church with a strong personality to enforce the authority of the Samoan Church in California
- Suitoanu was totally devoted to the authority of the Samoan Church, and he made sure that any newly-formed congregation that he helped set up came under the control of the CCCS.
- Suitoanu’s appointment was based upon his success in establishing the congregation in San Diego.⁷ Between 1956 and March 1959 he established **four** more Samoan Churches in California: Oceanside, Long Beach, San Francisco and Los Angeles.⁸
- He soon became recognised by the Congregational Conference of Southern California in 1959.⁹
- By 1962, another three congregations were established under his direction—Santa Ana, Palm Beach, and a second Long Beach congregation.¹⁰

As the leading Samoan clergyman, Suitoanu appointed lay preachers to establish and look after congregations. However a few of them rebelled against his authority and became ordained ministers

¹ Mile Lili’o to Vavae Toma, 22 December 1959, 1 (CCCSA).

² Tikeri Tauoa to Vavae Toma, 23 April 1960 (CCCSA).

³ Filo Tauaivale, “To Sing the Lords Song in a Foreign Land: A Brief History of the Samoan (LMS) Church in Hawaii 1950–1970”, 30.

⁴ Suitoanu Suitoanu, “Galuega i Amerika”. San Diego: Samoa Church (LMS), 1959, 1. The sacraments were performed by a navy chaplain Rev. Shackelford; “O le Tusi Valaau mai le ‘O le Malamalama o Samoa o le Satauro Paia”. San Diego: CCCS (San Diego), 1964; Suitoanu Suitoanu to John Bradshaw, 29 December 1959 (CCCSA); Gordon Lewthwaite, Christiane Mainzer, and Patrick Holland, “From Polynesia to California: Samoan Migration and Its Sequel”, 141. Suitoanu’s account counters the claim by Lewthwaite et. al. that the first Samoan Congregational Church in the United States was formed in San Francisco in 1957.

⁵ Suitoanu Suitoanu, “Galuega i Amerika”, 1; Vavae Toma to Suitoanu Suitoanu, 24 June 1960 (CCCSA); Osovale Maloata, “O le Ekalesia Faapotopotoga Kerisiano i San Diego”. *O le Sulu Samoa*, Iulai 1964, 127. In the 1964 July report Suitoanu was ordained in 1959. This contradicts Suitoanu’s account. However one can be acknowledged as a pastor by the Samoan Church in ‘exceptional circumstances’ and be officially ordained after a two year service. In this case the 1959 ordination of Suitoanu makes sense.

⁶ Suitoanu Suitoanu to Vavae Toma, 8 September 1959, 1 (CCCSA); Suitoanu Suitoanu to Vavae Toma, 16 September 1959, 2 (CCCSA); Suitoanu Suitoanu to John Bradshaw, 29 December 1959 (CCCSA).

⁷ Suitoanu Suitoanu to John Bradshaw, 29 December 1959, 1 (CCCSA); Mile Lili’o to Vavae Toma, 19 September 1959, 1 (CCCSA). Mile Lili’o the chairman of the American District requested the Samoan Church to officially make it known that Suitoanu was the designated leader of the District.

⁸ Jesse Perrin to General Assembly of Samoa Church (LMS), 24 March 1959 (CCCSA); Kuresa Eseroma to CCCS, 10 March 1960 (CCCSA).

⁹ Jesse Perrin to General Assembly of Samoa Church (LMS), 24 March 1959 (CCCSA).

¹⁰ Suitoanu Suitoanu to Etene Saaga, 12 April 1962, 1 (CCCSA); Setoga Jr to CCCS, 13 April 1963 (CCCSA).

recognised by the American Congregationalists. Suitonu described these defections as being caused by ‘petty jealousy’, fuelled by selfishness, family and village rivalry.¹¹ Suitonu, who sought to keep the Church in Samoa up-to-date with events in California, described the separated congregations as making a mockery of the Church:

people here—both Samoans and Americans—are making fun of our Church, inasmuch as every Tom, Dick, and Harry, who wants to preach for personal reasons, after I have refused him or his desire, has only to go to some American pastor to be ordained... these appointees desire to deprive me of the authority given me by authorities (at Malua). In addition, it is quite apparent that they resent my withholding the privilege of performing wedding, baptismal and communion ceremonies,¹²

Suitonu sought to curb the trend of LMS lay preachers from becoming pastors and aligning themselves with American Congregationalists. In 1959 the Church gave him official authority over those Samoan congregations that were affiliated with other Congregationalists, be it the London Missionary Society or the American Congregationalists.¹³ The Samoan Church (LMS) saw the close association with **Northern California Congregational Conference (NCCC)** as undermining the authority of the Church in Samoa.

Unlike Craig’s decision in 1953, when he allowed the Samoan Congregations to seek assistance from the American Congregationalists, this time he informed John Reuling of the **United Board for World Mission**, that the CCCS was trying to make ‘Samoan Congregations outside Samoa into a District of the Samoan Church’ and advised against any action that might challenge the CCCS authority.¹⁴ Reuling supported Craig’s suggestion not to interfere with the ‘unity of the Samoan Church’ and replied:

I have sent copies of your letter in its entirety to the Superintendents of the two Conferences and have added my personal plea that they do not allow the interest which some of their members may have in American Samoa to in any way have the effect of splitting the total Church of Samoa as a whole. I have suggested that if they want to have friendly and fraternal relations with the Samoan Church, it should be with the whole Samoan Church and not just with that section which happens to be under the political control of the United States.¹⁵

The reluctance of the **United Board of World Mission** not to invite or even entice CCCS congregations to be part of their organisation gave some assurance to Church leaders in Samoa with their plans for an American district. Suitonu’s authority was further enhanced when the Samoan Church appointed him as the first Elder of the American district in 1962.¹⁶ His position was strengthened by the CCCS’s rejection of lay preachers who were not trained at approved theological colleges in the United States.¹⁷ The end result of this action meant that lay preachers who wanted to become pastors of the CCCS had to attend Malua Theological College for four years.

¹¹Suitonu Suitonu to John Bradshaw, 29 December 1959, 1 (CCCSA).

¹²Suitonu Suitonu to John Bradshaw, 29 December 1959, 1–2 (CCCSA).

¹³ Suitonu Suitonu to John Bradshaw, 29 December 1959, 1 (CCCSA): (ii) If a group in America wishes to form a new congregation in association with the Samoan Church (LMS), application shall be made through Suitonu to the General Purposes and Finance Committee, and the matter shall be referred to the Church Extension Committee.

¹⁴Stuart Craig to John Reuling, 21 February 1962, 1–3 (CCCSA).

¹⁵John Reuling to Stuart Craig, 27 February 1962 (CCCSA).

¹⁶Suitonu Suitonu to Etene Saaga, 12 April 1962 (CCCSA); Ekalesia Faapotopotoga Kerisiano i Samoa. *Tusi o Iugafono a le Au Toeaina 1952–1978*, 59. 63KAT24; Osovale Maloata, “O le Ekalesia Faapotopotoga Kerisiano i San Diego”, 127. Suitonu was officially ordained as elder in May 1963.

¹⁷Vavae Toma to Suitonu Suitonu, 24 June 1960 (CCCSA).