STATISTICAL GROWTH OF THE LDS CHURCH IN SAMOA AND TONGA

by
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In response to invitation, I am pleased to present a brief update of the LDS Church's growth in Samoa and Tonga as a sequel to my paper last April. Significant changes have occurred in the missionary successes of both countries as well as the construction of church meetinghouses there. Church programs have been upgraded and membership continues to grow at a rapid clip. One interesting change was the transferring of translation services from Samoa and Tonga to Salt Lake City.

Perhaps the most exciting development in both countries is the construction of their own temples. Both temples are of the 12,500 square feet size and of similar design. Both were started at about the same time. Both will have open houses shortly, followed by dedication this summer. Both are expected to have adjacent genealogy service centers which will receive the name extraction cards from surrounding stakes and process them into computerized name slips for use in the temple. Both have generated tremendous spiritual uplift and anticipation as temple blessings approach reality.

TONGA

Hurricane Isaac which wreaked such terrible destruction, such as over 90% of the homes in the Ha'apai Islands, was also a blessing. As is so often the case in disaster, it brought out some of the best in human behavior. It demonstrated the great strength of the LDS Church. Immediately, it was noticeable that except for minor roof damage, not one LDS chapel was destroyed. They were quickly repaired and used as temporary shelters for non-members as well as members. The Church quickly allocated over a million dollars in relief funds plus large commodity shipments which were distributed through normal church procedures. Members were expected to work in return for the church assistance rendered. With help from the Presiding Bishopric's Office, many small new homes were built for the Saints. The whole population was so impressed by the church members and the welfare program that missionary work surged forth. Notwithstanding a new reduction in service for Tonga missionaries from 18 months down to 12 months, under the able leadership of Mission President Pita Hopoate, convert baptisms skyrocketed spectacularly from 1,583 in 1981 to 2,787 in 1982. That was an increase of 76%. Accordingly, church membership rose by 22% over 1981 from 23,795 to 29,098. In the next month or two, two new stakes are scheduled to be created in Tonga.

In physical facilities, Tonga made notable progress. At the outset of 1982, they were able to implement the full church operations and maintenance program as practiced in the United States. That is the responsibility and administration of chapel maintenance passed from the paid employees of the Presiding Bishopric's Office to the unpaid Physical Facilities Representatives (PFR) called by stake presidents.

When the tithing faithfulness program for construction was announced in April of 1982, all seven stakes in Tonga met the requirements. Meetinghouse construction surged forth with eight new buildings costing a total of about $2,330,000. At the end of 1982, a new milestone was achieved with the awarding of contracts to construct three chapels by private contractor—the first contracted meetinghouses in Tonga. It is hoped that eventually all church construction in Tonga will be done by private contractors as is practiced in the United States. Projection for 1983 construction is eighteen new buildings costing a total of $2,400,000.

A mark of spiritual maturity is qualifying for dedication of meetinghouses. Here Tonga scores highly with 70 of their 76 permanent meetinghouses dedicated. Two of the remain six are still in construction and the other four are merely waiting for all expense bills to be received and paid.

An interesting aspect of life in Tonga is a law which prohibits businesses from operating on Sundays. Everything is closed on Sunday, including the airport. That law, together with the faithfulness of Tongan Saints, produced an average sacrament meeting attendance of over 53% for the whole country for 1982. This compares favorably with the 45% average attendance in Hawaii for the same period. In my last visit to Tonga last November, I attended a ward where over 90% of the members were present.

SAMOA

Samoan likewise made commendable growth in 1982. Their church membership grew from 36,613 to 38,096, or a 4% increase. Partly due to good publicity generated by the temple construction, convert baptisms increased greatly from 1,313 in 1981 to 3,255 in 1982, a 151% increase. However, one of Samoa's concerns is the migration of citizens to other countries. There are probably more Samoans now in New Zealand than there are in Samoa. Hawaii and Utah also have large groups of Samoans.

In church construction, Samoa ran into a roadblock when church headquarters announced the tithing faithfulness requirement for construction. Samoa has a long history of poor reporting. Undeveloped transportation and communications facilities impede priesthood leaders in training and office workers to make accurate and timely reports. Many church units became discouraged and made little attempt to submit the required reports to church headquarters. These reports became the prime requisites to qualify for chapel construction under the new program, and since then only one of their eleven stakes had been able to qualify for new construction. This past week, however, four new stakes have just qualified. Consequently, no new projects were begun in 1982, and only about $119,000 was expended on repairs and minor renovations of their 1982 $2,000,000 construction budget. The Presiding Bishopric's Office, with faith in Samoa's ability to resolve their problems, budgeted almost a million dollars for new projects in Samoa in 1983.

Like Tonga, Samoa has been successful in dedicating their chapels. Sixty-three of their seventy-three are dedicated. Two of the remaining ten are still in construction and the other eight are awaiting financial closing.

In the Pesega Village of Western Samoa, the LDS Church has a large piece of property in excess of 125 acres. This property serves as the campus and faculty housing of the Church College of Western Samoa, and as headquarters for the Samoa Mission, the Church Education System, and the Presiding Bishopric's Office. Now to be located there are the
Samoa Temple and Visitors' Center. This whole complex has been master-planned for all its new uses and is on the verge of extensive changes expected to cost about $2 million. It will then truly become the hub of all Mormon activities in Samoa.

A stagnant economy coupled with a high rising rate of inflation will continue to feed the Samoan exodus. Those who leave to further their education have little, if any, employment incentives to return to their homeland. Still there continues among her displaced sons and daughters to be a strong attachment to the mother country. They strive to preserve their culture and to stay close to the Church. The LDS Church in Samoa probably is the brightest hope for these people.

SUMMARY

With all their problems and undeveloped condition, there is definite economic progress in both countries. Tonga now sports paved roads on their main thoroughfares, and more widespread telephones. Samoa has developed to the point where many services which the Church had to provide for itself can now be contracted, such as chapel construction, manufacture of building blocks, vehicle maintenance, and joinery products. The Saints in these countries are likewise maturing spiritually. Their high levels of church activity and great missionary successes stand as beacon lights to all the Church. They continue to rank first and second among all international countries in the ratio of LDS to the population. Jesus said to his disciples, "Go ye, therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." That is happening in Samoa and Tonga.