

**TEMPLES IN THE PACIFIC:  
A REFLECTION OF TWENTIETH CENTURY MORMON HISTORY**

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The construction of Latter-day Saint temples in the Pacific area is significant in and of itself. Yet this dramatic achievement takes on even further significance when it is viewed as a reflection of broader developments during the twentieth century.

**Early Twentieth Century Expansion**

Throughout most of the nineteenth century Latter-day Saint converts had gathered to "Zion," flocking to the centers of Mormon colonization in North America. As that century drew to a close, however, the supply of land for settlement approached exhaustion and the United States was plagued by depression. In this setting and consistent with revelations earlier given through Joseph Smith (D&C 101:20-22, 115:17-18), Mormon leaders began discouraging the Saints from gathering to America but rather instructed the faithful to stay and strengthen the Church in their own lands. President Lorenzo Snow, who served at the dawning of the twentieth century, stressed the Church's worldwide mission. Impressed with the need of taking the gospel to all of the world, he appointed apostle Heber J. Grant to open a mission in Japan and also looked forward to carrying the message of Mormonism to such places as Russia and Latin America.

The construction of temples reflected this shift in emphasis. All six nineteenth-century temples had been located in the same city or state as Church headquarters. In contrast, the first two temples dedicated in the new century were also the first outside of the continental United States.

Polynesian Saints were eager to enjoy all the blessings of the Restored Gospel. In 1913, for example, Stuart Meha and five other Maori men from New Zealand traveled to America to receive

their endowments in the Salt Lake Temple. Such a lengthy journey, however, was beyond the financial ability of most Pacific Saints. Speaking at a general conference in Salt Lake City, President Joseph F. Smith explained:

Away down in the Pacific Ocean are various groups of islands, from the Sandwich Islands down to Tahiti, Samoa, Tonga, and New Zealand. On them are thousands of good people . . . of the blood of Israel. When you carry the gospel to them they receive it with open hearts. They need the same privileges . . . that we enjoy, but these are out of their power. They are poor, and they can't gather means to come up here to be endowed, and sealed for time and eternity, for their living and their dead and be baptized for their dead.<sup>1</sup>

Following a meeting in his honor in Laie, June 1, 1915, President Smith invited Elder Reed Smoot and Presiding Bishop Charles W. Nibley to join him for an evening walk into the nearby tropical grounds. "I never saw a more beautiful night in all my life," Elder Smoot later recalled. While they were strolling, President Smith unexpectedly confided, "I feel impressed to dedicate this ground for the erection of a Temple to God, for a place where the peoples of the Pacific Isles can come and do their temple work. . . . I think now is the time to dedicate the ground." Elder Smoot continued, "I have heard President Smith pray hundreds of times . . . but never in all my life did I hear such a prayer. The very ground seemed to be sacred, and he seemed as if he were talking face to face with the Father. I cannot and never will forget it if I live a thousand years."<sup>2</sup>

Not only was the Hawaii Temple a reflection of early twentieth century geographical expansion, but it also represented a new concept in temple design. When the Alberta Temple was planned in 1913, the First Presidency had decided that it would depart from traditional designs in at least two important respects: it would not be adorned with towers; and it would be smaller, not including a large assembly room on the upper floor, typical of nineteenth century temples. Hence, the Alberta Temple was designed almost exclusively for sacred ordinances. The First Presidency

invited prominent Latter-day Saint architects to participate in an anonymous competition for the Alberta Temple's design. Of the seven proposals submitted, that of Hyrum Pope and Harold W. Burton was selected. When the decision was reached to build a temple in the islands, church leaders selected the same architects to design a similar but slightly smaller building for Hawaii.

Architect Pope believed that because the gospel dates from before the foundation of the earth, temple architecture "should be ancient as well as modern. It should express all the power which we associate with God."<sup>3</sup> With the large upper assembly room omitted, the architects had greater flexibility in arranging the various elements of the structure. The four endowment lecture rooms--Creation, Garden, World, and Terrestrial--in the Alberta and Hawaii Temples were placed in wings projecting outward from the central celestial room, which was located in an elevated position above the baptistery. The resulting plan took the form of a Grecian cross seventy-eight feet square, with the flat roof of the central portion rising to a height of fifty feet.

Many people questioned the departure of these temples from the basic pattern of those built in the previous century. In 1916 President Samuel E. Woolley of the Hawaiian Mission was invited to give a talk in which he would respond to these criticisms. Seeking inspiration, he opened a book at random and found President Brigham Young's 1853 prophecy of the time when temples would have one central tower with greenery and fishponds on the roof. He was impressed that the Hawaiian Temple, with provisions for flower boxes and ponds on top of the building, fulfilled President Young's description. Writing in the Improvement Era later that year, Elder John A. Widtsoe presented these circumstances as evidence of Brigham Young's prophetic calling. The architects, however, "asserted that they knew nothing of President Young's prophecy until several years after they had planned the Canadian and Hawaiian Temples."<sup>4</sup>

The lack of many building materials in the islands posed a formidable challenge. The builders determined that local volcanic rock and coral could be crushed to make good concrete.

Reinforced with steel, the temple became "a monolith of artificial stone" having a creamy white surface.<sup>5</sup> Those associated with building the temple were convinced that they had divine assistance. At one point, construction came to a standstill because of the lack of lumber which was not abundant in the islands. Contractor Ralph Woolley (Samuel's son) prayed for divine assistance. Two days later, after a particularly severe storm, the people of Laie spotted a freighter stranded on a nearby coral reef. This was a strange sight because ships of that size did not normally sail along that side of the island. To lighten his vessel, the captain offered to give away his entire cargo--of lumber--if the people would unload it. Young men from the community swam out to the ship, threw the lumber overboard, and lugged it up to the Temple site. It was unloaded and work on the temple resumed.<sup>6</sup>

Realizing the possibilities of the cement surface, the architects asked the First Presidency for permission to adorn the upper portion of the temple with sculptures. President Joseph F. Smith approved, and commissioned J. Leo and Avard Fairbanks to do the work. In the resulting friezes, 123 nearly life-size figures depict God's dealings with man in four great dispensations from the time of Adam to the present. The figures lean slightly outward in order to present a better appearance when viewed from the ground. The panel on the west presents the history of Israel during the Old Testament period. The story of the Book of Mormon is represented in the north frieze, including the departure of Hagoth and others, believed to be among the ancestors of the Polynesians. The panel to the south depicts the New Testament dispensation followed by the great apostasy. The sculptures on the temple's east front represent the latter-day restoration of the gospel with its saving principles.<sup>7</sup> The Hawaii Temple and its beautiful grounds were dedicated by Heber J. Grant in 1919. He lamented that the Polynesian's beloved President Joseph F. Smith had died the year before so could not officiate on this eagerly anticipated occasion.

#### Internationalization Under David O. McKay

During the 1950s David O. McKay presided over an accelerated internationalization of Mormonism. Once again this trend was reflected in temple building. Following extensive discussions, the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve on April 17, 1952 made the historic decision to build temples in Europe. When David O. McKay announced the selection of a temple site in Switzerland, he emphasized that the Church could bring temples closer to the people by constructing smaller buildings and more of them. The temple's architect testified that "when the revelation came" to make temples accessible to the Saints abroad, President McKay was also told how to make the same ceremonies and covenants available "to the Saints on the outskirts of Zion."<sup>8</sup> Using modern equipment such as motion pictures made it possible to present the endowment in a single ordinance room and in more than one language with far fewer than the usual number of temple workers. Other "overseas" temples announced during the 1950s included one near London, England, and another in New Zealand.

As early as about 1928 the president of the New Zealand Mission, John E. Magleby, told the small group of Saints in the Waikato Valley that "it would not be long until a House of God would be built in this area." He further prophesied that "the Waikato would become a gathering place and that some time in the future, the Saints in New Zealand would not need a passport to go to the temple."<sup>9</sup>

In 1954 President McKay appointed Wendell B. Mendenhall, who was then directing the Church's Pacific building program, to confidentially investigate possible temple sites. Elder Mendenhall looked over various properties in New Zealand, but felt that he had not yet seen the temple site. One day he felt impressed to go to Hamilton where the Church College was then under construction. "While in the car on the way, the whole thing came to me in an instant" he recalled. "The temple should be there by the college. The Church facilities for construction were already there, and that was the center of the population of the mission. Then, in my mind, I could

see the area even before I arrived, and I could envision the hill where the temple should stand. As soon as I arrived at the college and drove over the top of the hill, my whole vision was confirmed." This hill commanded a spectacular view not only of the Church college, but also of the fertile Waikato River valley.

About ten days later President McKay arrived in Hamilton. Elder Mendenhall first met him in the presence of others, so nothing could be said about the question of a temple site. Elder Mendenhall described their first visit to the hill: "After we stepped from the car and were looking around, President McKay called me to one side. By the way he was looking at the hill, I could tell immediately what was on his mind. I had not said a word to him. He asked, 'What do you think?' I knew what his question implied, and I simply asked in return, 'What do you think, President McKay?' And then in an almost prophetic tone he pronounced, 'This is the place to build the temple.'"

The owners of this choice hill had previously indicated that they did not wish to sell their property. One morning following President McKay's departure from New Zealand, Elder Mendenhall again met with them. They still were not willing to sell. By afternoon, however, Elder Mendenhall had convinced them to change their minds. His account continues:

Elder [George] Biesinger [supervisor of Church construction in New Zealand] and I had gone over the property very thoroughly and had put a valuation on it by breaking it down into various lots and acres. We met with the attorney and he overpriced the property considerably. After discussing the matter for about an hour, he said, "Would you be willing to consider this purchase if I break this property down my way and arrive at its valuation?" And we hazarded the chance and said, "Yes."

He figured the property his way, not knowing what was in our hearts or that we had our own valuation on paper in our pockets. He passed his paper to us. We looked at it. It was exactly the

same figure, right to the penny, we had figured that morning before going to his office. At five-thirty that evening we had the signed papers.<sup>10</sup>

All of the construction was done by volunteer labor. Beginning in 1950 the Church had devised the "labor missionary" program to build badly needed chapels and schools in the Pacific. Experienced builders, responding to mission calls, acted as supervisors. Young men from the islands, also serving as missionaries, donated their labor, learning valuable skills in the process. The local Saints did their part by feeding and housing these missionaries. Most of the volunteers were Maoris from New Zealand, although each of the other Pacific missions agreed to provide four workers throughout the period of construction, despite having extensive building projects of their own. One group who had come from a branch 350 miles away, declined to take any days off despite heavy rains (seventy inches fell during the first year of construction). Some changed into dry clothing at noon in order to continue their work. During one weekend, half of the volunteers were not members of the Church. Of a group of fifty nonmembers who worked on the temple, forty-five were eventually baptized. This temple and the adjacent church college were dedicated by President McKay in 1958.

Even with the construction of the New Zealand Temple, Pacific Saints from other areas still had to make substantial sacrifice to get there. For instance, a man from western Australia had to sell his car and furniture in order to make the journey which was longer than the distance from San Francisco to New York. "What matter the price of these earthly things in comparison with the blessings here to be gained?"<sup>11</sup> A Tongan family sold their livestock, went without new shoes or other necessities, the children worked and saved for two years, and the father rode a bicycle, rather than driving a car, so that they could go to the New Zealand Temple and be sealed.<sup>12</sup>

Although air fare from Tahiti to New Zealand represented approximately eight months' wages, sixty four made the trip to the temple in 1964. Being aware of this group's difficult financial

situation, Church members in New Zealand arranged to pick them up at the airport, bus them 75 miles, and to house and feed them near the temple at no cost. One of the Tahitians was Tahaure Hutihuti, a seventy-five year old pearl shell diver who had saved for over thirty years to come to the temple. When the group arrived just after midnight they saw the floodlighted temple atop a knoll. Hutihuti and others climbed off the bus, knelt on the ground, and offered a prayer of thanks. The dream of a lifetime was realized; he could now be sealed to his wife and forebears.<sup>13</sup>

### President Kimball's Challenge and Emphasis

President Spencer W. Kimball gave renewed emphasis to the Church's worldwide mission. In 1974 he unfolded his vision of how the entire world might be converted, and challenged the Saints to "lengthen your stride" in all facets of Church activity. He gave specific emphasis to temple work, declaring that he sensed the same urgency in this service as in the Church's missionary obligation to share the gospel with the world.

New temples were announced for Sao Paulo (the first in Latin America), Tokyo (the first in Asia), Mexico City, and Seattle. There were even plans for a second temple in the Salt Lake Valley. Not since the 1880s--when the Logan, Manti, and Salt Lake Temples were being built--had there been more than three temples under construction at once. As part of this expansion, plans were also announced in 1977 for a temple in American Samoa. It was to serve the Latter-day Saints living in Samoa, Tonga, French Polynesia (Tahiti), and Fiji. The temple's design included a single, tall spire rising above the building's rounded roof and surrounding palms. One of the most unique temples of the Church, the Samoa Temple was designed to fit comfortably in the island setting and still have the special feeling of a sacred House of the Lord."<sup>14</sup> These plans, however, were superceded by another announcement just three years later.



The 1970s brought yet another unprecedented development. The Arizona, St. George, Logan and Hawaii Temples were completely renovated to allow the presentation of endowment instructions by means of motion pictures. So extensive were the changes in these buildings that, for the first time in Church history, they were opened for public tours prior to their rededication. The 1978 open house at the Hawaii Temple created new good-will toward the Church and its people. Missionaries received some 55,000 referrals as nonmembers signed the temple's guest register. A non-Latter-day Saint teacher in Honolulu so impressed her elementary school students with the sanctity of the temple that some of them bought new shoes before attending the open house. In Hawaii's tropical climate children typically would have worn rubber sandals.<sup>15</sup>

The renovation of these temples expanded their capacity for ordinance work. During the five years prior to the Hawaii Temple's reconstruction, there had been an annual average total of 45,000 endowments for the dead. During the corresponding period following the reconstruction the yearly totals averaged 59,000, a 31 percent increase.

President Kimball also announced "name extraction." Through this new program, local Saints took names for temple ordinances from microfilmed records. This activity generated the highly useful computerized International Genealogical Index, and enabled temple districts to provide sufficient names for their own temple service.

In 1976, two new items--Joseph Smith's 1836 vision of the celestial kingdom and Joseph F. Smith's 1918 vision of Christ's ministry in the spirit world--were added to the standard works. This was the first expansion of the scriptural canon in nearly three-quarters of a century. Both of these revelations provided added doctrinal support for the enlarged emphasis on temple activity.

### **Explosion In Temple Construction During the 1980s**

A dramatic acceleration in temple construction came in April, 1980, when the First Presidency announced that seven new temples were to be built. These included the first temple in the southeastern United States, two more in South America, and four in the Pacific. By 1984 a total of twenty six new temples were announced, even including one in the German Democratic Republic. Most of them were located where they could make sacred blessings available to the living even though they might not contribute large numbers of ordinances for the dead. "Now begins the most intensive period of temple building in the history of the Church" affirmed the First Presidency. "We know that as our people meet the high moral standards required of those who would enter the temple, their marriages, family life, and individual lives will be strengthened."<sup>16</sup>

The First Presidency emphasized that these new temples would be of such a quality that they would "be pleasing to all" and yet could be constructed "at a cost that will not be burdensome for members to bear. The character and beauty of the new temples will be in keeping with their sacred purpose."<sup>17</sup> These temples were comparatively small, having a floor space of from 7,000 to 27,000 square feet. Furthermore, these temples were designed in families, rather than individually, thus substantially cutting the cost of planning. For example, the designs of the new Samoa, Tonga, and Australia temples were similar. Architect Emil Fetzer explained that a group of temples would follow a basic plan "with perhaps some slight modifications to make the outward appearance fit the local culture."<sup>18</sup> Though small, these plans were quite efficient. Hence the new temples sometimes had a greater capacity than earlier, larger temples.

A spirit of excitement and anticipation mounted as the Tonga and Samoa temples were completed in 1983. Traditional open houses commenced with special tours arranged for government leaders. The head of state of Western Samoa declared: "It will now be possible for the members of the Latter-day Saints Church to worship and to observe all the requirements of their faith right here in Samoa. I pray that this temple will be an everflowing source of spiritual blessing for all

those who will worship in it." As Tongan royalty entered the celestial room, the queen said to her escort, "I want you to know that I have a feeling of peace here."<sup>19</sup>

Reflecting on the dedication of these Pacific temples, President Gordon B. Hinckley recalled that "through ancient prophets the Lord promised that in the latter days he would remember his people on the isles of the sea. We have witnessed a marvelous fulfillment of these prophecies."<sup>20</sup> In the following months, local Church leaders noticed that families attending the temple were happier and more united, attendance at meetings and tithing faithfulness increased, and that members took their testimonies more seriously.<sup>21</sup>

### Genealogies and Temple Work

For centuries the Polynesian peoples had kept genealogies in various forms, such as wooden carvings in Tonga or as oral traditions memorized and passed down from generation to generation. During the early years of the twentieth century Mr. Abraham Fornander, a Hawaiian historian, convinced the people to write down their oral legends. He translated them and found that some of the genealogies extended back to the time of Christ. The results of his work were published in six large volumes.

"For twenty years," commented Susa Young Gates, "this Hawaiian genealogist and antiquarian has been at work on the preparation of these volumes; and now, with the completion . . . of the Hawaiian Temple, comes the publication of this master work for the people of that land. Surely God moves in a mysterious way, his wonders to perform."<sup>22</sup>

Individual Pacific Saints also felt the responsibility to collect records to form the basis of vicarious temple service.

Elder Gordon B. Hinckley recalled a faithful sister who brought her precious genealogical record to the New Zealand Temple: "A little woman came with her husband. They were evidently of

extremely modest circumstances. She held in her hand a straw basket, and in the basket a Book of Remembrance, the record of her people, laboriously gathered. To the temple she brought that record, out of the love born of the gospel, that those of her people who had gone before might enjoy the rich blessings of which she bore testimony."<sup>23</sup>

Thus early twentieth-century expansion, the accelerated internationalization under David O. McKay, the added emphasis on temple service by Spencer W. Kimball, the 1980's explosion in temple building, instances of divine guidance, and examples of individual Latter-day Saint's faithfulness all were reflected through temples in the Pacific.

1. Conference Report, October 1915, p. 8.
2. Ibid, October 1920, pp. 136-37.
3. Remarks at Alberta Temple Dedication, MS in Church Archives, pp. 228-29.
4. John A. Widtsoe, "The Temple in Hawaii: A Remarkable Fulfillment of Prophecy," IE 19 (September 1916): 955-58, and "Was Brigham Young a Prophet?" IE 50 (November 1947): 745, 786.
5. Hyrum C. Pope, "About the Temple in Hawaii," IE 23 (December 1919): 149-50; remarks by Romania Woolley (widow of Temple contractor Ralph E. Woolley) Nov. 27, 1969, recording in BYU Hawaii Campus Library.
6. Remarks by Romania Woolley, Feb. 17, 1970, recording in California.
7. J. Leo Fairbanks, "The Sculpture of the Hawaii Temple," *Juvenile Instructor* 56 (November 1921): 575-83.
8. Edward O. Anderson quoted in "Inspirational Events Associated with the Building of New Temples," MS, Church Archives.
9. Wendell B. Mendenhall, New Zealand Temple dedicatory proceedings, April 20-23, 1958, MS, Church Archives; Brian W. Hunt, "History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in New Zealand" (Master's Thesis, BYU, 1971), p. 116.
10. Allie Howe, "A Temple in the South Pacific," IE 58 (November 1955): 811-13; Wendell B. Mendenhall in Conference Report, April 1955, p. 5.
11. *Improvement Era*, 61 (July 1958): p. 509.
12. Spencer J. Palmer, *The Expanding Church* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1978), p. 225-6.
13. *Church News*, 12 May 1985, p. 16.
14. *Church News*, 15 October, 1977, p. 3; 3 June 1978, p. 4.
15. *Church News*, June 17, 1978, p. 7.
16. *Ensign*, 11 (May 1980): 99, 102.
17. Conference Report, April 1980, p. 3.
18. Ibid., 12 July 1980, p. 3.
19. Ibid., 24 July 1983, p. 4; 31 July, p. 3.
20. Conference Report, October 1983, p. 72.

21. *Church News*, 5 August 1984, p. 12.
22. Susa Young Gates, "Sandwich Island Genealogy," *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine*, 10 (October 1919): 148.
23. *Improvement Era*, 61 (July 1958): p. 509.