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History of Latter-Day Saint K-12 Education

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The Republic of Kiribati is a nation consisting of thirty-three coral atolls. While twenty-one of the atolls are inhabited, a majority of the population lives on the main island known as South Tarawa. This major population on South Tarawa have moved from outer islands in the past few decades in search for economic and educational opportunities that are found on the main island. Primary education is free and expected for all kids, with schools located on most islands, while secondary and university education is limited to mostly South Tarawa.

Historically, the discussion surrounding Kiribati revolved around its remoteness from the rest of the world. More recently, the fate of this tiny island nation has become central to discussions about the fate of the world. As global warming rises the ocean levels rise across the globe, claims have been made that Kiribati will be uninhabitable within the next century. Despite the fears of the native inhabitants of Kiribati, there is a growing group of members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the country that has increased the hope for the future among the native Kiribati people.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints first arrived in the Pacific nations, around the same time the religious movement began in upstate New York. The religion was founded in 1830 and in 1843 the first missionaries who reached the Pacific. Church membership in the Pacific grew consistently from the first appearance of missionaries in the region until a few decades ago, when the growth accelerated upwards to 80%. Despite the rapid growth of the Church in the Pacific nations, missionaries did not arrive in the Republic of Kiribati until 1972. Since then, the membership growth rate has been an astonishing 1,500% in Kiribati. The church in 1972 had no members, but now membership has grown to be 10% of the total Kiribati population. This study examined the growth of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the Pacific in the context of globalization, education, and acculturation by looking at the outcome of educational efforts made by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Kiribati. This school opened during the late 1970s as efforts to provide a Latter-day Saint foundation in countries with almost no Church presence. The school in Kiribati continued to become an unqualified success against a backdrop of Church growth.

Before proceeding, some notes on the membership of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and education are necessary to give proper context. Education plays an invaluable role in the lives of members of the Church around the globe. From the Church’s beginnings until now, leadership has stressed the need for education. In the culture of the Church, instruction in the doctrines and principles of the Church is to be a part of daily life, along with general education being a religious duty. Part of how the Church has brought better education to the world can be seen in the education system that has been established in the Pacific. The earliest missionaries to arrive in this region established schools to benefit the native populations. These schools were often understaffed until the 1950s, when the leader of the Church at the time, David O. McKay, placed a heightened effort on the education system in the Pacific. Upon his doing so, schools in the Pacific were able to receive the staffing and facilities necessary to provide the education that was always hoped for. Upon President McKay’s death in 1970, this growth slowed as the new leadership felt inspired to move education efforts to supplementing the education provided by local schools with religious education.

Around the same time as President McKay’s death, a Kiribati man named Waitea Abiuta opened a school on Tarawa in hopes to increase the opportunities for the natives. Not only did he desire to provide a good primary education but sought to find secondary education for them as well. His students applied to numerous schools throughout the world, including Liahona High School in Tonga. After the applications
began to pile up, the head of Church schools in the Pacific, Alton F. Wade, discussed with leaders of the Church regarding what to make of the applications. After meeting with Abiuta, they agreed to send twelve students to Liahona High School. Each of these students were baptized by May, three months after the school year began. The same happened the next year with following thirteen students who were sent to Liahona. Apostle of the Church, Elder Thomas S. Monson felt it was time to open missionary work on the country in 1975. Abiuta’s school quickly became the center for the members of the Church, with most of the Sunday meetings being held there. Persecution began to rise with this new religious movement in Kiribati as local ministers advised students not to enroll in Abiuta’s school which quickly led to financial troubles for the school. Seeing the value of this school as a factor in the future growth of Kiribati, the Church Education System (CES) offered to take over the school to help its growth. In 1977, the Church owned the school and renamed it Moroni Community School. Originally, because of the difficulty in finding trained teachers, teachers were brought in to teach and run the school while old students were trained to become teachers. By the 1990s, the school was entirely run by the indigenous population, and the local Church leadership had begun to come from the faculty of the school, which had become integrated into society. The explosive growth of Church membership came as the indigenous population began to run the school and it became an integrated part of society. The school is known throughout the country as being one of the best all-around schools.

Moroni High school provided what the country requested and needed, an avenue for better education. People flock to Moroni High year after year in hopes of attaining a better education. Following the rise of Moroni as a school, many other schools began to open, seeing the benefit education has on the population. Today, members are mostly concerned with their current state and focused on bettering their families. Looking towards the nation’s unknown future, the population has a newfound faith in themselves, a loving Father in Heaven who knows each of them, as well as in the outside world. This faith is coupled with an education that enables them to grow and utilize all that has been given them. This new hope and confidence has grown in large from the efforts made almost fifty years ago to educate the youth of Kiribati.