The Early LDS Missionaries: 
Teaching English and Converting Tongans.”
by Haitelenisia Uhila

I am indeed humbled and yet honored to be here. I aim to teach English to my people someday, but I still struggle with the language because it is my second language. Anyway, I heard of this effort that the Tongan history people (‘Uho o Tonga) are doing and they’re trying to read the journals of the missionaries from Tonga and produce papers out of it, and my thought was, “I want to write something about my people,” Then I asked myself the question, “How were these LDS missionaries from the U.S. mainland, who spoke very little Tongan, able to teach Tongans English, a language which they knew very little or maybe nothing at all about and also how it influenced their conversion to the church, thus the topic of my presentation “The Early LDS Missionaries: Teaching English and Converting Tongans.”

Before I go on I would like to read a story that was published in the Church News in 1959 that basically touches on all the things I want to talk about in my presentation—using one vehicle to get to another:

Elder James R. Walker and Robert A. Smith were tired and hungry. Since morning they had walked from village from village on the Tongan island of Niuafo’ou, distributing tracts and conversing with the people. They had not eaten since leaving the ship that morning and had been unsuccessful in finding a place to spend the night. “You had better go to another village,” they had been told. Finally towards evening they arrived at the village of the chief of the island and made their way to his house. To their request to a night’s lodgings he answered ‘yes” but we have no food to offer you. Glad for a piece of shelter if nothing else the elders accepted his hospitality. As they explained their work to the chief he became increasingly friendly. He called to a girl and told her to go to one of the neighbors and boil some rice. In a short time the elders were invited to sit down to a meal of rice and fried chicken. Elder Smith, his spirits considerably revived after eating, drew a shiny harmonica out of his pocket. The eyes of the little brown children opened wide as he began to play. The chief smiled approvingly. The merry tones drifted out through the still night air and the villagers began following them to their source. The house soon was filled. The crowd sang some songs to the accompaniment of the harmonica, then the elders delivered their message and distributed some tracts.

Thus went the early missionary work in Tonga in 1896—or maybe I should say, went even till now. When I refer to the early LDS missionaries, I mean from the late 1890’s up to 1960. I read some of journals of the following missionaries – some I skimmed through and some I read in detail:

Brigham Smoot – 1891
Marcus Woolley – 1907
William O. Facer – 1907
George Seely – 1911
Evon Huntsman – 1912
Vernon Coombs – 1920
Reuben Wiberg – 1921
Fred & David Stone - 1955

My main argument is that missionaries in Tonga were neither trained ministers nor fluent speakers of Tongan at first, but they knew of the Tongans’ passion for learning new things, their social inclination, love of music, and willingness to work. By incorporating these elements into their teaching, missionaries were successful early on in enrolling Tongans in classes of various kinds and then converting them to the LDS Church. In particular, conversing and learning English was beneficial to many Tongan commoners as it provided social mobility in the Tongan society.

Earl missionaries in Tonga (Morton Collection)

The first characteristic that I mentioned above is curiosity and passion for something new. In Tonga we live in small communities and so it is very common that anything new or someone new coming to the village is noticed in an instant. When missionaries came, they often brought new things with them including some musical instruments like the violin and harmonica. Because of this, they drew a lot of people into their gatherings and
also to the places the missionaries lived. In fact the Tongan’s were so fascinated by these new things that they named their children after them. Some are named Violini (violin), some were named “Misini” after sewing machines, even very big numbers and numerals were amazing to the Tongans and they thought of naming their children after them. My last name is Uhlia, which means lights or electricity, so maybe my ancestors were fascinated by the electricity so they decided to name their children after those things. Such was the case with English. When people in Tonga heard people speaking English it was something new so they wanted their children to go and learn English, their passion and curiosity for new things. One such Tongan was Samuela Fakatou: “My great desire to learn English led me a LDS missionary who taught English in the mission school in Fahefa. All elders at this time became school teachers of English in the various branches of the mission. This seemed to be the best lead the elders had of introducing the gospel to our people.” Obviously talent and curiosity for learning new ideas led them to missionary-run English classes and then for many, conversion into the LDS Church.

Next was the implications of English. In my mind, I think the missionaries didn’t really understand, but to the Tongans there were many more implications to them that the missionaries knew at first. Such implications included being “educated” or cultured. To the Tongan people, if you spoke English at that time and maybe even now you are thought to be educated, so you’re respected amongst the community. Not only that, but it also had a sense of being American, foreign or cultured. There were people that came to the church only because it gave them a sense of being American being from a foreign country, when they speak English. Some of the missionaries wrote in their journal their frustration on finding that these natives they ask queer questions and they’d rather ask questions about America than ask anything about the gospel or anything about education. So, in my mind, attending the LDS Church meant being American or being somewhat of a higher status than being merely a Tongan. Not only that, but learning English also built up their reputation, helped in getting a government job and otherwise earning money for the family. One of the Elders, Marcus Woolley, who served in Tonga 1907, wrote that he went to this concert and most of the people performing in the concert were boys who went to the church school where they taught and so they could speak some English. Because of that they had government jobs, even though these government jobs only meant helping the doctors and helping around the hospital. But since they could speak English they enjoyed a high reputation.

Another thing I noticed is that the missionaries did not understand that the Tongan people had their own motive when they came to learn English and that was social mobility. You see, in Tonga, when you are born you are either a commoner, a chief, a noble or a king. The majority of the Tongans are commoners. I am one. Moreover, it is impossible to become a chief or a noble because class is inherited through the bloodline. However, when the missionaries came, they affiliated with a lot of the chiefs and nobles, which the Tongans were afraid to do because it would be fematamu’a or forbidden to do so. In most of the pictures that I came across, if there are Tongans in the picture they are either lower in level or very far away from the chief or the king. However, the palangi missionaries affiliated more easily with the nobility and so when the men in Tonga associated with these missionaries it was also a way of getting close to their chiefs and nobles.
There was a bit of a challenge or barrier when the Tongans first interacted with the missionaries because these missionaries as they taught English were inexperienced *palangi* missionaries. In fact, in the early years, the majority of the missionaries had not finished high school, but when they got to Tonga they found out they were going to teach English to these people. Indeed many missionaries when they got to Tonga were assigned to teach English in the church schools. Those who later became fluent in the Tongan language were then sent out to do real missionary work amongst the people. George Sealy served in Tonga around 1911, said in one of his entries “Started for the first time in my life to teach school and never did before know how little I knew, but got along alright.” These teachers, a lot of them, were frustrated because first they didn’t know they were going to teach and secondly they were inexperienced in the teaching profession, yet here they were--sent to a classroom to teach the Tongans. Another elder, by the name of Winward said “Some of the kids they got the best of me, but wait until I get to know them. I will show them who is the boss. I lick the kids and will lick some more if they don’t look out. I’m the boss, not them.”

To me this gives a sense of the inexperienced teaching and the fact that these teachers were very frustrated. I don’t blame them because first, they didn’t expect it and second, maybe the Tongans were just so naughty in the classroom.

On an even more negative note, some of these missionaries were nevertheless overconfident in teaching because they saw the Tongans as stupid, ignorant, tender-minded and not knowledgeable.

In one of the journals written by Marcus Woolley, he wrote a poem. Part of it said:

“I talked to them from daylight until dark
and tried to teach them by sign and by mark.
I worked until I was nearly dead,
but none of it seemed to stay in their heads.”

This to me, has an air of superiority, of feeling better than the Tongans. “The things that they were taught did not stay in their heads” . . . yet I would ask the question “Is it a
problem with the students or is it a problem with the teaching.” I suppose it was both. The problem resided on both sides. For you see the Tongans were deluded by their overwillingness to gain knowledge. The missionaries were faulty for they were inexperienced in the teaching profession. The Reverend Buzacott, who served in Rarotonga in the 1800’s, said something that I believe summarizes well the natives overconfidence in their foreign but inexperienced teachers. He said, “The thirst for general knowledge . . . was excited and deepened and every week the people felt that their missionary was qualified by knowledge as well as office to lead them into the truth.” Of course when the missionaries gathered, these students would sing a couple of songs, ask about England or America and as time went by, developed absolute confidence in the teachers. That the teachers might be inexperienced never occurred to them. The mere fact that the teachers could speak English was the thing that mattered most to them.

However, to makeup for this inexperience, missionaries knew the natural interest of the Tongans. One of these interests was social gatherings and performances. Missionaries used socials and performances to get a lot of people to come, not only to the church schools, but also to the church and listen to their conferences. One Elder, Tamar Gordons, wrote, “Liahona (school) became the most important socializing body of the church and the primary source of youthful converts.” So, a lot of people came into the church because they liked socials. Tongans love to socialize, to go to dances and socialize with other people.
One problem occurred with this in converting people to the church is the conversion into the church became merely a social thing. This is the term called “kaungapapi” in Tongan, which means you “only baptized because the crowd is doing so.”

President Coombs, one of the Mission Presidents in Tonga in his reports to Salt Lake City wrote: “Many of them are good and are excellent when one looks at them knowing the depths from which they have come, but still I hardly think they would not stand the test that our pioneers stood. They will sin and feel ever so bad and truly repent about it and will live it down for four, five or more years and then go do the same thing over again. . . only 30 saints have what it takes that brought your parents and my grandparents across the plains.”

True or not, I believe this is partly a problem in using socialization as means of getting people to church meetings because many were baptized into the church just because the crowd was doing so. Boyd K. Packer wrote that “true doctrine understood changes attitudes and behavior.” This conversion process happened in Tonga among many, to be sure, but for a significant number the effects were temporary as Coombs pointed out. My next point is that the missionaries knew and used the Tongans love of music.
One of the writers in *The Improvement Era*, Carter E. Grant, wrote “the Tongan people responded readily to music, especially to the youth and adult choirs organized by the Elders and in no time at all the choirs became fertile sources for converts.” This was particularly true after the choirs were turned into schools for singing and speaking the English language. The Tongans were very confident that they were good because some of them would laugh at the missionaries when they attempted to sing. Also, when they travelled around in trucks they would sing wherever they went and the Tongans loved to sing too so the missionaries, when they found this out, used it as part of the curriculum at school. They used singing and music as part of motivating kids in learning English and also converting to the church.

One of the elders, Elder Facer wrote “The Tongans have marvelous voices and love to sing more than anything else. They were so delighted with this new music that our church house was ringing with song every night. There is no difficulty here in getting the choir members out to practice. The Tongans were intrinsically motivated to go learn English because they knew they would also sing, which is something they love to do. For the parents, teaching the kids how to sing in English was just amazing.

Elder Facer wrote “I told them the words, and Sione Tekongahau the music, and I could take them to any village, sit down in the shade of a large tree, start them singing and right away we would have an audience. The entire village usually, and they would be amazed that the boys could sing in English. The result? An opportunity to teach the gospel and more applications to enter our school.” For the missionaries, singing was a very effective way of hiding their inexperience, both in the Tongan language and in teaching.

In addition to singing, there was also labor. The Tongans were always willing to work and some of them not only went to school to be students but also to help out in other work.
A lot of times the missionaries would also use the natives to clean their houses. Labor was part of their assignments at school. Some of the kids would be beaten if they don’t stay after school and help out with the work and because of this a lot of the Tongans were left to do a lot of hard work, even building the houses, but a lot of them did not feel badly because they felt like it was part of their church calling to do these things.

One elder, David E. Cummings, in his journal wrote “The Tongans were a people with amazing faith in God and pathetically eager for chapels where they could worship in beauty as well as in truth. People were willing to do anything to obtain them . . . willing to work without pay, to depend on any uncertain food supply, to live in any kind of dwelling, to handle tools they had never touched before, put in long hours and change their ancient easy-going way of life into a discipline of organized activity. The people delighted in laughter and song, and were rich in good fellowship, loyalty, human sympathy and love.”

The missionaries felt that when they worked together with these Tongans it benefited both of them. They were not only able to build chapels and classrooms, but it also helped them to learn each others’ languages. Sometimes as they would work’ the missionaries would speak to the Tongans and use signs and marks to get through to them and the Tongans in turn would do the same.

In conclusion, understanding the culture of the people and the things they loved played a major role in teaching them English and also in converting them to the church. Although faced with difficulties and their own prejudices and inexperience, the missionaries were able to teach the Tongans by uncovering passions for learning new things, socializing, music, and a willingness to work. The Tongan people, in turn, found meaning and progress in their lives and status. Elder John H. Grobergs once said “We declare Christ, not English.” His point is well made. I believe we can do both, we just need to do it on separate tracks.
The mutual benefit of success, as defined by both parties, led to many early successes in the development and growth of the church in the Kingdom of Tonga. . . to the point where about 40% of its citizens are LDS. . . the highest percentage of any nation on earth.