The LDS Church on the Kalaupapa Peninsula
by Riley Moffat

LDS missionaries first proselyted on the peninsula from 1853 to 1856. Their greatest success was at Kalawao. It is doubtful, however, that a branch was functioning when the first patients were brought to the peninsula in 1866. Given the resurgence of missionary work in the late 1860s it is likely that LDS Hawaiians were among those first patients.

Church organization came with the arrival of LDS pioneer leader Ionatana (Jonathan) Napela, a kokua, and his wife Kiti (Kitty) Richardson Napela on the same day as Father Damien in 1873. Peter Kaeo, younger half brother of Kauikeaouli, Kamehameha III, cousin of Queen Emma and Napela’s neighbor on the peninsula says that Napela held meetings in a grove of trees inside the windward rim of Kauhako Crater. By 1877 meetings were being held in a schoolhouse according to a visiting missionary. In 1878 Elder Henry P. Richards and Elder Keau Kalawaia reported that there were two branches, one in Kalawao and one in Kalaupapa with 88 members in a district presided over by Pres. Napela. This is the time Father Damien reportedly tells Elder Richards that Napela is his ‘yoke-mate’. The visiting Elders often stay with Father Damien and enjoy lively conversations.

After Pres. Napela died in 1879 the Elders continued visiting once each year. In 1888 four Elders visited to sustain a new branch presidency in Kalawao and to visit Napela’s limestone covered grave on the rim of Kauhako Crater. Baptisms were performed in a tidal pool near the Kalawao landing. In 1895, Andrew Jenson reports there were 149 members in the Kalaupapa branch and 78 at Kalawao making them some of the largest branches in the mission. Linda Greene (1985) says that the Kalawao chapel shown just west of Siloama on the makai side of the road on M.D. Monsarrat’s 1895 survey for the Hawaiian Government Survey was replaced in 1904 by a chapel across the road on the mauka side. As the patient facilities moved from Kalawao to Kalaupapa this chapel was no longer needed, though it may have been used up until the 1920s. Ku’ulei Bell tells the story that the Church traded the chapel for land on Maui and the new owner used the building materials for a beach house.

Monsarrat’s 1895 map shows a Mormon chapel just north of the butcher shop in Kalaupapa. A second chapel in Kalaupapa was begun in 1901 and the two chapels were dedicated in 1904 by Elder William W. Waddoups. The Kalaupapa chapel sat 200 and was “one of the finest buildings in the entire mission” according to Elder Waddoups (Jensen, 1919). At the time there were 200 members in the two branches. In the community cemetery just north of the village a large Mormon section developed. In 1919, President Waddoups trained the Saints at Kalaupapa how to collect their genealogy so that they could submit names for proxy work in the new Hawaii Temple.
By 1926, LDS membership on the peninsula had dropped to 90 under the leadership of branch president Elder John Bright who served from 1918 to 1926. In 1927 the Kalaupapa chapel was remodeled and rededicated by Pres. Waddoups. President E. Wesley Smith of the Hawaii Mission visited in 1920 and was very impressed by the great gospel knowledge of the Saints there.

In the Kalaupapa chapel there are two pulpits and two bathrooms, one for patients and one for visitors. Patients sat on one side and visitors on the other. A little apartment for the missionaries was built in 1935 on the chapel lot and a cultural hall was added next to the chapel in 1947. With the development of new treatments that eliminated transference of the disease, missionaries could stay and help with the branch but not proselyte. By 1949 membership was down to 25 as old patients died and no new patients arrived. Interviews and recollections highlight the fact that all religious denominations cooperated and supported each other in addressing the needs of the patients. The physical and emotional suffering engendered by the disease mitigated the parochialism that tended to divide denominations elsewhere in the Islands. Elder David Hannemann recalls spending the first 6 months of his Hawaiian mission in Kalaupapa in the early 1950s with fond memories. As part of this ecumenical cooperation, Elder Hannemann and his companion were put in charge of the peninsula’s boy scout troop.

In 1934, Jack Sing was converted to the Church by his wife, Mary, and baptized. In 1952, he was called as branch president and served for 32 years. Many recall him driving visitors around in his Cadillac. Many also remember Jack receiving BYU-Hawaii’s Distinguished Service Award in 1977 at its annual graduation ceremonies and receiving a bearhug from Church President, Spencer W. Kimball.

By 1965, the 1904 chapel had been so damaged by termites and damp weather that it was replaced by the current frame chapel which was dedicated by Elder Marion D. Hanks of the Seventy. (Linda Greene suggests that the chapel was damaged in the April 1, 1946 tsunami). After Pres. Sing died in 1984, Sis. Ku’ulei Bell has “led” the congregation under the direction of Priesthood leaders from “topside” who regularly visit and conduct sacrament meetings.

[Editor’s Note: Elizabeth Kuulei Bell passed away on Feb 8, 2009.)

References


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