The Establishment of the Church in French Polynesia, 1844-1895

by
R. Lanier Britsch

In the spring of 1843, a former sailor who was now a Latter-day Saint received a mission call from Joseph Smith. His destination was to be Vermont, an area where a number of his family members lived. It is not clear why or how the old salt's mission call was changed to the Pacific islands, but on May 11, 1843, Addison Pratt was told he should serve there. Three other men—Benjamin F. Grouard, who had also sailed the Pacific and had lived in Hawaii, Noah Rogers, and Knowlton F. Hanks—were also assigned to take the restored gospel to the peoples of Oceania. Pratt, Grouard, and Rogers were married men; Hanks was a bachelor.

The little company of missionaries left Nauvoo, Illinois on May 23, with no idea, of course, that one of their number, Elder Hanks, would soon die of consumption at sea, or that another of their group, Elder Grouard, would not leave his mission field in the South Pacific until May 1852, nine years later. Elder Rogers alone would briefly see Nauvoo again, only to leave with the Saints and die at Mt. Pisgah. In New Bedford, Massachusetts, they found a whaling ship, the Timoleon, that was bound for the Sandwich Islands—Hawaii—their destination. Their voyage, which began on October 10, 1843, took them around the Cape of Good Hope, through the Indian Ocean, and finally into the South Pacific.

After six months of sailing they sighted the oval-shaped island of Tubuai, 350 miles south of Tahiti. That day, April 30, 1844, marked the beginning of LDS missionary work in the Pacific Islands.

Both Pratt and Grouard had lived in Hawaii and planned to return there. But the situation in Tubuai and the other islands in the vicinity of Tahiti caused them to reconsider. On learning that the three Latter-day Saints were missionaries, the bronzed-skinned Polynesians of Tubuai pleaded with Elder Pratt to remain among them. The islanders were already nominal Christians, but they wanted a permanent minister.

Finding it impossible to turn down their request, Addison removed his belongings from the Timoleon and bade his two companions good-bye. They sailed north to Tahiti, which now became their destination.

Pratt, whom the Polynesians called "Paraita," went to work with a will. Since he could speak but a few words of Hawaiian, he was limited in his teaching to a small group of Caucasian sailors who had settled on the island, taken wives, and become shipbuilders. It was one of their number, Ambrose Alexander, who was the first person in the Pacific area to receive baptism from an LDS elder. Five weeks after Alexander's baptism on June 15, 1844, nine more converts joined the Church. Among the number were four Polynesians, Nabota and his wife Teili, Pauma, and Hanoe, the first of their race to affiliate with the Church. In late July, Paraita organized the Tubuai Branch of the Church, with eleven members.

Although Elder Pratt enjoyed his associations with the white members of the branch, he believed he had an obligation to teach the local people. In order to learn the language he moved from Nautara to Mahu, where he could speak no English. With the help of an English-Tahitian grammar and many hours of practice, Pratt was preaching in Tahitian by September 1844.

During Pratt's first year on Tubuai he converted and baptized sixty people, a third of the island's population, including all but one of the Caucasians on the island. Caring for the members of his little flock was a demanding responsibility. Not only did he find himself deeply.
involved in all religious and spiritual matters, but he was also sought out for advice on matters of law and government.

Meanwhile, Elders Rogers and Grouard were engaged in missionary work on Tahiti and other islands to the northwest. They arrived at Papeete, Tahiti, on May 14, 1844, and soon discovered that social and political conditions were tense and unsettled. Tahiti was technically under local Polynesian control, but the French government was daily tightening its authority over the area. Because of these problems, the elders found the local people unwilling to listen to their message. Of course, the elders also had a serious language deficiency.

It was not until August 11 that Rogers and Grouard had their first baptisms. On that day Mr. and Mrs. Seth George Lincoln, friends from the Timoleon, joined the Church. They proved to be loyal members who provided room and board for the elders as well as facilities for church meetings.

When two American sailors joined the Church on August 18, some members of the foreign community became upset. Representatives of the London Missionary Society (LMS) circulated derisive stories about Joseph Smith and harassed Church members in other ways, but a few other sailors still chose to join with the Saints.

Late in 1844 Rogers and Grouard spend time on Huahine and Tubuai, respectively. By February 1845, they were both back in Papeete. After working there for a few weeks they were convinced that other areas would be more productive. Their two paths, Rogers' to the Leeward Islands of the Society Islands group and Grouard's east to the Tuamotu Islands, brought contrasting results. "By the middle of June," writes S. George Ellsworth, "Rogers was back in Tahiti, alone, without success, without word from the church or his family, disheartened. American newspapers carried by passing ships confirmed vague news of trouble in Illinois and the death of Joseph Smith. He feared for his family of nine children at Nauvoo. He himself had suffered violence at the hands of Missourians in 1840. He knew what could happen. The opportunity presenting itself he took The Three Brothers to the States. He arrived at Nauvoo December 29, 1845, and was united with his family only to die in the spring. Exodus from Nauvoo."

Benjamin F. Grouard's experience on the low-lying atolls of the Tuamotus was almost the exact opposite of Rogers'. When he arrived on Anaa on May 1, 1845, Grouard initiated the most productive era of the mission. Anaa, with its population of 2000 or 3000, offered a bleak existence. The island provided little more than coconuts and the sea provided fish. The people's ways were still essentially primitive. Although there were one hundred or so nominal Christians on the island, Grouard could not easily distinguish between them and their fellow islanders.

Perhaps because of their circumstances rather than in spite of them, the people and chiefs of Anaa were eager to have Elder Grouard live among them. No other white missionary had lived on Anaa. When Grouard arrived he was already fluent in Tahitian and only had to modify his language a bit to speak. His hearers listened well to his sermons.

Only six weeks after he commenced his work, Elder Grouard took his first twenty-four converts into the ocean to baptize them. By the end of August there were 355 baptized members of the Church. On September 21, 1945, Grouard organized branches in all five villages. He had baptized 620 Polynesians in four months.
By October, his administrative burdens became too heavy and he decided to get Pratt's assistance. He sailed for Tahiti on a pahi Pauwotu, a large double canoe. Although the boat wrecked, Grouard made his way to Tahiti and sent word to Elder Pratt to come there. By February 3, 1846, the two men were on Anaa. They worked together until June, when Grouard began a preaching tour that took him to nine other islands. When he returned in September, Grouard reported 116 more baptisms.

When Elders Pratt and Grouard held the first conference of the Church in the Pacific on Anaa on September 24, 1846, they gathered Saints from ten branches. There were 866 members in the Pacific Church. Over three years had passed since the elders had left Nauvoo, and there had been only two or three letters from home. Evidently no replacements were on the way. It was therefore decided that Paraia should return to the body of the Saints, wherever that was, and bring other missionaries to help with the work. Grouard, whom Pratt had married to Tearo, a Polynesian girl, in April 1846, would remain in the islands.3

When an inter-island ship came to Anaa in November 1846, Paraia took passage on it. "I shall never forget the parting with Brother Grouard," wrote Addison. "He and I have been yoked together in this mission for three and a half years. We have withstood the frowns of poverty, the opposition of men and devils . . . the frowns of hunger, traveling over the sharp coral rocks and slippery mountains with our toes out of our shoes, and our knees and elbows out of our clothes, living a part of our time on coconuts and raw fish, and sleeping on the ground for the sake of obeying the Savior's commands and preaching the Gospel to the natives of these South Sea Islands."4

Once in Tahiti Elder Pratt started looking for a ship that would take him to California. Between November 1846, and March 23, 1847, when he finally sailed, Pratt developed a branch of twenty-seven members at Hauu near Papeete. When Pratt arrived in San Francisco on June 11, he immediately started looking for anyone who could tell him the location of the Saints and where his wife and four daughters might be. He found some Church members who had come to California with Samuel Brannan, and they told him that the Saints had been driven from Nauvoo; they were waiting for Brannan to return with better information on the whereabouts of the main body of the Church. It was not until the next spring that Addison was able to travel with a remnant of the Mormon Battalion toward the Great Salt Lake Valley. When he arrived there on September 28, he was overjoyed to be reunited with his wife Louisa and their daughters, who had reached that city only eight days before from the east.

Only a week or two later, Elder Pratt reported on his mission in General Conference. The conference voted to send Addison and a contingent of new missionaries back to Polynesia as soon as possible. Louisa hoped that would not be too soon.

During the winter of 1848-1849, Addison taught the Tahitian language to prospective missionaries and other interested people. In late summer Pratt and a young veteran of the Mormon Battalion, James S. Brown, left for California and the Pacific. Twenty-one other missionaries and family members left later, among them Louisa and her daughters, and Caroline Barnes Crosby, Louisa's sister, and her husband and family. Addison and James S. arrived in Papeete on May 24, 1850. The second contingent arrived on Tubusi on October 21, 1850.
When Sister Pratt and her companions reached Tubuai, they were delighted to see Benjamin F. Grouard again, but they were shocked to learn that Pratt and Brown were still in Papeete. They had been detained there by the French governor, who demanded written statements about what the Mormons taught. They were finally given permits to travel in the islands, but the government made missionary work difficult. Pratt did not arrive in Tubuai until January 28, 1851.

The second period of the mission was neither easy nor successful. By 1850 the Roman Catholic French government was firmly in control, and the edicts of religious toleration of four years before were no longer respected. The government was uneasy about foreigners and gave preferential status to Catholics. These realities combined to create a near-impossible situation for the Mormons. Three missionary families sailed home for America in the spring of 1851. Among those who remained, Pratt, Grouard, Crosby, Sidney Alvarus Hanks, Simeon A. Duan, and Julian Moses traveled widely, particularly in the Tuamotus. Sisters Pratt and Crosby opened a school for their own and the island children and also taught homemaking skills to the Polynesian women.

In March 1852 the government placed all matters of religion under state control and created a new office of district minister to direct and correlate religious affairs throughout the protectorate. All missionaries were ordered to keep to one district and to preach only when they had written invitations from their congregations. But neither Mormons nor Protestants followed these laws when they could avoid them. Unfortunately, however, the Latter-day Saints did not have enough missionaries or sufficient financial backing to counteract the French government.

Before long Elder Grouard was summoned to Papeete on trumped-up charges and acquitted; James S. Brown was deported; and some local Saints lost their lives on Anaa because they insisted on worshipping as Mormons.

Pratt, Grouard, and company left for America in May 1852, leaving behind James S. Brown, who was on distant Raivavae (outside French control), and Sidney Alvarus Hanks, who was far east in the Tuamotus. Brown sailed from Tahiti in November 1852; Hanks did not leave the islands until 1857. When Pratt left the islands he estimated Church membership at nearly 2000.

After Brown left in late 1852, the Church members were left alone until 1892, when missionaries were sent from Samoa. The story of the LDS in French Polynesia for the next forty years is sketchy at best.

Government and Roman Catholic harassment was severe until 1867, when religious toleration was extended to all people in the protectorate. In the meantime the Church had split into various groups with strange new names. Between 1852 and 1864 a convert named John Hawkins, who traveled the islands as a trader, provided what leadership the Church received.

The Polynesian Saints created two gathering places or “Zions.” The older was at Hahu, Tubuai. The second Zion or Tioua was at Faa'a, three and one-half miles west of Papeete. There the island Saints built homes, a school, and a meetinghouse. It was into this little community that two missionaries of the Reorganized Church came in December 1873. They were headed for Australia, but during their short visit in Papeete they convinced at least part of the community that they represented the true inheritors of Joseph Smith’s authority and church. Before they left they baptized fifty-one people into the RLDS Church. Other RLDS missionaries followed during the next few years and won over half of the remaining Saints in French Polynesia to their church.
Latter-day Saint missionary work in French Polynesia was resumed on January 27, 1892, when Elders William A. Seegmiller and Joseph W. Damron, Jr., arrived in Papeete from Apia, Samoa. They had been sent by President William O. Lee of the Samoan Mission. After establishing themselves in an inexpensive cottage, the elders began asking for information concerning any remaining Mormons from the early mission. They were told to go to Faaa, Tiona. When they arrived there on February 9, they learned that everyone in the village was RLDS, but they were told that there were Mormons in the Tuamotu Islands and on Tubuai. Not knowing French or Tahitian, Seegmiller and Damron were severely hampered in their work.

Realizing that they needed a connection with the past, the elders wrote to the First Presidency in Salt Lake City to ask whether any missionaries from the first mission could be sent. The First Presidency reponded by calling James S. Brown, now sixty-five years old and having lost one leg, to return to French Polynesia as mission president. He, along with his son Elando and Elder Thomas S. Jones, arrived in Papeete on June 1, 1892. Brown was persona non grata when he left the islands in 1852, and for a time it appeared that he would bring the new mission more trouble than help. But with the assistance of the American consul in Papeete, Elder Brown convinced the French government that he would cause no problems.

In August Brown received a letter asking him to visit the Saints in Tubuai. It proved to be the opening the elders had been hoping for. Tehehe, who wrote the letter of invitation, said his people "had been left in the dark many years without one ray of light." At the same time the elders learned of other groups of Mormons who were still active in the Tuamotus. With Elder Seegmiller, Brown traveled to Tubuai where they soon baptized sixty-five people into the Church.

Elder Brown returned to Papeete on December 1 and almost immediately learned that the remnant of the Saints in the Tuamotus were going to hold a conference on Faate on January 6, 1893. Elders Damron and Jones had established contact with these people and strongly encouraged Brown and his son to come to that area as soon as possible. They arrived on Takaroa on December 26, and five days later they were on Faate. The assembled Saints were delighted to have missionaries from Salt Lake City among them. They considered Utah the center of their church.

Not long after James S. Brown stepped ashore, he was confronted by an elderly blind man named Maihea. Maihea was the leader of the Polynesian Saints. He claimed to have received his authority from Elders Pratt and Grouard. Maihea asked Brown some questions. Satisfied with the answers, he said, "We receive you as our father and leader, but had you not come back personally we would have refused to receive any foreign missionaries, as so many false teachers have been in our midst and decoyed many from the Gospel of Jesus Christ." Maihea then told Brown and his young companions how he and his people had prayed constantly for more missionaries, and now, after forty years, their prayers had been answered.

As the conference proceeded, the elders learned that there were ten organized LDS branches, with 425 members. Seventeen members were yet alive who had been baptized before 1852.

In July 1893, James S. and Elando Brown sailed for home. Three months before, a new contingent of eight missionaries had arrived from Utah. Elder Damron was appointed president of the now-stable mission. The work surged forward, and by 1895 the Tahitian Mission of the Church had 1040 members and children. The Church in French Polynesia was ready to move into its second phase of development.
Notes


3. Grouard, who Pratt said was wedded to his mission field, wrote numerous letters to his wife in Nauvoo but received no answers. They had been emotionally disaffected from each other before his mission call. He concluded that she had left him and the Church. Unfortunately Tearo died not long after giving birth to a baby girl. Grouard then married Nahina, who eventually bore three sons.

4. Andrew Jenson, Manuscript History of the French Polynesia Mission, November 14, 1846, Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.