



Titikaveka Church, Rarotonga

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Cook Islands

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The Cook Islands, formerly known as the Hervey Group, are located in the South Pacific Ocean to the northeast and southeast of American Samoa. The great proportion of the inhabitants are Polynesian. The islands are often divided into two groups, the northern group being low coral atolls and the southern group being hilly volcanic islands. The northern group is comprised of Suvarrow, Nassau, Pukapuka, Rakahanga, Manihiki, and Penryn. The southern group is comprised of Palmerston, Aitutaki, Manuao, Takutea, Atiu, Mitiaro, Mauke, Rarotonga, and Mangaia.¹

Most of the population live on Rarotonga where the capital is located on the north side of the island at Avarua. Approximately eight percent of the population are Seventh-day Adventists. The group is named after James Cook who first visited the islands in 1773. In 1888, the islands became a British protectorate. Later, administrative control was transferred to New Zealand. In 1965, the residents voted for self-government with New Zealand retaining some portfolios such as defense.²

Seventh-day Adventists Enter the Cook Islands

Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) missionaries first arrived in the Cook Islands in 1891 aboard the *Pitcairn*, calling at Mangaia, Rarotonga, and Aitutaki.³ Further visits took place during the subsequent five voyages of the *Pitcairn* during the 1890s. For this reason, the Seventh-day Adventist Church came to be known as Petania (meaning *Pitcairn*).⁴ The first SDA missionaries to settle on Rarotonga came with the *Pitcairn* on its third voyage in September 1894. They were Dr Joseph Caldwell and his wife, Julia, Dudley and Sarah Owen and *Pitcairner* and nurse trainee, Maud Young. Sadly, Sarah Owen passed away nine months after arrival and Dudley removed to Samoa but the Caldwells remained until 1900, breaking down prejudice with medical work. Julia tried teaching elementary lessons to a few students in their home.⁵

One of the first converts was Francis Nicholas who went to the Avondale School for Christian Workers in New South Wales for further training. Another was a European resident, W.H. Petch, who married Maud Young and assisted with the nursing ministry. An aged Tongan named Rata, with his crippled wife and son, defied opposition to join the missionary group.⁶

In association with a calendar change, the Cook Island chiefs enforced Sunday observance as the Sabbath, taking effect in January 1900. The move served to highlight Saturday observance. A group of approximately thirty individuals at Titikaveka Village, on the south side of Rarotonga, chose to observe Saturday and Elder Edward Gates visited that same year to baptize eighteen of them and form them into the first SDA church in the Cook Islands.⁷ Opposition from village chiefs intensified, encouraged by other mission groups. Permission was withdrawn for further young people to attend the Avondale school.⁸ Government pensions were withheld from believers and one man was refused the right to marry. All were threatened with the loss of title to their land and the burning of their houses.⁹ Those seen working on Sunday were fined and put to work building public roads and bridges.¹⁰ However, religious liberty under British rule eventually prevailed and the sting of opposition subsided, beginning at Rarotonga and spreading to the outlying islands during the next decade.

Strategic Shifts

Early in 1901, the Caldwells transferred to New Zealand because the tropics were beginning to sap their energies.¹¹ Albert and Hettie Piper had arrived on October 31, 1900, to replace them but it heralded a new emphasis.¹² The medical work, so appreciated by the people, ceased and efforts were concentrated on

educational work. Evelyn Gooding arrived from Australia in February 1902 to start an elementary school at Arorangi Village on the western side of Rarotonga. This was a strange decision because the membership lived in Titikaveka Village. It was not long before she faced the difficult task of dividing her time between the school at Arorangi and another at Titikaveka. Later, Piper decided to unite the two schools as a boarding institution at Arorangi, some students from Titikaveka missing out.¹³ Then, in 1904, with Piper on sick leave and Griffiths and Marion Jones relieving, Gooding returned to re-activate Titikaveka school while Marion Jones taught at Arorangi.¹⁴ Frequent changes did not auger well for stability. Mark Carey replaced Gooding in 1905 and continued teaching until 1907 but when he was replaced by two female teachers who did not offer woodworking in order for young men to obtain employment outside the church. The parents then withdrew their children.¹⁵ One of the better students, Tuaine Solomona, spent some time at the Avondale school and was then appointed to Papua. This move also seemed inappropriate, he being the first fruits of the education efforts and best suited to minister to his own culture. The Cook Islands Mission was depleted of resources by his deployment elsewhere and Papua gained little because he gravitated to private employment.¹⁶

Piper devoted considerable time to construction of the Titikaveka church building, the first in the Cook Islands Mission. It was a simple European-style structure of coral rock walls and iron roof with a back room in which Gooding conducted her little school. It was dedicated debt free on May 23, 1904. Its total cost, £95, was shared by Australasian Sabbath Schools and Cook Island members.¹⁷ A handwritten message in a bottle was placed inside the wall and discovered when the church was replaced in 1976 with a modern structure. The message told of Caldwell's purchase of the land with his own money and listed the twenty-six charter members.¹⁸

With the coming of a long line of new missionaries after 1908, efforts to establish a network of schools was superseded by a push to produce literature in the local language and enter new territory. A periodical titled *Tuatua-Mou* (Truth) was first issued in January 1907.¹⁹ Books such as *Daniela* (Thoughts on Daniel) and *Iesu Akaora* (Christ Our Saviour) were translated and printed in Australia and canvassed among the islanders. Reading matter was the seed sown that prepared the way for resident missionaries to the far-flung islands.²⁰

George and Maybelle Sterling pioneered Aitutaki Island in 1912 and organized a church there on October 25, 1913.²¹ Most of the Titikeveka Church members had apostatized, so the names of the three remaining loyal ones were transferred to the Aitutaki Church roll.²² The Aitutaki Church was dedicated on June 6, 1914.²³ Henry and Olive Streeter settled on Mangaia Island in mid-1914 and operated an elementary school but malaria so weakened them that they had to return to Australia.²⁴ The Sterlings set up a mission home on Mauke Island in 1915.²⁵ A member of the Aitutaki Church, Howard Strickland, began mission work on Manihiki Atoll in 1916²⁶ and the following year Iti Strickland was successful in raising up a church of twenty-two adults on Pukapuka Atoll.²⁷ Their worship center was dedicated on July 18, 1919.²⁸ Rakahanga Atoll was pioneered in 1921 by Koteka, a former London Missionary Society minister.²⁹ In the same year, a company of believers was reported to be meeting regularly on Penryn Atoll.³⁰ In 1925, a few individuals from Palmerston Island came to Avarua, Rarotonga, to be baptized and then returned to their island where forty people had formed a Sabbath School.³¹

In the same year one member of this group, Taenga Marsters, went to Suvarrow Atoll and started a Sabbath School.³²

By 1930, most of the scattered Cook Islands had been entered by SDA missionaries. After the first twenty years, with efforts centered chiefly on Rarotonga, there was only one church and ten loyal baptized members to report.³³ In 1931 the statistical report was more promising with six churches and 103 baptized members.³⁴

The Cook Islands Mission was always hamstrung without a boat of its own. In 1930 superintendent Harold Wicks lamented that inter-island communication was so poor that when he toured only a stopover of a few hours was made by the trading vessel. If he remained at any island, he would have to stay perhaps six months before a ship returned, other areas of his parish languishing in the meantime. Pukapuka Atoll and Palmerston Island, he reported, had not been visited for a decade. He regretted, too, the failure to train nationals who could minister to their own culture.³⁵ Only one, Tauraki, was listed as a licensed fellow worker.³⁶

Missionary Arthur Jacobson determined to redress the shortage of national workers by returning to the educational model. The Titikaveka Church had revived and in 1937 Jacobson secured an old coconut plantation nearby, the Papa'aroa Estate, at the water's edge on which to establish what became known as the Cook Islands Training School (later renamed the Cook Islands Missionary School). Classrooms, a chapel, dormitories for young men and women, teacher's quarters, headmaster's home, workshop, printing press shop, and copra drying sheds were constructed. No fees were charged, and no subsidies were sent from Australian headquarters. It was a self-supporting institution dependent on the sale of coconuts and oranges. The students fished and grew tomatoes to finance their personal needs.³⁷ Morning classes were instruction in homiletics, Bible studies, English, history, and singing.³⁸ Some of the headmasters who succeeded Jacobson were James Cormack, Nelson Palmer, and Donald Watson. Nationals such as Joseph Vati from Aitutaki and Henry Moala from Tonga assisted in the earliest years.³⁹

Vati was ordained in 1948, the first Cook Islander to receive ministerial credentials.⁴⁰ Other nationals, graduates of the Cook Islands Training School, joined the workforce and a few began to take leadership roles. When the Cook Islands Mission first listed departmental directors, in 1950, the name of Miriama Rau appeared as Sabbath School leader and that of Matamua Iti as Young People's and Missionary Volunteer leader.⁴¹ Missionary Volunteer meetings had been a feature of church gatherings in the Cook Islands from as early as 1930.⁴²

Social and Political Impact

In times of disaster the mission has responded with charitable aid. For example, when a devastating hurricane swept through the entire group in 1968 the mission organized the free distribution of a large shipment of clothing from New Zealand.⁴³

According to the *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* the Cook Islands Mission has maintained administrative headquarters at Titikaveka since 1954.⁴⁴ Presently there is an active radio ministry sponsored by the mission since 2006.⁴⁵ There are fifteen SDA churches scattered throughout the northern and southern Cook Islands with a total baptized membership of almost 1,000.⁴⁶ In recent decades many members have migrated to Australasia for employment opportunities and formed their own ethnic churches. In their homeland the education work remains the most enduring contribution to their society, the institution near Titikaveka experiencing a number of name changes since 1937. Today it functions under the name Papa'aroa High School and its seven teachers offer 120 students classes ranging from preschool to grade 10 academy level.⁴⁷

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