



Office Headquarters for the American Samoa District attached to the Trans-Pacific Union Mission.

Photo courtesy of Eileen Talatau.

American Samoa Mission

MILTON HOOK

Milton Hook, Ed.D. (Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, the United States). Hook retired in 1997 as a minister in the Greater Sydney Conference, Australia. An Australian by birth Hook has served the Church as a teacher at the elementary, academy and college levels, a missionary in Papua New Guinea, and as a local church pastor. In retirement he is a conjoint senior lecturer at Avondale College of Higher Education. He has authored *Flames Over Battle Creek*, *Avondale: Experiment on the Dora*, *Desmond Ford: Reformist Theologian*, *Gospel Revivalist* and the *Seventh-day Adventist Heritage Series*, and many magazine articles. He is married to Noeleen and has two sons and three grandchildren.

Territory and History

The Territory of American Samoa is located in the south-central Pacific Ocean, approximately 1,600 miles (2,600 kilometers) northeast of New Zealand and 2,200 miles (3,500 kilometers) southwest of Hawaii. American Samoa includes the inhabited islands of Tutuila, Tau, Olosega, Ofu, and Aunuu. Swains Island, an inhabited coral atoll about 280 miles (450 kilometers) northwest of Tutuila, was made a part of American Samoa in 1925. The capital of American Samoa is Pago Pago, on the island of Tutuila.¹

The London Missionary Society first arrived in the islands in the 1830s. More missionaries traveled to the islands as their influence spread to Tutuila and later the Manu'a Islands.²

By 1904 the islands of American Samoa were fully ceded to the United States. However, the U.S. Congress did not formally accept the deeds of cessation until Feb. 20, 1929. In 1951 control of the territory was transferred to the U.S. Department of the Interior. The U.S. government appointed a governor who had full powers to administer the territory. In 1977 Peter Coleman, a Samoan, became the territory's first elected governor. Since then all members of the territory's Fono have been elected by the citizens. In 1981 American Samoans for the first time elected a nonvoting delegate to serve a two-year term in the U.S. House of Representatives.³

Initial Contact by Seventh-day Adventists

On the first voyage of the *Pitcairn* the vessel called at Pago Pago harbor on Tutuila Island, Samoa. The missionaries spoke of it as a beautiful and calm haven. The *Pitcairn* arrived on April 27, 1891, and left on May 4. The crew used the time to repaint the bulwarks, sell \$25 worth of books, and reduce a fever that a chief was suffering.⁴ The local people would have to wait more than fifty years for Seventh-day Adventists to appoint a resident missionary.

A Small Beginning

During the Second World War there was a significant American military presence on Tutuila. In 1941 Seventh-day Adventists in Western Samoa began plans to open a mission at Pago Pago by sending someone from the Vailoa Training School.⁵ In March 1944 Church officials granted permission for the enterprise, and Tini Inu went to pioneer the territory, first conducting a Sabbath School and organizing a Missionary Volunteer Society.⁶ Reports were rare. Four years later Inu spoke of a married couple, Fuata'i and his wife, Faai'u, who were attending his Sabbath School.⁷ Eventually there were sufficient numbers to form a church. He translated *Training Light Bearers* and trained many to become lay evangelists.⁸ His mission enterprise, however, was not acknowledged in the *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* until 1952.⁹

Some Growth

Inu labored in Pago Pago for 14 years and was replaced by Sanika Afa'ese.¹⁰ At the time of the changeover in 1957, the Voice of Prophecy began to be aired on Pago Pago WVUV each Sunday at noon.¹¹ These programs resulted in some further converts.¹² Tesese Tasi replaced Afa'ese in 1961.¹³ His daughter Talafulu Tesese was assisted by Henry Moala from Beulah College, Tonga, in the operation of an elementary school for one hundred pupils. A second church, built by layman Pulou, was opened in Leone at the western end of the island.¹⁴ When Tasi transferred, he was replaced by Papu Siofele.¹⁵

Expatriate Leadership

Late in 1969 Graham Satchell was appointed to transfer from Sydney to Western Samoa,¹⁶ but was reassigned to be district director in American Samoa in order to arrange the logistics for a major evangelistic crusade conducted by George Burnside. Thirteen Samoan ministers joined the team in order to improve their technique in the American/Australian public evangelism style. The 1970 program extended from May 31 through June 24, with an average attendance of approximately four hundred individuals. They were mainly young people who understood English. There was a modest number of conversions.¹⁷ Satchell remained to nurture the interest until 1972, when he took an extended furlough to pursue further studies at Andrews University.¹⁸ He returned to Pago Pago in 1974 for a further term.¹⁹

Expansion to Manu'a Islands

In 1973 a group of ten students from Vailoa Training School, together with two teachers, defied some spirited opposition from the inhabitants of Olosega Island in the Manu'a group to conduct a public crusade. These islands were the domain of the London Missionary Society, and for a decade they had resisted entrance by a Seventh-day Adventist. Fereti Puni, the leader of the mission party, later reported that about three hundred came to listen to their meetings and a handful requested baptism. There was drama at the ceremony when a father rushed into the surf brandishing a stick to prevent his daughter's baptism. Nevertheless, three were baptized and another two were baptized later at Leone, Tutuila, in order to avoid further disturbances. The students then ran another crusade on neighboring Ofa Island. The reception from the community was friendlier, and two were baptized without incident.²⁰ Fuliese Maisa was appointed to be their resident minister and continue evangelism.²¹

Moving Toward National Leadership

Satchell was the first and last expatriate to be in sole charge of the American Samoa district. National leadership remained resident on Tutuila and Manu'a Islands, but expatriate leadership had overall control from Western Samoa. Later this was identified as a general criticism of the Seventh-day Adventist mission, members noticing that other denominations moved more rapidly to national leadership.²² By 1984, however, this situation was

rectified with the appointment of Ripine Rimoni to the presidency of the Samoan Mission.²³ In 1990 Rimoni led a small team of ministers in an evangelistic crusade in Pago Pago that resulted in seventy baptisms.²⁴

Rimoni was especially proud of the church building in Leone, Tutuila. With its high glass windows it made an impressive spectacle—in his opinion, the “best designed and appointed” church in the South Pacific Division. He observed also that American Samoa members had consistently contributed larger totals for tithes and offerings and therefore had subsidized the mission in Western Samoa. Members in American Samoa tended to drift to Hawaii or California because they held American passports.²⁵ Membership in 2020 was 1,787.²⁶

In 2016 American Samoa was detached from the Samoas-Tokelau Mission and became an attached region of the Trans Pacific Union Mission, which has its headquarters in Suva, Fiji. The first district director of the region was Pastor Uili Solofa, the former president of the Samoas-Tokelau Mission.²⁷ Current membership (2018) for the American Samoa district stands at 1,687.²⁸ The address of the American Samoa district office is PO Box 3850, Pago Pago 96799, American Samoa. Iakina Adventist Academy is located in Pago Pago.

The advent of television has changed the ethos of island society. It is more difficult to attract an audience for an evangelistic crusade. Instead, the appeal of television now takes precedence. For that reason the Adventist Church has established a branch of Hope Channel Oceania in American Samoa. The facility, dedicated on December 19, 2016, is located in the southwest area of Tutuila Island at Vaitogi.²⁹ Its success most likely will be dependent on a shift from foreign speakers to Samoan speakers.

Late in 2020 the South Pacific Division Executive Committee voted to recommend that American Samoa separate from the Samoa-Tokelau Mission.³⁰ Taking up the recommendation at the Trans-Pacific Union Mission Constituency Meetings, November 18-21, agreement was reached for American Samoa to increase its status from an attached field to a mission in its own right. They had met all the criteria for such an advance including an increase in tithes and offerings, new churches established and educational debt paid off. Elder Kenneth Fuliese was elected as the president of the American Samoa Mission. Prospects for future growth are promising.³¹

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