

# Mission to Paradise

*By Eugene England*

Stories and insights from the LDS mission England and his wife Charlotte served together in Samoa during the early years of their marriage.

Originally published: *BYU Studies* 38, no.1 (1999), 170–85.

WHEN WE WOKE early in the morning, we looked out on a world such as we had often yearned for but never quite imagined. We were at anchor inside the bay at Apia, Western Samoa, the waves sounding faintly on the reef behind us, the town’s main buildings reflecting white straight back at the barely risen sun, and beyond the town, every shade of green, solid mats of life growing even up the vertical cliffs to peaks that touched the bottoms of a few bright white clouds. I knew that at the top of the first hill beyond the town, at Vailima (Five Streams), was the whitewashed monument for the grave of Robert Louis Stevenson, who told the assembled Samoan chiefs when he built his home there in 1890, “I have chosen the land to be my land, the people to be my people, to live and die with,”

Charlotte and I were on a small steamer, the *Matua*, coming from Suva, Fiji, where we had waited ten days after the long voyage from San Francisco via Hawaii on the British liner *Oronsay*. We had been called as missionaries for the LDS Church in January 1954, just a month after our marriage, had left in June, and now, in July, had arrived, with two huge trunks, to spend two and a half years preaching to the “natives.”

When we first got our call, a personally signed letter from the Church’s President, David O. McKay, we had looked up Samoa in reference books at the University of Utah library and read about those natives in Margaret Mead’s *Coming of Age in Samoa*. We had learned about the London Missionary Society, an interdenominational group who Christianized Samoa in the 1830s and, with Catholics and Mormons, who came later, now made up the three largest religious groups; about the population of one hundred thousand on the three main islands and their economy—copra, cocoa, and subsistence farming; about the history of European intervention, which culminated in gunboat posturing between Germans and British and Americans in 1889 that was stopped only by an unexpected hurricane (we could now see, at the edge of the harbor, the rusted remains of one of the ships sunk sixty-five years before); about the loss of German influence after the Great War and the division into Western Samoa (the two largest islands), now a UN protectorate under New Zealand, and the Territory of American Samoa (one large island fifty miles to the east). And we had learned from Margaret Mead about the varieties of adolescent sex, including *moetolos*, the “sleep-crawlers”—unpopular boys who slipped into

the open-sided *fales* at night, essentially to rape young girls under the noses of their parents.

At eight o'clock, the white-suited president of the mission, Howard Stone, and his wife, Maureen, came on board to greet us. Most of his seventy missionaries were young, single elders who were assigned away from the Church headquarters at Pesega (near Apia, the only large town) to train and supervise Church leaders and to teach school in small villages; the fifteen single "sisters" were all kept at Pesega to teach at the large Church high school there. A married couple was a novelty, and President Stone was probably tempted to keep us in Pesega teaching school, but he had the courage to send us, after a few days rest, to Vaiola (Living Water), on the largest and most "primitive" island, Savai'i.

We were escorted by Elder Martin Stephens, a shy, tall, red-haired man whose job was driving trucks and tractors in building roads and helping build chapels, and Elder Leroy Nalder, a wiry little cowboy from Wyoming who supervised the Church plantation at Vaiola. We took a bus to the west end of Upolu, then a ferry seven miles across to Savai'a, where a huge (480 pounds we learned later), scowling police official, in a starched, white uniform and backed by two aides, met us at the pier and asked for our papers—which he proceeded to confiscate while sternly speaking to us in rapid, incomprehensible Samoan. The elders let us squirm awhile, even told us we'd have to go to the police station, then all three officials—and also the elders—broke up laughing.

The policeman handed back our papers and, in impeccable English, invited us to his home for dinner. There, while he devoured plates of fruit and whole baked pigeons, we learned that this man, Fitisemanu, was of the Samoan royalty but had attended the Church's Pesega school as a teenager and had become a Mormon. After college in New Zealand, he had been exiled to this minor post because the state religion was Protestant and it would be unacceptable for a Mormon to remain in royal circles, but he continued to educate himself and served the Church as a translator (I remembered seeing his credit inside the cover for having translated the Pearl of Great Price).

We talked for an hour, sitting on his veranda and looking out through the tall palms that leaned over the calm lagoon, discussing local Church problems and Samoan culture (he laughed about Margaret Mead, who didn't learn the language and therefore wasn't trusted, and was, in fact, fed outrageous stories—about such things as *moetolos*—that ended up as sober facts in her book). We discussed the exciting ideas about the universe revealed to Joseph Smith in the Pearl of Great Price—that God did not create the world out of nothing but from matter and energy that have existed forever, just as our own essential selves have; that with God's redemptive love and guidance we can increase in intelligence and goodness, as God himself has done, until we become like him; indeed, that his purpose, his "work and glory," is to bring to pass our immortality and eternal life. We talked about the revelation that Adam and Eve did not ruin God's plan in the garden but understood and fulfilled God's purposes by choosing to partake of the tree of knowledge and thus to depart an innocent but static paradise and begin to progress through making and overcoming mistakes, with the aid of God's love expressed through the teachings and life and death of Christ. He read to me, in Samoan and then English, his favorite

passage, where Eve exclaims to Adam: “Were it not for our transgression we never should have had seed, and never should have known good and evil, and the joy of our redemption” (Moses 5:11).

Then the elders from Vaiola arrived with horses to take us up the four-mile trail, and we were soon immersed for the first time in old-growth jungle, with its huge, dense canopy of life and constant smell of decay. The elders told us the Samoan names of the various ferns and orchids and banyan trees and lizards and bats and wild pigs and had us repeat them—*pili*, *pua’a*, *pe’a vao*. We passed a few small plots of banana trees and elephant-ear-shaped taro plants, islands cut out from jungle along the edge of the road, and just below the village we passed through the large plantation of coconut palms, evenly spaced, all of them sixty feet high, with a clipped lawn underneath for ease in the harvesting of the soccer-ball-sized nuts.

We settled into one room of an ancient wood-frame house (which also contained four elders in two other bedrooms) and the next week began teaching school at opposite ends of the one-room, open-sided frame church in the center of the circular village. Charlotte taught nine fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds, and I had fourteen slightly younger students (while Samoan teachers taught the younger children in the native-style *fales* that made a huge circle around the central village green, or *malae*). Our schedule quickly settled into routine: up at 5:30, private Book of Mormon study until 6:30, then language class with the elders until 7:30, breakfast and then school assembly, with patriotic song and prayer, at 8:00, then class periods (religion, arithmetic, reading, English grammar, lunch, spelling, health and physical education, voluntary study period) until 3:00, lesson preparation for next day and private language study until 6:00, supper—and the evening for training meetings with school teachers and Church leaders and some private reading.

Saturdays we often traveled by horseback down to the coast to visit branches of the Church, encouraging members and giving our little memorized talks in Samoan at the Sunday meetings. On these trips, I became friends, through occasional timid visits, with Fitisemanu, and Charlotte was adopted by A’iga, the wife of the president of the branch along the coast in Falemua, where we most often stayed. Her arm was swollen to a foot in diameter with elephantiasis, and she spoke no English but seemed to delight in serving Charlotte food, opening her face to her, and holding Charlotte’s hand in her own enlarged one in the long evenings as we tried to speak our few Samoan sentences with her. One Sunday afternoon, as we rode in the back of a truck along the coast, I was hit in the back of the head by a rock thrown from the jungle.

Vaiola is situated at the island’s center on a tract of about two hundred acres that was given to the Church by an early convert who was a landowning chief, or *matasi*; it had been developed in the 1920s as a Church school and plantation, with a new-built village to house the plantation workers, who would also board pupils from all over the island for the school terms. Only a mile away was an ancient village, Tapu’ele’ele, whose residents, passing occasionally on their way to the coast, seemed fierce and alien. They were nearly all tattooed in the traditional way—exfoliating plant designs across the back and down the legs and sometimes abstract marks on the face, a custom going out of favor with the Mormons.

Elder Phillip Hanks, our school principal as well as supervising elder, had been invited to teach the gospel to a young woman in Tapu'ele'ele who had married the brother of one of our teachers. We went with him to sit cross-legged on the mats placed over the rock foundation of the open-sided *fale* and struggled to follow the language we were still learning very slowly because we taught our classes in English. The young woman, Si'usi'u, was demure, fed us lavishly, and—it seemed to Charlotte and me—listened only politely. But one Saturday we were invited to her baptism.

I led Charlotte on horseback along the muddy trail, the elders and Kalosi Pe'a, president of the Savai'i district, walking ahead. We saw a fruit-eating bat or “flying fox” hanging upside-down in a tree. It was as big as a cat, with orange-brown fur. We passed through the village in the evening quiet, with a few swallows still darting through the circle of open houses, from one of which came Si'usi'u, in a plain white dress with a double-blossomed, scarlet hibiscus behind her ear, followed by her relatives and many curious friends. We left the horse and walked down into a steep ravine and up along a stream to a large pool surrounded on three sides by fifty-foot rock walls, with flowered vines looping down each cliff face from the jungle that rose at the top, except where the stream came over the cliff in a waterfall. Elder Hanks went behind some rocks to change into white, then led us, standing on the rock ledges, in a hymn, and President Kalosi gave a short talk on the gift of the Holy Ghost.

By now it was dusk, the sun down but still lighting the clouds with orange and purple. After Elder Hanks helped Si'usi'u wade out into the pool and baptized her, she turned and swam out to the small waterfall. A friend threw her a huge round lemon from the bank, and she used it to wash her hair.

As Christmas approached, we found ourselves more and more accepted (we had a daily “clinic” with our sparse first-aid supplies, mainly treating cuts and bruises and lots of boils) and planned a school Christmas party. Charlotte made a Christmas tree for the chapel-school from a well-shaped breadfruit tree branch stuck upright in a sturdy round section of banana tree trunk. We stripped off the breadfruit leaves to make room for decorations made from crepe paper and star and angel shapes cut from tin can lids.

A week before Christmas I developed a little sore on my right ring finger, and it seemed to be irritated by the dust from the chalk I used each day until it spread into an open wound over most of the side of the finger. I didn't pay much attention, just disinfected it and wrapped it in gauze, but one morning while Charlotte changed the wrapping, she noticed that there were red streaks up along my veins to the lymph node in my armpit—blood poisoning. The elders gave me a priesthood blessing, using consecrated olive oil; I invited a local native healer in, and she treated the wound with coconut oil and various herbs; and Charlotte fasted for three days and prayed over me. The redness slowly withdrew, and the hand was healing when we went into Pesega for Christmas and were sent to a doctor in Apia, who gave me a penicillin shot. About twice a year (at no regular times) for the forty-five years since then, the finger has developed tiny, irritating sores, and I remember the wound and the healing.

In the missionwide meetings at Christmastime, President Stone gave us new assignments that separated us for a month—Charlotte to work with a sister missionary tracking down inactive members near Apia and I to live with a supervising elder in Sauniatu, where there was another Church village, plantation, and school, and travel all around the coast of Upolu, instructing Church leaders. On one extended trip, we had to travel by large outrigger canoe around the impassable cliffs on the far eastern end of the island. Two young members of the local Church branch carried us through the surf out to the canoe (one of the customs of exaggerated respect that resulted when the original Christian missionaries established themselves at parallel rank with the Samoan chiefs). The crew, who all seemed very pleased with the chance to convey heavy-tipping *palagis* (white men), included a steersman and four rowers, one of whom was totally blind.

We stayed three days in the *fale* of a branch president at Fagaloa, on the extreme western tip of Upolu, while a huge tropical storm passed through. I spent the time copying in my journal the long list of Old Testament prophecies concerning Christ that were listed in the back of an ancient Protestant Bible that had been given to the branch president's grandfather by one of the first Mormon missionaries.

As we walked the narrow trail along the southern coast that would take us from the more isolated eastern section to the road where we could catch a bus around to Apia, we occasionally encountered groups of teenage girls wearing only the traditional waist-high *lavalavas*. We chastely stood looking out into the jungle as they passed, giggling, behind us. At midday a young boy passed, and my companion asked him, "*Pe mafai, sina niu?*" The boy nodded, quickly braided a vine into a loop that he twisted around his feet to hold them together at the ankles, and hoisted himself in a hopping motion straight up an eighty-foot coconut palm—arms around the trunk (with machete in one hand) and feet braced straight in and held from slipping apart by the loop. He chopped out two green coconuts from the cluster just under the fronds, hopped back down, sliced open the tops of the coconuts with his machete, handed them to us, and was on his way in less than two minutes. Holding the large nuts in both hands, we drank that unique, slightly milky liquid that fills the coconut before the familiar white meat actually forms—and that tastes a little like almonds, like ginger ale, like nothing else—until we were full.

A few days later, we were traveling back to Apia by bus from Sauniatu to report to President Stone. As the bus stopped briefly in Fagaloa, I heard my name called and saw that Charlotte and her companion were sitting on the mats in an open *fale* across the road. I opened the window and called back to her, and she ran out to the road and stood, quite still, without waving, as the bus pulled slowly away along the road in a long curve to the left so I could see her for several minutes.

In January, President David O. McKay and Sister McKay visited Samoa—the first time a General Authority had been there since he had come himself as a young Apostle on his world tour in 1921 and had made a great prophecy at Sauniatu about the future success of the Church in Samoa (later commemorated with a stone monument that stood between our missionary *fale* and the pool where we bathed). This time he was greeted by government figures and royalty, who gathered in the huge metal-roofed *fale* near the mission home, together with all our Samoan Church

leaders, to give him a *fesilafa'iga fa'atupu*, a formal *kava* ceremony originally designed for visiting kings. The various dignitaries welcomed him with speeches (especially long, highly allusive orations by their “talking chiefs”—men appointed and trained in traditional myths and language and diplomacy), followed by the drinking in turn of traditional libations, presided over by a young maiden who dispensed the tangy, slightly anesthetic drink made from the ‘ava plant’s root.

President McKay responded by admiring the participants’ ornate costumes and traditions and poetic, stylized speeches and then reminding them that there was something greater—their Christian faith and callings. We young missionaries were confused by the graciousness with which the President drank the *kava*, imitating the ceremonial flourish of pouring a few drops on the ground while expressing thanks, and later at the feast as he drank the Samoan “cocoa”—both of these native drinks had seemed to us questionable under the Church’s Word of Wisdom. (Fitisemanu expressed his opinion, with scholastic fervor, that there was no need for concern but admitted, on my prodding, that the “cocoa” was extremely effective in helping fishermen stay awake all night.)

We had three days of conferences and testimony meetings with President McKay and then bid him farewell with a huge traditional Samoan gift-giving ceremony, where each Church congregation paraded across the school’s playground their variety of gifts, most prominently the huge, precious, finely woven and decorated mats called *‘ietoga* and then piled them at his feet. Each group also sang or danced, and when one district presidency, three venerable men in full traditional costume, moved out in the remarkable Samoan style of individualistic movements of hands and feet that gathered slowly to a crescendo of joyful twists and body slaps, I was tempted to join them and felt perhaps President McKay, whose feet I could see keeping rhythm, was also tempted.

At the end of the ceremony, he arose and picked up two of the gifts, a carved, six-foot staff and a large ceremonial fly whisk, woven of coconut husk string, both of which he had seen the talking chiefs use in the *kava* ceremony. He stood forth holding the staff before him, swung the whisk over his shoulder in the precise ceremonial fashion, and proceeded to thank and bless the people. He ended with a promise that they would before long have a temple they could go to for sacred instruction and ordinances that would exalt them as eternally married husbands and wives and potential gods.

Charlotte and I were able to spend the next six months together, assigned to teach Church leaders in two separate villages on Upolu. We were away from other missionaries for the first time and from anyone who spoke English, and we felt we had divine help as we learned Samoan quickly by the direct method—sitting in the members’ *fales*, pointing to things, and asking questions. We prayed and studied and improvised ways to help the local members teach each other, conduct meetings, and serve the needs of everyone, including the children. We found what seemed an automatic generosity and often an emotional directness and openness in the people, especially, it appeared, in those who were still relatively distant from *palagi* influence. Such uninhibited, passionate life, with all feelings quite close to the surface when we had gained trust, was deeply at odds with our own Utah Mormon, Anglo-

Saxon upbringing and was troubling, frightening—and sometimes joyful to the point of intoxication.

In Vailu'utai, I helped the young men put up a basketball standard and taught them how to play (complicated by their occasionally having to hold their *lavalavas* on with one hand while dribbling with the other on a fast break). Charlotte designed wire and crepe paper petals to frame each child's face as they stood at the front of the chapel, like a carefully tended garden (including even a crepe paper white picket fence), and sang to their parents, under a huge sign she made, "*O 'ai e sili 'i le malo o le lagi?*" (Who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?). But once we were asked to conduct a funeral for a baby that had died for no apparent reason and seemed to us, when we saw it simply laid on a mat, to have a large black bruise on its head, with a green fungus beginning to cover it. Then one day we heard a scream, and I rushed out of our house to see a man chasing a child with a huge rock lifted in both hands. I ran in front of him and saw his eyes appear to come back from madness as he barely stopped himself from smashing me in the head with the rock and then dissolved into tears and apologies, which went on into the evening, including his throwing a huge, ostentatious feast for us.

When we had first received our call, we had been students at the University of Utah, taking basic courses, sometimes together, in music and anthropology and political science and golf. In some of our courses, we had discussed cultural relativism in general and specifically the ethics of intruding on other cultures with our American values and customs or particular religious doctrines and prescriptions. When we got our call and read Margaret Mead, we wondered together how we might avoid the various forms of "imperialism" and were determined to be very careful. And we did find, in Samoa, there were severe temptations toward racism and classism, as well as garden variety cultural snobbery. We matter-of-factly allowed ourselves, ignorant twenty-year-olds, to be addressed in the higher form of Samoan traditionally reserved for chiefs and distinguished elders, to be given the chief seats at feasts and served delicacies—and to be carried through the surf to a canoe. We were part of conversations that discussed the "curse" that was on these native peoples, whom we believed (and found confirmation in the origin myths they shared with us about ancestors coming from the east and living only on the cool and high peaks like those they came from) were descended from the Book of Mormon peoples of America—and even found ourselves occasionally stereotyping the Samoans as unambitious or childlike or easily angered. We were much sobered when people we tried to encourage in difficult new tasks and skills sometimes reflected these ingrained notions back to us, excusing themselves as "unable" because they were "Lamanites "

We came to a decision together to stop sending our clothes out to be washed by members because this missionary custom seemed, especially the way it was often just assumed to be the Samoans' duty, to perpetuate the class structure imposed by the first white men. When we tried to explain our decision, we were severely criticized for being self-righteous (which we probably were) and went tearfully to a leader of the Samoan work missionaries who had been especially gracious and helpful to us, Lafi Toelupe. He shared with us the story of his own father, who had

served as a missionary for the Church (called to take his family far from his home and serve as the president of a weak congregation there) for over forty years—with no opportunity to build any economic security for his family and while enduring much patronizing and even degrading racial comments from visiting white supervisors. And he counseled patience, pointing to his own somewhat better life as a Church missionary, called to teach music and translate for visiting authorities like President McKay and be a respected leader of native missionaries—and good friend to people like us.

We went away somewhat ashamed and began to look more closely at what the Church influence was doing: The Samoan work missionaries, under Lafi's guidance, were doing proselyting in the evenings, with much success. Elders who used racial stereotypes in one sentence could express profound love and gratitude for specific Samoans in the next. But especially we began to see that teaching new values and even cultural structures could be beneficial rather than imperialistic. We were first embarrassed somewhat by the constant harping on getting the many young Samoan couples who lived in traditional common-law marriages to be "legal," that is, to submit to a formal civil ceremony performed by a supervising elder. This was expressly a requirement before they could be baptized and sometimes involved hasty efforts toward what looked almost like shotgun weddings. But most often we found that teaching respect for marriage as a formal, public commitment, with ongoing responsibilities, covenanted to and witnessed by a community of loving family and friends who would work to help those duties be fulfilled, did in fact make for more loving and nurturing relationships between the couple and with their children. We became convinced that some things *were* universal, that we weren't perfect in sorting them out (we realized, with a rueful laugh, that we had joined the elders in teaching the members to celebrate the Fourth of July and that we weren't nearly as keen to learn to play cricket as we expected them to be about basketball), but that the gospel, carefully attended to, helped us do so.

In September, when we told President Stone that Charlotte was two months pregnant, we were transferred to American Samoa, where he felt medical care with a Hungarian obstetrician who had been trained in the States would be best for Charlotte. We were sent to live in the Church village of Mapusaga, a few miles inland from the deep, sheltered U.S. naval port at Pago Pago, and to serve as the first full-time proselyting missionaries in Samoa for many years. Just before Christmas, we began teaching a woman named Taligū E'e, who had Mormon relatives and who had agreed to meet us each Wednesday afternoon. We would walk to her *fale* and teach her one of the lessons from the systematic missionary teaching guide—"the Apostasy," "the Restoration," "redemption from sin through the Atonement," and so on. She would listen politely and impassively, her eyes looking down at the mats we sat on, and after we finished she would serve us the meal she had prepared.

One Wednesday we taught Taligū the plan of salvation lesson. We told her how we had all once lived with God and had chosen to come to earth with Christ, who had offered himself as our Savior, and how important it was to follow him if we knew him. Then I told her how, by doing temple work, we could help those who had died without knowing Christ but who were now being taught about him in the



spirit world. Her head came up as I told this story. Timidly she asked about her own ancestors who lived before Christian missionaries came to Samoa: she had believed they must be damned because they did not know Christ and were not baptized.

I repeated what I realized right then was indeed the gospel, the Good News. I assured her that God loves everyone equally who comes to earth and had provided a way for all, including her ancestors, to come to him. She kept her eyes on my face, and they slowly filled with tears. I sensed that a deep sorrow, a long-standing wound, was being healed in her, and I kept repeating, “*O le Atua, alofa tele ia ‘i latou uma lava?*” which I hoped adequately conveyed, “God really loves them all.”

Taligū was baptized the day after we left Samoa. We had been transferred, because of divine inspiration to President Stone I believe, to Hawaii for our baby to be born where there were medical facilities that turned out to be needed to save Charlotte’s life in her very difficult delivery. We have heard that Taligū became the matriarch of a great Church family in Samoa, and we trust that she has done the saving work for her ancestors in the temple that was built, in fulfillment of President McKay’s promise, a few years later in New Zealand.

We left on January 29, 1956, on the first scheduled airline flight from the new airport near Mapusaga. We watched the rich jungle drop below us, then the quiet water inside the reef surrounding much of Tutuila. Charlotte, eight months pregnant, couldn’t bear to sit in her narrow seat, so I made a bed for her across two empty seats at the back of the plane and then watched through the window as we passed high over Upolu and Savai’i heading east to the first stop in Fiji. I thought with joy and soberness of the life in Charlotte and the life being born in Taligu and the seeds of life and death, of good and evil, growing in me.

© 2010 Eugene England Foundation. All rights reserved.

How to cite this essay: Eugene England, “Mission to Paradise,” *BYU Studies* 38, no.1 (1999): 170–85.

The Eugene England Foundation expects website users to follow carefully Fair Use of Copyrighted Materials guidelines. Please contact [www.eugeneengland.org](http://www.eugeneengland.org) website administrators for questions or support, to submit or view thoughtful and responsible comments, and to donate to the nonprofit Eugene England Foundation.