

Booklet

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**A LATE EXPANSION
EARLY ADVENTISM IN KIRIBATI AND TUVALU**

By Milton Hook



Seventh-day Adventist Heritage Series

A LATE EXPANSION

Early Adventism in Kiribati and Tuvalu

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SDA Heritage Series: Entry into the Australian Colonies
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Milton Hook is the author of "Flames Over Battle Creek", a brief history of the early days at the Review and Herald Publishing Association as seen through the eyes of George Amadon, printer's foreman at the institution. Dr Hook's doctoral dissertation researched the pioneering years of the Avondale School, 1894 to 1900, and he has published some of these findings.

He spent three years as a mission director in Papua New Guinea. His teaching years include primary, secondary and college level experience, especially in Bible subjects, in Australia, New Zealand and America. He is an ordained minister, married and the father of two sons.

He would welcome any information which may enhance the content of this series.

When the PITCAIRN was sailing the Pacific the Kiribati and Tuvalu Islands were never visited by the Adventist missionaries. Other American Protestant missionaries had already entered the Kiribati Islands from the north and the London Missionary Society had penetrated from their Samoan and Cook Island bases to the south-east. French Roman Catholic missionaries had also established themselves in the Kiribati Islands. The Adventist mission, by comparison with other church groups and with Adventist entrance elsewhere in the Pacific, was a latecomer to these islands.

The Kiribati Islands straddle the equator like scattered pearls awash. The inhabitants are mainly Micronesians. To the south lie the smaller Tuvalu group inhabited by Polynesians. There is no similarity between the languages but it is an amiable meeting of the two races who agreeably accepted British protection when they first became known to the Western world. The atolls present a pastel picture of misty-blue skies, lime-green fronds, pale yellow sands and shimmering silver-grey twilights.

It is a curious fact that English-speaking Adventist missionaries left the Kiribati and Tuvalu Islands alone and persisted against great odds in French and German territories instead. It was, of course, more difficult to enter as a stranger into a close-knit but sparse population, especially when other mission groups were already settled. Furthermore, the islands themselves are simply low-lying coral atolls, less than four metres above sea level and bereft of good soil for fruit and vegetable cultivation. Any missionary wishing to be self-supporting would have a hard time.

Aboard ship in 1919 Pastor Septimus Carr once made the acquaintance of a London Missionary Society individual who told of his ordeals in the group. He had tried growing a garden in a rubbish heap but the crabs ate everything as soon as it germinated. He then imported thirty bags of soil, with some wire-netting to keep out the crabs, and made a second attempt. It was more successful. Coal, also, had to be imported for cooking purposes because firewood was at a premium. Indeed, fuel was so scarce that the nationals often ate their fish raw.

The roots of the Adventist mission in the Kiribati and Tuvalu group began in Samoa. A handful of Tuvalu islanders attended the Vailoa Training School in the 1930's and were baptised there. One of these students was Samuelu Vailopa. Church administrators hoped that such men would spearhead the Adventist mission in their home islands. But then the war zone extended into their territory and plans had to be shelved.

When hostilities abated about 1944, Samuelu left Samoa and returned to his Tuvalu homeland to begin mission work. He settled on Nui atoll. He was married to a local girl, Sieni. Keeping in touch with Raimund Reye back in Samoa, the news was eventually relayed that his efforts to start a little mission school on Nui were frustrated by the local council.

Local authorities forced Samuelu to discontinue his efforts and Reye tried to think of alternative avenues to begin the mission. In 1945 Reye wrote to headquarters back in Australia suggesting, "Pastor Palmer could interview the High Commissioner for the Pacific regarding the possibility of our opening up work in the group." Reye also recommended Tavita Niu, a former student at Vailoa who had been baptised by Reye in 1935, should go from Samoa as a paid missionary to Tuvalu.

Tavita's father, Niu, was married to a Samoan woman, Taelo. They were all members of the Apia Church, father Niu serving as a deacon and lay-preacher. He was a Tuvaluan and owned land on

his native island of Nukulailai as well as on Funafuti and Nukufetau. His son, Tavita, at the time was stationed at Vaialele, Samoa, with his wife, Fetu, and little baby, working as the local missionary. Reye suggested they all embark for the Tuvalu group where father Niu could install Tavita as trustee of his land. Tavita would then stay on as the missionary and Niu could return to Samoa. With some variations these plans came to fruition some fifteen months later.

In the meantime some negotiations were apparently made with the Western Pacific High Commissioner's office. There, a Mr Maud, who knew something of the Adventist work in Samoa, proved to be enthusiastic about the Adventists starting work in the Kiribati and Tuvalu groups. He knew of a young missionary, in Samoa, John Howse, and no doubt suggested he be the pioneer. However, Howse was unable to go immediately. Instead, the plans which Reye had made for sending Tavita Niu and family were put into operation. By October 1946 they were on Funafuti Island and there, soon after, started a little Sabbath School.

Church headquarters had not forgotten the invitation from the High Commissioner's office to establish an official base for mission work. Howse was voted to pioneer the chain of islands and told to study marine navigation. The harbour-master at Lyttleton Harbour, Christchurch, gave him free lessons throughout 1946. In the meantime a sturdy boat was being built in Sydney at the Lars Halvorsen shipyards. It had to be designed especially for deep sea and long distance trips rather than coastal hugging. Tom and Edith Howse, parents of John and veteran missionaries themselves in the Pacific, named it FETU-AO, a Samoan name meaning "Morning Star". It was dedicated in Sydney. On April 10, 1947, John set out for the Kiribati and Tuvalu Islands, via Fiji, where he had left his family in the care of fellow missionaries.

Howse's family stayed in Fiji during the initial exploratory voyage northwards in June 1947. He returned for them in September. A government official of the island Education Department, Mr Hard, joined the epic maiden voyage. This precedent of giving passage to

others became the rule for Howse. He was pioneering new territory for his mission against great odds. The Tuvaluans had decreed a closed ordinance which forbade the intrusion of further Christian groups. Only indigenous people like Samuelu and Tavita could stay and exert an influence. Howse, therefore, seized every excuse to visit the various atolls to advertise his presence. He would ferry government officers, nuns and other missionaries without charge. Periodically he would go west to Ocean Island to get supplies and mail for himself and others. His friendship and helpfulness won respect among islanders and Europeans alike.

Leaving Tavita Niu on Funafuti, Howse established his base on Abemama, October 6, 1947. He was situated just north of the equator. A few months after arrival they started a school for about twenty pupils in a make-shift building. Thirteen-year-old Joan Howse taught the younger students and her mother, Merle, instructed the older ones. A proper school building was opened and dedicated on May 5, 1949. Samuelu was then transferred from his beleaguered position on Nui to teach at Abemama.

Apart from the educational work at Abemama a Sabbath School of about twenty-five members was established on July 10, 1948. The first baptism, on Sabbath, January 29, 1949, was comprised of folk mainly from this group. Those who joined the church at this time were Manuira and his wife, Te Baoti; Te Bao and his wife, Arataki; as well as Samasoni (Samson), one of Howse's boat assistants from Tuvalu. Te Bao later became the first indigenous Adventist minister of the Kiribati Islands.

A second baptism was held nearly two months later, on March 22, 1949, at Funafuti. Among the seven candidates were former London Missionary Society members who became Seventh-day Adventists as a result of the Niu family witness. These included Niu's brother, Apeti; Apeti's wife, Alasi; and Luteru and his wife, Leitu, together with their son, Kusi Luteru. Kusi later became the first Tuvaluan to be ordained as a Seventh-day Adventist minister. Their baptism was a very quiet affair at five o'clock one Tuesday morning. Howse was

delighted to ruffle the calm lagoon but not the feelings of other missionaries in the close-knit community.

Three more were baptised on Sabbath, January 7, 1950, at Abemama. They were To Binabina and his wife, Tekaua, as well as Howse's houseboy, Aniteru (Andrew) Bwenawa. To Binabina proved to be a stalwart worker for the mission. In 1949 he had translated Voice of Prophecy Bible lessons into Kiribatian and, like Te Bao, later became one of the first licensed Adventist ministers among his own people. He was an ex-government translator and magistrate. With his assistance Howse obtained permission to preach on five separate atolls.

Compared to the Kiribati Islands, Adventist mission work in the Tuvalu Islands was more difficult from the start. Eventually, persecution from local councils on Funafuti left Howse with no alternative but to transfer Tavita Niu and family to Abemama in 1949 and there at headquarters he taught school until 1955. But it left the fledgling company of believers at Funafuti dependant solely on Howse's periodic visits with the FETU-AO. However, the hard exterior of intolerance began to crack in the early 1950's when local council bans on extra schools were lifted.

The Howse family transferred in October 1950 and were replaced by Graeme and Zeta Miller. Miller itinerated in the FETU-AO exploring avenues for expanding the mission and nurturing the current interest.

Ken and Mildred Wright arrived early in 1951, direct from Avondale College graduation. Wright concentrated on building up the Abemama school which had about fifty pupils and operated on an annual budget of only \$30. He also built his own native materials home, installing a power generator, refrigerator, a full-length mirror and a flushing toilet- at that time rare novelties in the region. On Sunday afternoons the Wrights found themselves in a position as tour guides conducting curious islanders through their home. The locals would ask if they could press the toilet button just to see the

magical 'mod-con' work. They would stand in front of the mirror gazing in wonderment and disbelief, then collapse in a laughing heap on the floor. All would finish the tour with an ice-block treat from the fridge. Of course, in the tropics they had never seen, tasted, or imagined ice.

There were moments of drama for the budding missionaries. The Wright's two little boys, Lyndon and Geoff, were accustomed to romping in the rock pools at low-tide with their baby-sitter, Terita, an eleven-year-old girl. One evening, while dishes were being washed, two-year-old Geoff apparently toddled off to the beach unbeknown to parents or baby-sitter. The Wrights recall spotting Terita racing pell-mell towards the shore. She had heard a faint cry. Within seconds she retrieved the youngster by the ankles from the crashing high-tide. She sprinted back up the beach with his head down and briny spilling from his lungs. It was a close call.

Towards the end of their stay at Abemama Mildred was obliged to go to Tarawa for the birth of their third child. The FETU-AO left her there, ahead of time, with the doctor and two nurses and then tripped to Fiji. The day after little Jenny was born a steamer called at Tarawa heading south past Abemama. Mildred was determined to embark despite the risks so soon after the birth. Ken was radioed at Abemama and instructed to set a large fire on the shore to signal where the boat should stop. Arriving offshore, first Mildred and then baby Jenny were transferred into the ship's power-boat. Mildred has vivid memories of jumping at the critical moment when the bobbing craft rushed up towards her at the height of the swell. She spread-eagled at the bottom of the boat and rode the rapid descent into the trough unharmed. Near the reef they transferred into a waiting canoe and were finally carried ashore through the shallows in a cane chair.

By mid-1953 Frank and Jean Gifford had replaced the Wrights. Frank cared for the school. Their stay was brief. Late in the following year Wally Dawson and his wife, Mary, arrived to assume charge of the school. In the same year Alec and Shirley Thompson replaced

the Millers. The year 1954 marked the organisation of the first Seventh-day Adventist church in the island group. This was formed with twenty-two members at the school site, Kauma on Abemama. This headquarters property had been provided by To Binabina.

In 1955 a courageous pair of Samoan missionaries went to Funafuti to brave the opposition from other Christians. Their names were Siaosi Neru and his wife, Kesila, daughter of one of the early Samoan converts, Vaiea. This couple worked with great fortitude but tragedy struck when Kesila contracted a serious eye infection. Immediate treatment would have saved her eyesight, but the isolation of the islands proved to be catastrophic. As soon as possible she was taken to New Zealand for treatment but despite the best of medical help she was left totally blind.

Neru stayed on alone in Tuvalu for another year. In that time he visited some other islands in the group, notably Vaitupu. He told of journeying there with a fellow Adventist, Iere, who had relatives on the island. Each evening they would go out with a borrowed Tilley lamp, a small blackboard, some prophetic charts and their Bibles. They would study late into the night with interested families. Opposing forces repeatedly preached against them, insisting on all villagers meeting in the maneaba (community house) for social occasions simply as a distraction, and habitually inviting the best interests to evening meals and card-playing. Despite the frustrations Neru nurtured a growing thirst for more studies. Some of the locals requested a permanent teacher be sent to Vaitupu and one boy returned with Neru to the school on Funafuti.

Neru, however, eventually had to leave the Tuvalu group in mid-1958 to be with Kesila in Auckland. Her condition deteriorated and she passed away in February 1959.

The Kiribati Islands remain the most northerly group in the South Pacific Division. In 1968 mission headquarters were transferred further north from Abemama to Tarawa atoll. A glance at the membership graph reveals a steady climb to over one hundred

members in the first decade of mission work in the region. It has continued to rise with the exception of two or three set-backs.

Major sources for this booklet are the "Australasian Record", the 1947-50 diaries of John Howse, the Raimund Reye letter collection, and the author's personal collection of pioneer data.

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