

Chapter 22

A Beacon to the Isles of the Sea: How Education Brought Gospel Light to Kiribati

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Know ye not that I, the Lord your God, have created all men, and that I remember those who are upon the isles of the sea . . . and I bring forth my word unto the children of men, yea, even upon all the nations of the earth? —2 Nephi 29:7

In the central Pacific Ocean lie three chains of tropical atolls (narrow, coral islands which surround a lagoon) that make up the island nation of Kiribati.¹ These islands, also known as the Gilbert Islands, are primarily inhabited by Micronesians. Archaeological evidence suggests that Austronesian-speaking people first settled Kiribati prior to the first century AD. Groups of Polynesians intermingled with the I-Kiribati (natives of Kiribati) roughly six hundred years ago.² Today there are approximately 100,000 I-Kiribati inhabiting twenty of the thirty-three islands in the country.³ Roughly one third of the people live on the capital island of Tarawa.⁴ Nearly all federal government buildings and most schools are lo-

cated on Tarawa. Although the Kiribati populous is small, the islands span an area of water comparable in size with the continental United States. Kiribati straddles the equator with the 180-degree meridian line running directly through the center of the country. The climate remains hot year-round due to its central position in the Pacific Ocean. I-Kiribati rely on rainfall and land wells for drinking and bathing water. Even though rain falls regularly, the nation can experience droughts for several months.

Christianity came to Kiribati in the mid-1800s. The first Protestant missionaries to serve in Kiribati, Hiram Bingham Jr. (son of the renowned Hawaiian missionary, Hiram Bingham) and his wife, Minerva Clarissa, were sent by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions in 1857.⁵ Bingham organized a school and a church on the island of Abemama. His linguistic talents were evident as he soon learned the Kiribati language, created the Kiribati alphabet using Roman letters, compiled a Kiribati-English dictionary, and wrote several other

grammar books. Bingham explained his purpose for printing these books: “[That they] may in some measure assist in the acquisition of the language by such of his countrymen as may be called to preach Christ and Him crucified to a people sunken in darkness and superstition.”⁶ Bingham’s crowning linguistic achievement was his translation of the Bible.⁷

In later years, Samoan pastors from the London Missionary Society came to the Gilbert Islands and helped solidify Protestantism. The result was the formation of the Gilbert Islands Protestant Church (GIPC), currently called the Kiribati Protestant Church (KPC). While the Protestants established themselves firmly in the southern Gilbert Islands, the Catholics were obtaining strongholds in the northern Gilberts. As a result of these early missionary efforts, today the majority of I-Kiribati are either Catholic or KPC.⁸ Although Christianity has been in Kiribati since 1857, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was not officially established there until 1977. Though a complete history of the Latter-day Saints in Kiribati has not been written, this study provides the most detailed account to date. It summarizes the remarkable story of how education was the primary means through which the restored gospel was carried to the Republic of Kiribati.

Auriaria Kokoi Ataria School (AKAS)

The British government of the Gilbert Islands allowed only 5 to 7 percent of all Kiribati elementary-aged children to attend school. This was an attempt to prevent the general population from becoming educated. Only a certain number of jobs were available to the public in Kiribati, and the British chose to educate only enough people to fill the available positions.⁹ In this atmosphere of



Fig. 1. View of the Eita shoreline in 1972
Courtesy of George C. Puckett

government-curtailed education, Waitea Abiuta, an experienced teacher and administrator at a number of schools throughout the Gilbert Islands, established a small elementary school at Eita, Tarawa. He wanted to extend the opportunity for learning to a greater number of I-Kiribati children who would not otherwise have the chance. Abiuta named the elementary school Auriaria Kokoi Ataria School (AKAS) and became its inaugural principal. The school’s name reflected the historical and sacred significance of its location. The land on which Abiuta’s new school was built was part of a section known as Tabuarorae (the sacred place). Tradition held that this was where early settlers first landed and lived on Tarawa, and that a demigod named Auriaria had led them there. The place became the home of the early ancestral kings, Kokoi being the most famous.¹⁰ Thus Abiuta called his school Auriaria Kokoi Ataria for the god, Auriaria, the ancestral king, Kokoi, and for his own father, Ataria.¹¹ With the creation of AKAS in 1969, basic education became available to a few more I-Kiribati children. Between forty and seventy students who otherwise would not have had the opportunity for an elementary education, attended AKAS each year.¹² Under the leadership of Abiuta, students of AKAS were directed towards further education and a brighter future.

A Dream and a Prophecy

The people of Kiribati have a rich history of traditional superstitions and visions. Tabuarorae, where Abiuta built AKAS, had not been settled earlier because of its use anciently as a refuge for the people. It was the most sacred location in all of Kiribati.¹³ People feared that something terrible might happen because of Abiuta's bold move to settle this sacred land. In the same year he established his school, many people from Eita village (which borders Tabuarorae) had a dream about Abiuta's building a school at Tabuarorae. A woman of the village, Monika, told Abiuta about the dream. In the dream, a fire started and smoke went into the sky and all the people saw it. Monika went around the village voicing it to the elders saying, "You know we feel very sorry because there was a vision [that] we saw in our dream; we saw that place burning. There was a smoke that went from there to the sky."¹⁴ After discussing the meaning of the dream, the people of the village concluded that there was going to be trouble in that area. They assumed that it was likely that Abiuta and his family would all die because they put up construction on holy ground.

So Monika came to Abiuta's father and related the dream with a warning: "You must pack up your things and leave this place because [the] people in the village are talking about you. They saw a smoke from here that went into the sky." And then the old man said, "Oh, is that what you [came] to tell us?" "Yes," Monika responded, "Tell Waitea to pack up his things and leave the school. It's good to go back to [his native village]. It's better to evacuate the place. [The] people saw a very dangerous dream." However, Abiuta's father, a retired pastor and minister, also believed in visions, and he had a different interpretation of this one. To Monika he said:

Let's carefully consider [the dream]. If a smoke is seen from the earth to the sky, that is something. It is a vision concerning

the power of God. Anything that relates to heaven is from God. So if you will go back to the village now, tell your friends not to worry about us. We won't leave this place. We will stay and complete the school. The meaning of the dream is this—one day the power of God will be bestowed in this area and a lot of things . . . will happen which will be seen not only by the village, but by the islands of Kiribati and by the nearby countries. If something is seen in the sky, we [can] see it here from Kiribati, those in the Marshalls can see it; everyone sees it and that is related to the power of God. So tell your friends not to worry about us. Be happy. It is a good vision. It's a vision of something that will be established in this area, which will benefit the people of this country. It is not a minor project; it's a very big project, backed up with power, which we don't know.¹⁵

So the old woman went back to the village and she told her friends, "[Do not] worry about the dream. The old man doesn't want to go. He said that it is not a vision of trouble, it is a vision and a blessing from heaven."¹⁶

Not long after the dream, AKAS was registered with the Ministry of Education and officially opened. Coincidentally, at the precise time the ribbon-cutting was taking place—12 o'clock, July 21, 1969—the local news announced that Apollo 11 had landed on the moon. This prompted Abiuta to proclaim to the gathered



Fig. 2. *Maneaba*-style classroom at AKAS in 1972. The Kiribati word *maneaba* stands for meeting place or building. Courtesy of George C. Puckett

crowd: “We are very grateful today to officially open this school on the day of victory. This is the day of victory for the United States for they are the first human nation to land on the moon [with] Apollo 11. As this is a day of victory for the United States, so this school will also be backed by the States in the near future.” That was his prophecy. “We don’t build the school for us,” Abiuta continued. “We don’t build the school for us to own it. No, we build the school to prepare it for those who have the financial strength, who have the ability, who have the manpower, and who have the financial power to bring it up to the standard that we expect for this country. We are just human beings with limited ability, but we opened the campus for those who will come after us.”¹⁷ Abiuta had a vision of what the students of AKAS could become. He saw AKAS as the beginning of a promising future.

lotua Tune, a former AKAS student, recalled the following about Abiuta: “The vision of this place I didn’t realize until I left. This is the nesting place. We came and learned how to fly here and then we flew away and [eventually] came back. . . . I think that things were made known unto this man. He talked like a Mormon. He had a vision. And I think it really helped those of us that we should not think about going to another school.”¹⁸ Abiuta always said to his students, “You are digging through your mountain now. Once you get on the other side there will be a blessing.”¹⁹ This blessing of education that Abiuta constantly talked about, although just a seed of thought, slowly began to grow into reality.

Abiuta’s Letters to Liahona High School

The first contact with the Church from Kiribati was made by Abiuta in 1972.²⁰ Abiuta sent out letters to high schools throughout the world to such places as England, the United States, and various countries within the Pacific Rim.²¹ The letters outlined his intentions—he desired to have sixty students from the graduating class of his elementary school attend any high school

that would accept them. He reasoned that if these students did not have the opportunity to receive a secondary education in foreign lands, they would not be given the chance in Kiribati. Only a small percentage of students were accepted into the government schools of Kiribati; most, therefore, would not have the opportunity to further their education.²²

One of the letters Abiuta sent was to Liahona High School (a Church-owned and operated school in Tonga). George C. Puckett, superintendent of Church schools in Tonga, received and read the letter.²³ Because it dealt with nonmembers from another country, Puckett referred the letter to Alton L. Wade in Salt Lake City, Utah, who was the Church Educational System (CES) zone administrator for the Pacific Area.²⁴ Realizing these letters were from nonmembers, Wade put the letter aside. Then Puckett received another letter two or three months later and sent it along to the same fate. Finally, a third letter came from Abiuta. This time the letter was accompanied by thirty-five to forty personal letters from AKAS students who wrote and pleaded that they be granted the opportunity to attend high school once they graduated from elementary school. As Wade later described it, the sheer volume of correspondence received from Abiuta was impressive. So was his way with words. What finally stirred Wade into action, however, was the sincerity of the students’ letters

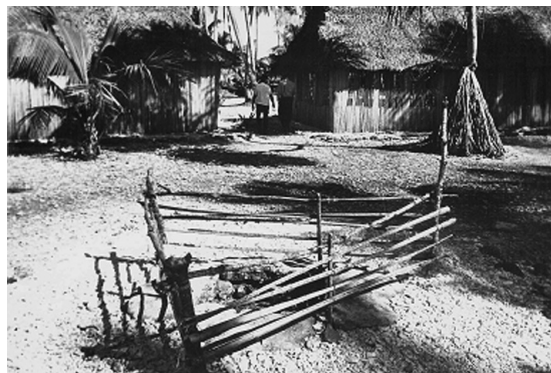


Fig. 3. The AKAS water well in 1972 with classroom structures in the background
Courtesy of George C. Puckett

and the impression that this might provide an opening for missionary work to begin in this new land.²⁵ Wade decided to take the letters to the office of Neal A. Maxwell, CES commissioner. They discussed the matter, and several questions arose, one of which was if these students were to attend the Church school what would happen to them if they became converted to the Church and got baptized? There were no known members of the Church in Kiribati at that time, so there was no guarantee that students would remain involved with the Church when they returned home after their high school education.²⁶

Although the letters from Abiuta were now being taken seriously, Maxwell and Wade concluded that an investigation would have to be made before bringing students to Liahona High School. Wade and Kenneth Beesley, associate commissioner of education, were sent to Tarawa to obtain firsthand information about the matter. Without prior notification, Wade made his way to AKAS and walked into one of the school buildings where he found Abiuta standing looking at the wall. When Abiuta turned around and saw Wade, he was startled, not knowing who he was. When Wade introduced himself, Abiuta embraced him and broke down in tears of gratitude. Wade looked over the school facilities and students. After observing the modest nature of the school and evaluating the circumstances of the students, he returned to Salt Lake City and reported his findings to the Commissioner's Office. The decision was made to authorize a few AKAS students to attend Liahona High School in Tonga for the 1973 school year.²⁷ Wade contacted George Puckett, directing him to go to Tarawa and, if in his judgment the situation looked right, to choose twelve students from AKAS to come to Liahona High School.²⁸ Though no one at AKAS was a member of the Church, Abiuta nonetheless asked Puckett to conduct a devotional service for the student body before he left. In so doing, Puckett gave the first Latter-day Saint sermon in the Gilbert Islands in December 1972 to AKAS students, their parents, and teachers. Puckett left the meeting with the clear impres-



Fig. 4. Waitea Abiuta and George Bates, during the visit of Bates and George C. Puckett to the Gilbert Islands in 1972 to select the first twelve students to attend Liahona High School in Tonga
Courtesy of George C. Puckett

sion that what was being undertaken would be the beginning of a great missionary work in Kiribati. The students Puckett selected held the key to unlocking the door to their native land so the gospel could be established in Kiribati.²⁹ Thus Abiuta's letters to Liahona High School opened the way for the gospel to be planted in the lives of a few I-Kiribati students.

Fiji Mission President Ebbie L. Davis's Involvement

When opened to missionary work, Kirabati would be a part of the Fiji Suva Mission. After corresponding with Alton Wade, Fiji mission

president Ebbie L. Davis visited Kiribati in September 1972.³⁰ President Davis remembers this experience vividly: "I went by and talked with [the] AKAS people, went home and contacted Liahona High School and they had already agreed to take twelve students."³¹

In a second visit to Kiribati the following summer, President Davis was accompanied by Elder John H. Groberg, a regional representative of the Twelve (forerunner to Area Seventy), to attempt to officially register the Church and open the country to missionary work.³² President Davis learned that government regulations would present an obstacle to registering the Church. Davis recalled: "If you did not have fifty people you could not organize a church. If you did not have a church you could not baptize anyone. That was fine—at this point we just wanted to do Christian service. I was really impressed with the people of Kiribati; they are a different sort of people. You could really feel there was something there; you had the right people at the right place."³³

During this second visit, President Davis traveled beyond the confines of AKAS to visit several towns elsewhere on the island of Tarawa. He envisioned a day when the Church would have a school on Tarawa similar to Liahona High School. President Davis recognized that the people needed secondary education opportunities, and he felt a desire to do all he could to make it happen.³⁴ He also wanted to find out if the Church could bring in proselyting missionaries. The government allowed this but insisted that they be I-Kiribati.³⁵ After understanding the options presented to him by the Kiribati government, President Davis did not doubt that the Church would one day establish itself there. However, government restrictions against expatriate missionaries made it clear that the I-Kiribati students enrolled at Liahona High School would be the key to bringing the gospel to their country.

Liahona High School: Tonga

The first group of twelve I-Kiribati students arrived in Tonga in February 1973, and special

attention was given to them from the start. After a few short months all twelve students desired baptism. Because the students were still dependent minors, written permission to authorize baptism had to be obtained from their parents. By May 1973 all twelve had obtained the required written permission from their parents and had been baptized.³⁶ Because of the first group's success, Liahona approved thirteen more students from Abiuta's AKAS to come the following year. These thirteen also joined the Church.³⁷ While the first groups of I-Kiribati students were attending school in Tonga, Elder Thomas S. Monson of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles visited Liahona High School. During Elder Monson's visit, Elder Groberg invited him to meet with the small body of I-Kiribati students. Following this meeting, Elders Monson and Groberg discussed the possibility of including the Gilbert Islands as part of the Fiji Suva Mission and opening the colony to missionary work if enough I-Kiribati eventually joined the Church and then returned to their homes on Tarawa.³⁸

It was clear that if the pattern of converting most of the incoming class of I-Kiribati continued, the requisite fifty I-Kiribati church members would soon be reached. As a step toward being able to achieve formal recognition of the Church in Kiribati, and with the approval of Elder Groberg and President Davis, in 1975 six young men from the original group of students were ordained elders and called to serve missions.³⁹ For their first six months, they were assigned to the Tongan Mission.⁴⁰ During that time an I-Kiribati family came to Liahona High School and was taught by the I-Kiribati missionaries. Eventually, the entire family was baptized, the first I-Kiribati converts taught by I-Kiribati missionaries.⁴¹ After six months of training and serving in Tonga, the elders were transferred to the Fiji Suva Mission on October 14, 1975. They were now under the direction of President Kenneth M. Palmer, who had succeeded President Davis.⁴² Liahona had done its part; the school had acted as a catalyst in laying the foundation for the future growth of the Church in Kiribati.

The Gospel Brought to Kiribati: A Blessing to the People

After giving his new I-Kiribati missionaries a short, five-day training experience, President Palmer accompanied them to Tarawa.⁴³ Since no previous dedicatory prayer had been offered for the Gilbert Islands, President Palmer was authorized to dedicate the land for the preaching of the gospel. On October 20, 1975, Palmer and the missionaries proceeded to a large islet of Tarawa called Betio, the site of a former World War II battle. Palmer believed that “this battle had fulfilled for Kiribati, and particularly Tarawa, what the Revolutionary War had done for America. . . . [It had] redeemed the land by the shedding of blood.”⁴⁴ At Betio, Palmer selected the cemetery as the appropriate location, knelt with the missionaries, and offered the dedicatory prayer. It contained great promises to the land and people of Kiribati:

We do earnestly pray that as people join the Church in this land, strong leaders may be raised up who will assume the administration of the Kingdom in this portion of Thy vineyard, and that among them will be Branch Presidents, Bishops, High Counselors, Stake Presidents and Missionaries. We seek that Thy Holy Spirit may move upon the government and leaders of these islands, that keys may be turned, and doors opened for the preaching of the gospel. Now, Holy Father, we do recognize our dependence on Thee. Of a surety we know that in these islands of the sea, as foretold by Thy servant Isaiah and other Prophets, there are many scattered members of Thy chosen people of the House of Israel who will be receptive to the message of Thy servants, even as sheep know the voice of their shepherd.⁴⁵

President Palmer’s dedicatory prayer officially opened the preaching of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ in the Gilberts.

The six elders commenced their labors, and within a few months a number of I-Kiribati joined the Church, including the one who set in motion the events that culminated in bringing the gospel

to Kiribati—Waitea Abiuta.⁴⁶ Shortly after Abiuta’s baptism, not surprisingly, President Palmer set him apart as the first branch president in Kiribati on January 24, 1976.⁴⁷ The six elders were aided in their missionary efforts by several expatriate missionaries sent to Kiribati by President Palmer.⁴⁸ Because the British government would not extend visa permits to expatriate missionaries, the foreign missionaries could only stay in the country for periods of up to one month. Then they had to return to Fiji or go home. The first expatriates to serve in Kiribati were the assistants to the Fiji Suva Mission president. Although their time was short in Kiribati, they carried with them experience and stability, and they brought motivation and success to the I-Kiribati missionaries.⁴⁹

The first groups of missionaries to labor in Kiribati experienced the persecution and trials common to missionaries throughout the world. They also underwent additional trials and difficulties because of their unusual circumstances. These young men were serving on their home island. One of their number, Elder Lotua Tune, recalled his feelings while serving on Tarawa: “As I look back, when we came, there were not very many members. There was a lot of persecution and mocking going on. At that time, the wearing of neck ties and long pants was [problematic]. That was probably one of the hardest things I had to face.”⁵⁰ Wearing high-quality apparel was difficult to do in Kiribati because it developed an atmosphere of inequality between the missionaries and the people. The people would mock the missionaries for wearing their dressy attire. Just making the decision to serve a mission under these trying circumstances was difficult. For some of the elders, the pressures and persecutions were too much, and they failed to complete their missions. But along with the trials came blessings. Tune added, “The mission was great. We only had one branch at the time. We had a lot of baptisms. Every Sunday we baptized—a lot!”⁵¹ Through the efforts of these early missionaries, many prominent leaders came to a knowledge of

the truth. These early members became the pioneers who laid a foundation for the Church in this remote corner of the earth.

The Miracle of Moroni

When the Church sent missionaries to Kiribati, AKAS became the center of Church activity. The school provided the buildings that were used for Church meetings; baptisms were performed in the ocean nearby. As in other parts of the world, opposition soon arose from the other denominations present in Kiribati. The opposing church leaders counseled parents of AKAS students to withdraw their children from enrollment in the school. Because AKAS's primary source of income was from student tuition, such opposition generated mounting financial difficulties for Abiuta, and he was forced to ask CES for help. Once again, Alton Wade was involved. He learned that Abiuta was seeking more than just financial aid; ultimately, he wanted the Church to entirely take over AKAS. After careful consideration, and understanding the important role of the school with the Church, Wade recommended that the CES provide enough temporary financial relief to sustain AKAS for the duration of the school year.⁵² He also sent a professional teacher to Tarawa to supervise the school.⁵³ Grant S. Howlett, his wife, Patricia, and their family were selected to go from Tonga.⁵⁴ Howlett was to become the new headmaster of AKAS. About this time, because of personal circumstances, Abiuta left the Church and almost all involvement with AKAS.⁵⁵ The future of Church involvement with the school still remained undecided.

Brother Wade made another trip to Kiribati to decide the matter. Because the school was the center of the Church in Kiribati, he felt obligated to maintain it. After receiving permission from Church President Spencer W. Kimball, CES officially took over AKAS in 1977 and leased the school's land for ninety-nine years.⁵⁶ The school fit well into the program of the Church, but Wade felt that it should be renamed. So, while he and his traveling companion, Paul Sorenson, were

sitting on a coconut stump on Tarawa and looking out into the ocean, he came up with the name Moroni Community School (later called Moroni High School). Wade thought of the angel Moroni sounding his gospel trumpet to all the earth, and he felt that the school would be similar—a beacon shining to the people of the islands of the sea.⁵⁷

In addition to being made the school principal, Grant Howlett was set apart as the second branch president of the Tarawa Branch when it was reorganized.⁵⁸ He was also the one responsible for seeking official recognition for the Church in the Gilbert Islands. The Church had now surpassed the fifty-member minimum, so Howlett pushed forward the Church's application even though he anticipated that the whole process of granting official recognition would take as many as seven years. He began befriending and corresponding with key government officials, hoping to overcome the opposition that existed within government circles. After completing the application, Howlett took it directly to the chief minister of the Gilbert Islands Colony. To his surprise, he was greeted not by the chief minister, but by Bob Campbell, minister of education and one of the friends Howlett had previously cultivated. Campbell was filling in for the chief minister for a week and, without a doubt, was the key to success in the initial stage of the application.

Still, opposition mounted from other quarters. Within a few days Howlett received a letter to the effect that the application could not be acted upon until certain allegations were cleared up concerning the Church not allowing "coloured races to fill the top ranks in the priesthood and administration of the Church."⁵⁹ This obviously referred to its contemporary policy of withholding priesthood from blacks. Howlett himself did not fully understand this matter but had felt inspired to buy a book on the subject while on a recent trip to Utah in June 1976. He now dug out the book and read it. "The book helped," he noted, "but the Spirit of the Lord

rested on me, and I drafted a letter to Mr. Campbell which I consider to have been inspired. It allayed all opposition and brought us the desired church registration about a month later." Official registration was granted on June 29, 1977. Seeing the rapidity with which this took place as miraculous, Howlett wrote, "The Church of God has been in the Gilberts about fifty years, and they are still not registered. Our missionaries have been in the Gilberts less than two years."⁶⁰

Opposition, however, had not entirely ceased. The British officer in charge of immigration was deeply opposed to new religions. "Two is enough—that gives people a choice. Any more just brings fighting," he told Elder Groberg, President Palmer, and Brother Howlett on one occasion when they talked with him about getting permits for expatriate missionaries to enter and reside there.⁶¹ Then the officer decided that Howlett's signature on the application for registration was in strict violation of a restriction boldly typed across the face of his "Permit to Enter and Reside in the Gilbert Islands" prohibiting any "proselytizing."⁶² The government sent Howlett a letter explaining that his residential status in the colony was in jeopardy. At the time, Howlett was recuperating from an operation where his ruptured appendix was removed. When he gained enough strength to draft a letter, he apologized for the delayed response, explained his recent illness, and applied for an amendment to his permit to enter and reside in Kiribati. Fortunately, the officer's heart was softened, and the amendment was granted for six months. Before renewal was necessary, a change in government brought more sympathetic people into office.

Pioneer I-Kiribati Stalwarts

In addition to the contributions of the pioneer I-Kiribati missionaries and devoted expatriates such as Puckett, Wade, Davis, and Howlett, the valiant efforts of certain prominent I-Kiribati who joined the Church in these early years were also crucial. One such member was Baitika

Toum, six-time minister to the president of the Republic of Kiribati. His services proved to be providential for the progress of the Church. In his own words, Toum states:

I think I have been used as an instrument. I want to recall that the Lord works miraculously and He utilizes whatever He likes to use as an instrument. I am not very perfect or worthy to be given responsibility to work for the Lord, but I am surprised to [have] been given all of these responsibilities to move His Kingdom in this Republic of Kiribati. I understand that most of the things that I did were for extending Zion in the Republic of Kiribati. When the Church first came it faced a lot of difficulties. Most of the positions of people in the government with authority were either Protestant or Catholic. They were influenced by the Moderator and the Bishop of the church. So the rolling forth of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints faced a lot of difficulties, a lot of hold ups, and a lot of interferences. I was glad that the Lord used me in a political career to serve my country, my people, and also to help the Kingdom of God in Kiribati.

What I have a strong testimony of is in the development of Moroni High School. Moroni High School, when [it was first registered] faced a lot of opposition and [the government] knew that the only way of attracting the interest of the Kiribati people was through the education system. So these government officials had the authority to keep Moroni [from becoming a secondary school]. The Church authorities wanted the school to be extended into a secondary school up to form three [equivalent to Grade 9 in the United States], but the government would not allow it. They wanted it to remain a community school like other primary schools on outer islands with a limited number of student attendance. So, when I was elected as a minister for the second time in 1982, I was given the Ministry of Education. This ministry was the key for all of Moroni's difficulties. The first thing that clicked into my mind when I was offered this portfolio was that I knew it was a calling from the Lord to help Moroni become a secondary school.

When I went into the office, the first thing that I called for was a board of directors and then

I asked them, “What is the purpose of education?” I asked them this so that I could lead them to the idea of expanding Moroni Community School. Then they said, “Well, we want to educate our people so that they can compete, so that they can improve the country and their welfare.” “Okay,” I responded, “Are we going to develop the schools or are we going to make limits on them?” Then they said, “Well, we think it is better if we increase them. Let any school that wants to expand go forth and we will give them our support.” Then I said, “Okay, that is a good thing. Let us refer to the Moroni case, what is happening to it now?” The key people in the government were present at this meeting. The secretary at that time was a strong Protestant. I knew he was once the Secretary for Education. He was the one who backed up things and put down Moroni, together with the assistance of the Catholic priests and the Catholic secretaries. So I told them, “Using my power as a minister, I give the okay for Moroni Community School to be extended up to form seven.” And I also told them that “any church in Kiribati that wanted to expand, let it expand, provided it can qualify for the requirements from the administration office.” From that time Moroni High School was registered as a junior secondary school. I was the Minister [of Education] at that time and I was the one who backed up the legal formalities for each school’s registration as a junior secondary school.

Then we faced another problem regarding a construction permit. The school was not allowed to expand because no future structures could be built without the consent of the government council. Then I once again became involved. I thought, “How am I going to overcome this? The Council is not part of me; it is not under my ministry.” The Council was under the Ministry for Home Affairs. It was a challenge for me at that time when I tried to help. I prayed for help and I was helped by the Spirit. Then I started playing my political game with the councillors and I drafted a letter in which I tried to tackle the obstacles. In the end I was fortunate to be supported.⁶³

Table 1. Kiribati Church Statistics, 1980–2004

Year	Members	Stakes	Wards	Districts	Total Branches
1980	510	—	—	—	1
1985	1,385*	—	—	—	6
1990	2,259	—	—	1	17
1995	5,076	—	—	1	17
2000	8,633	1	11	1	16
2004	11,081	1	11	1	16

*Estimate

Sources: Church Almanac and Membership and Statistical Records Division of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

In response to Toum’s letter to the government council, the Kiribati government granted building permits to Moroni High School enabling it to expand to its full potential as a secondary school.

During the years between the time the Church first acquired the school and the late 1980s, several expatriate teachers and administrators served as headmaster and principal of Moroni High School. One of these professionals was Roy G. Bauer, who served as headmaster from January 1983 to June 1984. According to Bauer, the Church’s dramatic growth in Kiribati was greatly influenced by education:

The Church Educational System has had a significant impact upon the growth of the Church in Kiribati. From the time when the Church took over AKAS, the school has served as a vehicle of conversion for many young people who are now heads of families and Church leaders in Kiribati. . . . We felt the receptiveness of the people of Kiribati to the gospel of Jesus Christ. . . . There was then and continues to be now a great spiritual hunger for the gospel by the people of Kiribati. The Church in Kiribati has experienced a great relationship of trust with the Kiribati government leaders due in most part to the positive impact of Moroni High School. Moroni High School is indeed an educational gem that has opened many doors of opportunity for missionary work in Kiribati.⁶⁴

Most of the students who enrolled at Moroni during these intermediate years were not members of the Church. Nonetheless, they were taught the gospel and many joined the Church. “There were times we remember when one hundred baptisms per month would take place,” Bauer recalled.⁶⁵ Truly, Moroni High School has been a “gem” for the Church and many thousands of Saints in Micronesia.

A Promising and Bright Future

More than a quarter century has passed since the first missionaries arrived on Tarawa. At the end of that first year (1975), thirty-five members resided in Kiribati.⁶⁶ Since then, Church growth has been tremendous.⁶⁷ Membership reached 11,081 in 2004, a 490 percent increase since its 2,259 member total in 1990. For a country with a population of approximately 100,000, that is a significant growth rate.

During the 1990s, Kiribati accounted for nearly fifty percent of the baptisms in the Fiji Suva Mission.⁶⁸ Returned mission president Roy Bauer is optimistic about the future: “There is no doubt that the Church will continue to experience great growth in Kiribati as the Church Educational System with Moroni High School, the members, and the full time missionaries work unitedly to bless those who have not as yet had the opportunity to receive and accept the gospel.”⁶⁹

In 1996, Elder L. Tom Perry of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles became the first Apostle to travel to Kiribati. On August 9, he dedicated Moroni High School. “Having an Apostle dedicate the school,” remarked Tune, gave it “additional ‘vision and direction.’”⁷⁰ The following day Elder Perry rededicated the country for the preaching of the gospel. He chose a secluded spot on the beach where the Battle of Tarawa was fought during World War II.⁷¹ In his dedicatory prayer, he mentioned that just as this battle freed the people from physical bondage so would the gospel of Jesus

Christ free the people of Kiribati from spiritual bondage.⁷² On August 11, the first stake in Micronesia was created—the Tarawa Kiribati Stake. Atunibeia Mote, age thirty-four, a graduate of Moroni High School and BYU–Hawai‘i, was called as the first stake president. With the formation of a stake in Kiribati, the Church reached an important milestone in its growth and stability on this island nation in the Pacific.

In 2000, en route to Indonesia, President Gordon B. Hinckley became the first prophet to visit Kiribati. His January 26 stop lasted only two hours while his jet refueled at the Bonriki International Airport. President Hinckley was greeted by several thousand I-Kiribati who occupied the field that serves as the airport’s parking lot and stood in the hot, equatorial sun, eager to hear the words of a living prophet.⁷³ President Hinckley spoke to the members and commended them: “I’ve never been to Kiribati before—not many people have. But what a pleasure it is to look into your faces and to feel of your spirit—your great love for the Lord; your great love for the Prophet Joseph Smith; your great love for the Church



Fig. 5. First Tarawa Kiribati Stake Presidency, organized on August 11, 1996, by Elder L. Tom Perry. Left to right: Levita Lamese, first counselor; Atunibeia Mote, president; and Ioteba Tune, second counselor.

Courtesy of W. James Jacob

which you have joined in such large numbers.”⁷⁴ President Hinckley spoke about the significant role Moroni High School has played in the progress of the Church and the development of the members’ lives in Kiribati. He challenged the members to take advantage of education and the school: “Get all the education that you can. The Lord has told us that we have an obligation to educate ourselves in the things of the world and the things of His Church and Kingdom. This school will open up opportunities for you that you otherwise would not have. So, take advantage of it! If you have to sacrifice, do it, but go to school.”⁷⁵

Levita Lamese, the second president of the Tarawa Kiribati Stake and former principal of Moroni High School, recalled his personal experience at the time of the prophet’s visit. He said that he looked out into the members’ faces and could tell that they were moved upon by the Spirit. Many had tears streaming down their faces.⁷⁶ All were overwhelmed “to be in the presence of the prophet of God. They just could not believe they were seeing the living prophet speak to them face to face.”⁷⁷ It is amazing to see how much emphasis Church leaders have given to this tiny nation over the years. From the beginning, they have been committed to see the Church flourish in this remote area of the earth.

Looking back over the past thirty years, it is striking to see how the destinies of the Church and the AKAS have intertwined. As former Fiji Suva Mission president Howard F. Wolfgramm expressed it, “The Lord’s timing for going into Kiribati was just right.”⁷⁸ When asked what role the school has played in the establishment of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Kiribati, Alton Wade summed it up in a single word: “Everything.”⁷⁹ Just as the tin roofs of the school buildings reflect the light from the sun to the neighboring areas of Tarawa, so does the restored gospel radiate from Moroni High School into the hearts of all those around it. Through the miracle of Moroni High School, the Church has been able to flourish in Kiribati and continues to be a beacon to other islands of the sea.

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Notes

I want to thank the many individuals who have assisted me with this chapter. Heading the list is R. Lanier Britsch, emeritus professor of history at BYU; Levita Lamese, of Kiribati, helped lay the foundation for this study through countless discussions, oral interviews, translations, and transcriptions; and Clayne L. Pope, former dean of the BYU College of Family, Home, and Social Sciences, provided a grant to help finance this study. Most importantly, I wish to thank the Latter-day Saints of Kiribati, who lived this history.

1. Kiribati (pronounced /Kir-i-bas/) gained independence from Great Britain on July 12, 1979, and became formally known as the Republic of Kiribati. Originally a protectorate of Great Britain, from 1892 to 1916, Kiribati was known as the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony under Great Britain from 1916–1976; and the Gilbert Islands Colony from 1976 until it gained independence. See Barrie Macdonald, *Cinderellas of the Empire* (Hong Kong: Colorcraft, 1982), v–viii. “Kiribati” and “Gilbert Islands” are still used interchangeably for the Republic of Kiribati, a practice followed in this chapter.

2. See Richard McGinn, *Studies in Austronesian Linguistics, Monographs in International Studies. Southeast Asia Series*, No. 76 (Athens, OH: Ohio University Center for International Studies Center for Southeast Asian Studies, 1988); Robert C. Kiste, “Pre-colonial Times,” in *Tides of History: The Pacific Islands in the Twentieth Century*, ed. K. R. Howe, Robert C. Kiste and Brij V. Lal (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai’i Press, 1994), 3–28; and Felix M. Keesing, *Native Peoples of the Pacific World* (New York: Macmillan, 1945). There are three major cultural areas within the Pacific Islands region, which include Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia. Each of these terms is an arbitrary label given to the Pacific Islanders based on linguistic, cultural, archeological, and regional

characteristics. While Kiribati is primarily considered part of Micronesia, it has many language and cultural derivatives from neighboring Polynesia. The Kiribati language is part of the Austronesian language family, which is considered one of the largest language families both geographically and numerically. Austronesian languages are spoken from New Zealand in the south, to Hawai'i in the north, Madagascar in the west, and Easter Island in the east. The indigenous languages of Papua New Guinea and Australia are not considered part of the Austronesian language family.

3. United States Census Bureau, *International Population Database* (Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 2003); www.census.gov (accessed September 17, 2003).

4. Arthur Francis Grimble, *Tungaru Traditions: Writings on the Atoll Culture of the Gilbert Islands* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1989), xvii.

5. Hiram Bingham Jr., *A Gilbertese-English Dictionary* (London: Lowe and Brydone Printers, 1908), preface.

6. Hiram Bingham Jr., *Outlines of a Grammar of the Gilbert Islands Language*, 2nd ed. (Rongorongo, Beru: London Missionary Society, 1945), 5.

7. Bingham, *A Gilbertese-English Dictionary*, preface.

8. Charles W. Forman, *The Island Churches of the South Pacific* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1982), 26–27.

9. Limiting educational opportunities to the masses was a common practice in many former British colonies. The reasons for doing so could be economic (e.g., East African colonies and the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony), racial (e.g., Fiji and Australia), or political (e.g., India and South Africa). See, for instance, Peter Hitchen, "State and Church in British Honduran Education, 1931–39: A British Colonial Perspective," *History of Education* 29, no. 3 (2000): 195–211; Carmen White, "Affirmative Action and Education in Fiji: Legitimation, Contestation, and Colonial Discourse," *Harvard Educational Review* 71, no. 2 (2001): 240–68; Satpal Sangwan, "Science Education in India under Colonial Constraints, 1792–1857," *Oxford Review of Education* 16, no. 1 (1990): 81–95; Sandra Harding, *Is Science Multi-Cultural? Postcolonialisms, Feminisms, and Epistemologies* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998); and Birgit Brock-Utne, *Whose Education for All? The Recolonization of the African Mind* (New York: Falmer Press, 2000).

10. The water of Tabuarorae is also considered sacred; visitors to Tarawa are usually brought there to drink of the wells before they do anything else.

11. The acronym AKAS was used most often. See Grant S. and Patricia L.M. Howlett, *Journal*, 2, 5, copy in author's possession.

12. Waitea Abiuta, interview by W. James Jacob and Levita Lamese, tape recording, August 11, 1996, Bonriki, Tarawa, in author's possession. Lamese served as the second president of the Tarawa Kiribati Stake and principal of Moroni High School. He earned a master's degree from BYU in 1996.

13. Iotua Bareeta Tune, interview by W. James Jacob and Levita Lamese, tape recording, August 1996, Moroni High School, Eita, Tarawa. Tune is currently CES country director for the Republic of Kiribati and has served as bishop of the Eita First Ward in the Tarawa Kiribati Stake. Tune also served as the first local district president in Kiribati and the first local principal of Moroni High School 1990–96. Tune earned a master's degree from BYU in 1990. And, true pioneers, he and his wife, Meei, were the first Kiribati couple to be sealed together in a temple.

14. Baitika Toum, interview by W. James Jacob and Levita Lamese, tape recording, August 4, 1996, Bikenibeu, Tarawa, in author's possession.

15. Toum, interview.

16. Toum, interview.

17. Toum, interview.

18. Tune, interview.

19. Tune, interview. While it is clear that there are no mountains throughout the country of Kiribati, and the highest point on most islands does not exceed ten feet above sea level, the people have often used a metaphor that places their settlements atop enormous mountain-like formations in the midst of the ocean. These "mountains" rise from the depths of the sea, cresting just above sea level. Thus, the people of Eita Village were familiar with Abiuta's mountain-digging metaphor. Banaba (Ocean Island), one of three great Pacific Island phosphate rock islands in the Pacific, is the only exception with a rugged terrain frequented by cliffs and mined hills. The highest point on Banaba is 266 feet above sea level. Mining the rich deposits of phosphate in the hills of Banaba was also a well-known trade in the post-World War II era and may have contributed to this mountain-digging metaphor. Many people throughout the Gilberts and neighboring Ellice Islands worked on Banaba until 1979, when the phosphate deposits were almost entirely depleted.

20. At this time there were already three I-Kiribati members of the Church, but all had been baptized while attending foreign schools in Australia, Tonga, and Hawai'i.

21. Howlett, Journal, 5–6.

22. Levita and Rose Lamese, interview with W. James Jacob, May 1996, Provo, Utah; Toum, interview.

23. Roy G. Bauer, Journal, 1, copy in author's possession. Bauer was the principal of Moroni High School in the 1980s and later served as president of the Fiji Suva Mission from July 1999 to July 2002. See also Alton L. Wade, "Ye Shall Be Witnesses Unto Me," devotional given at Brigham Young University, April 4, 2000. Wade retired as vice president of student life at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, in April 2000.

24. Alton L. Wade, interview by W. James Jacob and Levita Lamese, tape recording, May 23, 1996, Provo, Utah, in author's possession.

25. Alton L. Wade, interview by W. James Jacob and Natalie Kaye Jacob, November 9, 2003, Provo, Utah.

26. Howlett, Journal, 6.

27. Howlett, Journal, 6. See also George C. Puckett, Journal, 135–36, copy in author's possession.

28. Puckett, Journal, 136. As superintendent of Church schools in Tonga, Puckett was asked by Wade to verify whether or not the students would fit in well in Tonga and then make the final decision for selecting and admitting them to attend Liahona High School.

29. The names of those first twelve students enrolled in Liahona High School in Tonga in February 1973: Karaititi Kaino, Teutu Rubo, Marinao Iotebatu (the three girls), and Barate Timea, Tekaiabeti Taratake, Teema Bentitai, Abakite Tuneti, Titi Akau, Tebong Tebong, Bename Tawai, Itaia Riteri, and Taaiti Natanga (Kararaua). See Howlett, Journal, 7. See also, "12 Tonga Students Open Way," *Church News*, May 8, 1976, 13.

30. Davis was called as the second president of the Fiji Suva Mission. See "Teacher Is Called as Mission President," *Church News*, July 1, 1972, 14.

31. Ebbie L. and Linda Davis, interview by W. James Jacob and Levita Lamese, tape recording, May 26, 1996, Kaysville, Utah, in author's possession.

32. Fiji Suva Mission, Historical Record, August 24, 1973, Church Archives, Historical Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah; hereafter cited as Church Archives.

33. Davis, interview.

34. Davis, interview.

35. Wade, interview, 1996.

36. Howlett, Journal, 7.

37. "12 Tonga Students Open Way," 13.

38. John H. Groberg, interview by W. James Jacob, tape recording, February 16, 2005, Salt Lake City, Utah, in author's possession. Elder Monson said he would go through the proper channels and let Elder Groberg know of the decision to open the Gilberts to the preaching of the gospel. John H. Groberg to W. James Jacob, March 28, 2005, correspondence in author's possession.

39. In April 1975 priesthood leaders set apart as missionaries Barate Timea, Abakite Tuneti, Tekaiabeti Taratake, Teema Bentitai, Bename Tawai, and Taaiti Natanga. See Howlett, Journal, 9. Bauer, Journal, 2, also mentions the call of two sister missionaries.

40. Tonga Mission, Historical Report, March 27, 1975, Church Archives.

41. Howlett, Journal, 9.

42. "12 Tonga Students Open Way," 13.

43. Fiji Suva Mission, Historical Record, October 14–19, 1975, Church Archives.

44. Kenneth M. Palmer, as cited in Howlett, Journal, 3.

45. Fiji Suva Mission, Historical Record, October 20, 1975, Church Archives.

46. "12 Tonga Students Open Way," 13.

47. R. Lanier Britsch, *Unto the Islands of the Sea: A History of the Latter-day Saints in the Pacific* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1986), 518.

48. Wade, interview, 1996.

49. Rian Nelson was the third expatriate missionary to serve in the Gilbert Islands (interview by W. James Jacob, tape recording, June 30, 1996, Bountiful, Utah).

50. Tune, interview.

51. Tune, interview.

52. Tune, interview.

53. "Church, Education Bolstered in Gilberts," *Church News*, February 26, 1977, 12.

54. Susan K. Howlett, "A Friend in the Gilberts," *Friend*, November 1977, 39.

55. Despite Abiuta's fallout with the Church, Wade still feels that Abiuta was prompted by the Spirit to write the letters in 1972: "He's the one that started it and to this day I'm convinced that Waitea [Abiuta] was moved upon by the Holy Ghost" (Wade, interview, 1996).

56. See R. Lanier Britsch, "The Story Continues: The Latter-day Saints in the Pacific, 1984–1997," chapter 14 therein; also Davis, interview.

57. Wade, interview, 1996.
58. Fiji Suva Mission, Historical Record, December 5, 1976, Church Archives.
59. Howlett, Journal, 16.
60. Howlett, Journal, 16. Howlett does not give the name of this influential book in his journal.
61. Howlett, Journal, 16.
62. Howlett, Journal, 16, 17.
63. Toum, interview.
64. Roy G. Bauer to W. James Jacob, April 27, 2000, correspondence in author's possession.
65. Bauer, correspondence, April 27, 2000.
66. Mission Financial and Statistical Reports, Fiji Suva Mission, 1975–76, Church Archives.
67. Interviews by W. James Jacob in 1996, 1997, and 1999 with several former Fiji Suva mission presidents: Clyde G. Harper (who served 1990–93), Howard F. Wolfgramm (1993–96), Jean A. Tefan (1996–99), and Roy G. Bauer (1999–2002).
68. Roy G. Bauer, correspondence with W. James Jacob, April 29, 2000, in author's possession.
69. Roy G. Bauer, telephone interview with W. James Jacob, April 27, 2000.
70. Iotua Tune, as cited in Sarah Jane Weaver, "Moroni High School: An Educational Model," *Church News*, September 21, 1996, 8.
71. Elder L. Tom Perry dedicated four countries and three provinces of France for the preaching of the gospel from this location on August 10, 1996. The four countries dedicated were the Republic of Kiribati, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, and Nauru; New Caledonia, Wallis, and Futuna were the three provinces dedicated. See related article by Dell Van Orden, "Elder Perry Creates First Kiribati Stake, Dedicates Islands," *Church News*, September 21, 1996, 3, 5.
72. Tune, interview.
73. Iotua Tune, telephone interview with W. James Jacob, February 2000.
74. "Pres. Hinckley Completes Tour in Pacific Rim," *Church News*, February 12, 2000, 3.
75. "Pres. Hinckley Completes Tour in Pacific Rim," *Church News*, 3.
76. Levita Lamese, telephone interview with W. James Jacob, April 27, 2000. See also "Two New Temples Dedicated, President Hinckley Visits the Pacific," *Ensign*, April 2000, 75–76.
77. "Pres. Hinckley Completes Tour in Pacific Rim," *Church News*, 3.
78. Wolfgramm, telephone interview.
79. Wade, interview, 1996. See also J. Malan and Fae Heslop, "Stage Set for Growth on Tiny Island," *Church News*, October 31, 1987, 6, and Weaver, "Moroni High School: An Educational Model," *Church News*, September 21, 1996, 8.

