Chapter 17

Seasons of Faith:
An Overview of the History of the Church in French Polynesia

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The history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the South Pacific cannot be told without an understanding of the work that commenced in French Polynesia, more commonly known as Tahiti. This was the Church's first mission to the Pacific Islands, and the success of missionary efforts there inspired subsequent outreach to other Polynesian peoples, opening up fertile fields ready to harvest. In French Polynesia, proselytizing was done in a language other than English, for the first time in Latter-day Saint history, and the mission there was one of the Church's earliest attempts to reach beyond the confines of North America.

The challenges involved in writing a history of the Church in French Polynesia are similar to those in other areas of the Pacific where written record keeping was a postcontact phenomenon carried out principally by Caucasians. Consequently, because of a lack of written islander sources, historians are generally forced to rely upon extant missionary writings and journals. This reliance modifies the point of view and focuses on the bringers of the message rather than on the receivers. Furthermore, many of the missionary record keepers were young, biased, and often made mistakes. Nonetheless, from their accounts careful students can still gain a reasonable picture of the faith and courage displayed by early missionaries and converts of the Church in Tahiti.

As with other Polynesian nations, Western contact with the islands of French Polynesia occurred relatively late. Samuel Wallis was the first European explorer to set foot on Tahiti, in 1767, and French navigator Louis Antoine de Bougainville arrived one year later. Captain James Cook charted the islands, including Tubuai in the Austral Archipelago, in 1769. Both France and England laid claim to these islands, but France established a protectorate there in 1842. Still, the English presence, as will be seen, remained strong because of the London Missionary Society. By 1880, Tahiti had become an official colony of France, and today French Polynesia is an overseas territory of France. Tahitians have full French

citizenship, and French is the official language of the territory, although Tahitian is taught as a second language in schools and is still used predominantly in the outer islands, by the elderly, and in families promoting traditional Polynesian culture.

The Church Established

The spread of Christianity is one of the epic stories in the expansion of Western civilization throughout the world. The commission to preach the gospel in all the world came from the Savior as He directed His Apostles following His Resurrection to "go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost" (Matthew 28:19). The same instruction to evangelize the world was enunciated by Joseph Smith. God's commission to the elders of the Church was "Go ye into all the world" (D&C 84:62). Initially, Mormonism spread from friend to friend, relative to relative throughout New England and Canada, and from there it was taken to England. Wherever converts' former work or travels had taken them, they were encouraged to retrace their steps to old friends and lead them down the newfound gospel path. This is how the mission to the Polynesians had its inception, beginning with Addison Pratt (see figure 1 in chapter 3).

Born in 1802, Pratt was a contemporary of Joseph Smith. As a youth, he left his New Hampshire home against his father's will and hired on with a whaling ship bound for the Hawaiian Islands. In 1822 he jumped ship at O'ahu and spent six months working there and learning some of the language. The next ten years he spent whaling on the oceans of the world. In 1831 Pratt married Louisa Barnes and settled in Ripley, New York, on the shores of Lake Erie, where he established a prosperous farm and engaged in summer lake-shipping. The Pratts received the gospel in 1838, sold their holdings, and reached Nauvoo in 1841 with their four daughters. In Nauvoo, Pratt became known for his sea experiences. Pratt family tradition has it that one day while working on the temple, Pratt mentioned to Joseph Smith how the Hawaiians reminded him of the American Indians, which may have planted the seed for his later call. On March 28, 1843, Addison Pratt received his patriarchal blessing from Hyrum Smith: "And you shall go out and come in and go forth upon the face of the earth . . . and your acts to be written in the chronicles of your brethren. . . . Your name shall be perpetuated . . . from generation to generation . . . and had in honor until the latest generation." After the blessing, the patriarch said to him, "I guess you have got to go awhaleing."[1]

Six weeks later, on May 11, 1843, the call came. The Twelve met in Joseph Smith's office, and it was "voted that Addison Pratt and Knowlton F. Hanks, Noah Rogers, and Benjamin F. Grouard go on a mission to the Sandwich Islands."[2]

Benjamin Grouard, twenty-four, was a handsome, bright, and serious young man who was also an experienced seaman and skilled mechanic. He had joined the Church and married in 1841, and had already served a brief mission to western Pennsylvania prior to being called to go to the Pacific. Noah Rogers, forty-six, was appointed president of the mission since he had longer experience in the Church. He and his faithful wife, who had both been expelled from Missouri, had nine children. The fourth member of the group was Knowlton Hanks, who was twenty-seven and single, and who was suffering from tuberculosis. There was concern about his health, but it was thought that a sea voyage would be the best prescription.

The four left Nauvoo without purse or scrip on June 1, 1843, and made their way to New Bedford, Massachusetts, the center of American whaling. There they learned that the only ship leaving for the South Seas was the whaler *Timoleon*, which was going not to the Sandwich [Hawaiian] Islands but to the Society Islands. Saints in New Bedford and Boston made the

voyage possible by paying the passage money. The *Timoleon* got underway October 9, 1843, and before the ship had been out a month, Elder Hanks died and was buried at sea. The ship made its way across the Atlantic, around the Cape of Good Hope, across the Indian Ocean, under Australia, and then up into the Pacific Ocean. On April 30, 1844, the first landfall in Polynesia was made at the island of Tubuai in the Austral Archipelago, about four hundred miles south of the island of Tahiti.

The political and religious climate in French Polynesia in 1844 was both helpful and inhibitive to the establishment of the Church. Since March, the Society Islands had been in a state of war, with the French battling the Tahitians to enforce their protectorate status. The London Missionary Society (LMS), which had been present in the islands since 1797, saw itself as representing English interests. Since its arrival, the London Missionary Society had exerted considerable political influence on the local government and had introduced English political and legal institutions whenever possible. The British consul, a former LMS missionary, had influenced Queen Pomare IV of Tahiti to follow an anti-French, anti-Catholic policy. This power struggle between the LMS and the French actually allowed a brief window of opportunity for the American Latter-day Saint missionaries.

Though the British viewed the Mormons' arrival as just one more attempt to usurp their influence and undermine their power, the London Missionary Society had already sown seeds that would be harvested by the Latter-day Saints. The first LMS-administered baptisms had occurred in 1819, and by the time the Mormons arrived, the English missionaries had done much to introduce Christianity and Western moral values where traditional Tahitian cultural practices had once predominated. Of equal importance was the fact that the LMS missionaries learned Tahitian, committed it to writing, and were dedicated to preserving it. Through their efforts, much Christian literature was translated into Tahitian, including the entire Bible, which was available to the people by 1840. Spelling books, catechisms, and hymnbooks were also translated and published. LMS missionaries were the first to teach the Tahitians to read and the first to establish schools in conjunction with their churches.

The French, on the other hand, were doing everything in their power to minimize both the religious and political power of the London Missionary Society. In order to protect the arrival of Catholic missionaries, the French promoted religious tolerance and freedom, which in turn made the legal entrance of the Mormons initially possible. Had the Tahitians' own government been in power under British influence, the Mormons would have been expelled. Nonetheless, the French were not anxious to compound their already significant challenges with the introduction of representatives from yet another Christian religion and another nation. Thus it was into this political and religious maelstrom that the Mormon missionaries, unaware of the building tensions, arrived in 1844.

When the *Timoleon* anchored at Tubuai on April 30, 1844, the islanders canoed out to greet the ship and were ecstatic to learn that missionaries were aboard. They clamored to have at least one of the missionaries remain. Addison Pratt was at first reluctant to be separated from his missionary companions, but his sense of duty finally overcame his natural hesitations. He viewed the islanders as old acquaintances. Their canoes and their faces reminded him of his Sandwich Island friends, and he could communicate with them a bit in Hawaiian, so it was decided that of the three he should stay. Grouard and Rogers went on to Tahiti after a weeklong stay at Tubuai, arriving in Papeete six days later.

On Tahiti, the two missionaries soon learned that wartime was no time for proselytizing. The Tahitians were interested only in ending the war, and the English excluded the Mormons from the only available church facilities. Additionally, they were faced with the daunting task of learning the language. Discouraged, President Rogers took a

schooner to the island of Huahine, where he taught from October to January without success. Grouard left Tahiti in late December and spent two months with Pratt on Tubuai.

The political strife of the Society Islands had not yet reached Tubuai, and Pratt found success. There were no other Western missionaries on the island, although the people had been Christianized in 1797, and native Christian missionaries were sometimes in residence. The LMS missionaries occasionally visited but never stayed. The islanders were enthusiastic for Pratt to live among them and be their teacher. The Tubuai islanders were used to interacting with English-speaking sailors since many trading and whaling ships stopped there, and a handful of white sailors even lived on the island. Six of them, including Charles Hill, were Elder Pratt's first converts.

From the beginning, Pratt, whose name was soon Tahitian-ized to "Paraita," familiarized himself with local ways. He was taken into the home of Nabota and his wife, Telii, who did everything for him, including personally tutoring him in the Tahitian language. He wrote of his hosts, "Where I go, they go, and where I stay, they stay; they consider all they have is mine."[3] Others as well were generous and kind, and he considered himself to be treated "better than their princes."[4] Nabota and Telii were Elder Pratt's first local converts and were baptized on July 22, 1844. One week later, Pratt organized the Tubuai Branch, the first branch in the Pacific, with eleven members. After ten months he wrote to Brigham Young, "The Lord has greatly blessed my feeble efforts to spread the gospel. I have baptized fifty-seven persons on this island." Among his converts were the queen and several important chiefs. Pratt lived simply among the people, learning from them and teaching them at the same time. They respected him and consulted him in nearly all of their decisions. He wrote in jest, "*I am prime minister of the island.*"[5]

Nonetheless, the solitary missionary was concerned because he had received no news from Nauvoo, either from Church leaders or from his wife (he would receive only two letters from his wife during this mission, with the first arriving a year and a half after his arrival). He did, however, occasionally receive letters from Rogers and Grouard, and he enjoyed a brief reunion with Grouard in December 1844. Pratt constantly thought of his family and sent letters whenever there was a ship that stopped, but he faithfully followed instructions from Brigham Young to remain in the field until relieved or released. He was there alone, but he was not about to relinquish the field and go home. His success on Tubuai anchored the mission, guaranteed its perpetuity, and also encouraged Elders Rogers and Grouard to persist in their efforts.

When in February 1845 Rogers and Grouard met back on Tahiti, they decided to go to more distant islands away from the war where there were no English missionaries. Accordingly, they parted company in April, with Grouard going east to Anaa in the Tuamotu Archipelago, and Rogers going west to the Leeward Islands of the Society group. Unfortunately, by the middle of June, Rogers had had no success. Back on Tahiti, alone and without word from the Church or his family, Rogers became disheartened. Having heard rumors of trouble in Illinois, he returned to the United States arriving at Nauvoo on December 29, 1845. There he was briefly reunited with his family, only to die in the spring exodus from Nauvoo.

On May 1, 1845, Grouard landed on the island of Anaa where he found only a hundred Christians out of a population of "from two to three thousand," though he found little difference between the two groups, and little in the way of true Christian observances. Grouard's proposal to reside on the island awhile stirred up excitement among the islanders because, as the chief stated, "the English missionaries . . . never would come, because our land has not plenty of good things to eat."[6] Only three short weeks after his first sermon, Grouard performed his first baptisms. From then on, the numbers swelled. By September 21, Elder Grouard had organized

5 branches with 620 members total, and the heavy demands led him to seek the assistance of Addison Pratt, who was still on Tubuai. He made his way to Tahiti and sent a message to Pratt in Tubuai, who readily acceded to the request and put the Tubuai Branch in the charge of Charles Hill. Pratt's ever-faithful companions, Nabota and Telii, accompanied him to Tahiti, where they met Grouard, and all together set sail for Anaa.

The missionaries reached Anaa on February 3, 1846, and spent the next seven months on Anaa, as well as visiting 9 or 10 neighboring islands where another 116 souls were baptized. On September 24, 1846, the first Latter-day Saint conference in Polynesia was held on Anaa. Ten branches of the Church were represented with a total of 866 members in good standing. At this conference, Elder Pratt announced his determination to return to the Church in the United States, find his family, and return to Polynesia with additional missionaries. His parting from Grouard was understandably difficult, and his last journal entry on Anaa echoed the bittersweet feelings of both men:

> Often we felt that our Heavenly Father was our only friend left, and then would we seek some lone retreat . . . and pour out our complaints before him. And he has never forsaken us, but has blesst [*sic*] our labours and through him we have jointly baptized over a thousand natives, besides a goodly number of Americans and Europeans. And now I leave him [Grouard] in the field to sustain it, by the help of the Lord, while I beg my way to my family and the boddy [*sic*] of the church to see if it has any notion of lifting even a finger to sustain our labours among the South Sea Islands.[7]

Pratt left Anaa in the middle of November for Tahiti, where he remained until March, working in the district of Tiarei and establishing a branch at Huau. His faithful companions, Nabota and Telii, left Tahiti to return to Tubuai on January 9, 1847, and Pratt recorded: "We had been together nearly 3 years, and their faithfulness to me and the cause in which I am engaged had rendered them dear to my heart, and these parting moments brought sensations to my feelings that I cannot describe, but that I shall never forget."[8]

With the departure of Addison Pratt from the islands on March 28, 1847, the first phase of the mission history closed. The two great areas of success had been on the island of Tubuai and on the islands of the Tuamotu Archipelago.

Reinforcements

Despite their success, Addison Pratt and Benjamin Grouard were troubled because they had not received the assistance or relief that had been promised. On March 5, 1846, the elders received their first letter from the Twelve, from Wilford Woodruff, written at Nauvoo in November 1844. On the same ship came American newspapers of 1845 that told of threats of violence and the expulsion of the Saints from Nauvoo. From the Woodruff letter, Grouard concluded that his wife had left him and the Church and had returned to Philadelphia and her old ways. Grouard determined that since it was not good for man to be alone, he would remarry and remain in the islands. Accordingly, he took a young Polynesian woman, Tearo, as his wife.[9] He spent the next three years between Tahiti and Tubuai, with occasional visits to the Tuamotus, which he had left in the care of Polynesian elders and an American convert, John Hawkins. Upon the death of Tearo, who left him a daughter, Grouard married Nahina, the daughter of the chief of Anaa, with whom he had three sons.

It took Addison Pratt three years to get back to the United States and return to the islands with additional forces. From Papeete, he traveled to California. Upon learning that the Saints were gathering in the Great Basin, he made the trek to the Salt Lake Valley, arriving September 28, 1848, just one week after his family had arrived there from Winter Quarters. He had been separated from his wife and daughters for five years and four months.

At the October 1848 general conference, Elder Pratt gave a report of his mission and solicited additional support. That winter, Pratt taught Tahitian classes in a cabin in Old Fort, constituting the first mission language training in the Salt Lake Valley. The following spring missionaries were called, and Elder Pratt left in the company of James S. Brown, a young veteran of the Mormon Battalion, to arrive in Papeete on May 24, 1850. As planned, a second company of twenty-one, including Pratt's wife, Louisa, his daughters, and Louisa Pratt's sister and brother-in-law, Caroline and Jonathan Crosby, reached Tubuai in October 1850. This was the first time that wives and children had been allowed to accompany their husbands on Latter-day Saint missions. Also among the group was Sydney Alvarus Hanks, whose brother Knowlton Hanks had died at sea in 1843. Hanks pledged to fulfill the mission to Polynesia that his brother had been unable to complete. Although some of these new arrivals did not remain long, for a brief period missionary work in the islands was reinforced and revitalized.

Although Addison Pratt and James Brown arrived in Tahiti in May 1850, misunderstandings with the government and delays prevented their sailing to Tubuai until the following January. Meanwhile, Grouard unexpectedly arrived in Papeete to stand trial for unspecified charges, but after answering all questions satisfactorily he was allowed to return to Tubuai. Government officials, however, restricted Pratt and Brown to Tahiti. From that time on, in order to obtain permission to remain in French Polynesia, Mormon missionaries had to prove that they would no longer live off the islanders, and islanders were forbidden to support foreigners. This new policy presented great difficulty for the Latter-day Saint missionaries.

Finally, in January 1851 Pratt was permitted to travel to Tubuai where he was reunited with his family, having last seen them in October 1849 in the Salt Lake Valley. There the islanders assisted the missionaries in building their own homes. The islanders assured the missionaries that they would have the privilege of occupying what land they needed for farming. The men turned their attention to completing a mission ship that had been started by Grouard. Their ship, christened *Ravaai* (The Fisherman), was launched in May 1851 and allowed the elders to travel extensively. During such times, Sister Louisa Pratt, with her four daughters, and Sister Caroline Crosby, with her son, remained on Tubuai. There the sisters taught school, held prayer and hymn meetings, taught the island women nursing, gardening, and homemaking skills, and also introduced such handicrafts as quilting, sewing, and knitting. In short, they shared with the women of Tubuai domestic and devotional practices that were common among American Latter-day Saint women at the time. Although Louisa and Caroline never mastered Tahitian, the children fared much better with the language, and these missionary families had a long-lasting influence.[10]

While life settled into a routine for the Pratts and Crosbys on Tubuai, the traveling elders, particularly Elder James Brown, had greater challenges. Brown was assigned in July 1851 to preside on Anaa, but he was quickly accused of "the crime of rebellion and attempting to subvert the laws of the protectorate" after displaying an American flag.[11] He was arrested a few months later, was returned in chains to Tahiti where he was imprisoned for two weeks, and then was expelled from the French protectorate islands. Elder Grouard saw to it that Brown left on the mission schooner for Raivavae, one of the Austral Islands outside of French dominion, where he remained for ten months. There, Elder Brown met considerable opposition, although he did bring about twenty people into the waters of baptism. Hostility increased until he and his little flock were threatened with death in May 1852. Through two days of mounting agitation during which many angry islanders spoke of having a fat white missionary for a roast, Brown remained calm, remembering a promise given him by Brigham Young: "Although men will seek your

life, you shall be spared and return to the bosom of the Church in safety."[12] A bonfire was lit, and the islanders prepared to burn Brown alive. At the climactic moment, Elder Brown powerfully defied his enemies in the name of God. A local Mormon couple from the village stepped forward and demanded they be burned first, whereupon the people turned to fighting each other until evening dispersed the spent mob. Later, Brown was told by some of the islanders that at the moment he defied them, a brilliant light appeared over his head, which was taken as a sign that Brown's God was protecting him.[13]

James Brown's expulsion from the French protectorate, the complaints from the families on Tubuai about their lonely situations, French administrative policy, a revival of and general return by local members to former non-Christian practices, and the news that the relief missionaries ready to leave California had canceled their sailing plans, all combined to cast a shadow of discouragement over the American missionaries. The final blow occurred in March 1852 when the legislative assembly of Tahiti passed a law that, in effect, put church under state, which resulted in authorizing virtually only Polynesian preachers. There seemed to be nothing to do but to leave the islands. Most of the London Missionary Society missionaries were also forced to leave the islands at this time.

By August 1852, the only remaining foreign Latter-day Saint missionaries were James Brown (who would return to America later that year) and Sidney Alvarus Hanks (with whom contact was lost in the distant Tuamotu Islands and who did not return to the States until some time after 1857). Elders Pratt and Grouard made even more attempts to sustain the mission, but because French policy had not changed, they were not allowed to remain in Polynesia.

The departure of Addison Pratt, his companions, and their families marked the close of the first great period of the history of the Church in French Polynesia and inaugurated a period characterized by the heroic efforts of local leadership to preserve the Church against great odds. According to Elder Grouard, the missionaries "did all we could to organize and set things in order previous to leaving and Brother Hanks still remains among them. . . .We left a number of native Elders who have proved themselves worthy men of God and are faithfully laboring in the ministry, according to the best of their knowledge."[14] At the time, no one realized how long the absence of guidance from Church headquarters would last.

A Period of Persecution and Isolation

The government expected the Latter-day Saints to quickly abandon their worship practices upon the departure of their American leaders, but many Tahitian Saints, particularly in the Tuamotu Islands, persisted in Mormon activities. A period of great persecution and conflict ensued, during which the Catholics tried to displace the Mormons in the Tuamotus and prohibited Latter-day Saint worship services. In November 1852, a regrettable episode took place on the island of Anaa. When the Saints refused to end a prayer meeting deemed illegal by an officer of the local government, hostility broke out, resulting in the death of a gendarme and a Catholic priest. The French responded by sending a man-of-war with troops to punish the offenders. The troops were unable to learn the names of those responsible for the deaths, so they seized five hostages and hanged them in public. The rest of the rebel Mormon men served two years imprisonment at hard labor on the island of Tahiti.

During this period, partly to avoid arrest and partly so they could continue to hold Church services, island Saints adopted new names for their groups, including Israelites, Abrahamites, Darkites, and Whistlers. Notwithstanding the fact that many teachings were altered, the island Saints perpetuated branch organizations, patterns of worship, and the teaching of the gospel. Takaroa, in the Tuamotus, where Elder Alvarus

Hanks made his headquarters, was a major center of the Church in those years. When Hanks left, the Church persisted under the leadership of his delegated leader, Mapuhi.

It was quite by accident that the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS) entered French Polynesia. On December 13, 1873, the ship *Domingo* limped into Papeete Harbor for repairs. Aboard were two missionaries from the RLDS Church who learned that there was a fully organized and operating Latter-day Saint group in the community of Faaa. Finding Tahitians believing in Joseph Smith, they rebaptized some fifty-one people and requested that RLDS missionaries be sent to the Society Islands. In June 1878, William Nelson arrived from the RLDS Church and continued to reap the harvest of the early Latter-day Saint missionaries. He was followed by a succession of couples representing the RLDS Church in the islands. From 1852 onward, it was not a lack of desire that prevented the Latter-day Saint Church from sending missionaries back to Tahiti, but rather it was the trials and tribulations the Saints were experiencing in Utah. Happily, the early success in Tahiti did lead to the expansion of the Church in other regions of Polynesia, including Hawai'i and Sāmoa, but the distress of the Latter-day Saint Church in Utah created an opportunity for the RLDS Church in French Polynesia.[15]

Mission Leadership Reestablished

Beginning in 1890, the people of Utah entered a period of accommodation with the United States government, and thoughts were once again turned to revisiting and reestablishing the faith among the Tahitian people. The president of the Samoan Mission, William O. Lee, assigned two elders, William A. Seegmiller and Joseph W. Damron Jr., to go to Tahiti for that purpose. They arrived in Papeete on January 27, 1892, and faced great difficulties in beginning missionary work. It was not until two months later that they learned of the "Mormon community" in Faaa. Imagine their elation to find a congregation of Polynesian Saints and their even greater disappointment to learn that the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints had come to the islands and had drawn these people into their organization. The discouraged elders were grateful for reinforcements who arrived on June 1, 1892. Recognizing the wisdom in calling an experienced elder who knew the people and the language, the First Presidency appointed James S. Brown, then sixty-five, missing one leg, and in poor health, as mission president to return and reestablish the Church. Brown was accompanied by his son, Elando, and by Elder Thomas Jones Jr.

During the next fourteen months, President Brown gave an emphatic start to reopening the mission. Under his leadership the missionaries gradually encountered remnant Latter-day Saint congregations and affirmed to the RLDS congregations that "the authority had continued in the [Latter-day Saint] Church from the Prophet Joseph to the present organization."[16] Brown clearly identified himself, Addison Pratt, and Benjamin Grouard with the Latter-day Saint Church. He visited and talked with the people (including several who had known him during his first mission), held public meetings, and performed priesthood ordinances. Brown also labored with the government to secure a license to preach and faced the new issue of polygamy, which he assured officials was no longer being practiced. The licensing problem would continue to plague the Church for years to come.

The missionaries soon learned of Mapuhi and other islander leaders in the Tuamotu Islands who had maintained faithful Latter-day Saint congregations. On January 6, 1893, President Brown held the first conference under the renewed order on the island of Faaite in the Tuamotus. There were some in the congregation who had known him from his early visit forty years before, and they rejoiced in the return of the true representatives of their Church. A string

Fig. 1. An early Tahitian chapel
Courtesy of BYU–Hawai'i Archives

of conferences was held throughout the archipelago with similar results, and the missionaries found themselves busy reestablishing the Church. Elder Seegmiller traveled to Tubuai to find that all but one there had joined the RLDS group, but he nevertheless met with success.

On May 6, 1893, eight new missionaries arrived from Utah. President Brown, with failing health, felt that he had accomplished what he had come to do. He had welded a firm link between the past and present, had witnessed the reestablishment of a strong mission, and had even been able to validate the claim that properties taken over by the RLDS missionaries actually belonged to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He and Elando left Tahiti in July 1893. It remained to subsequent mission presidents and local leaders to strengthen the island Saints and refocus missionary efforts.

During the 1890s, five mission presidents shepherded the Polynesian Saints with the assistance of twenty or more missionaries. The licensing of the missionaries continued to present challenges since all foreigners were required to obtain permission to sojourn, and all ministers, a license to preach and teach. The purpose was to prevent freeloaders who would exploit, abuse, or take advantage of the Polynesians. Fortunately, American consul William Doty intervened, and licenses were granted.

Fig. 2. President Ernest C. and Sister Venus Rossiter
Courtesy of Yves and Kathleen Perrin

The missionaries also faced the challenge of learning Tahitian. Significant progress was made when Daniel T. Miller, a professor of linguistics at Brigham Young Academy in Logan, Utah, was called as mission president in 1896. President Miller learned the language himself and initiated an effective language-training program. President Miller effected an even more important contribution in his translation of the Book of Mormon. This Tahitian translation was finally published in Salt Lake City in 1904, and this accomplishment ushered in a new era of missionary work.

Challenges to the Work

In 1900 the Church counted 905 members in the Tuamotus (out of a population of 4,743) and 159 members on Tubuai (out of 429 islanders).[17] Four decades later and in spite of continuous missionary work (with an average of 12 American missionaries per year during this period), the number of Saints in French Polynesia had increased only slightly to 1,511.[18] Though leaders and missionaries continued to visit the strongholds, holding mission conferences and calling local priesthood leaders wherever possible, new converts were few and far between. At the turn of the century, a brief attempt to implant the Church in the Marquesas and Gambier archipelagoes had proved completely unsuccessful, and instructions were soon sent to close other areas of the mission where there had been no baptisms for a year or more. Leading causes of the slow growth of the Church in French Polynesia prior to World War II were the country's small population base, the fact that the Church's strongholds were in the outer islands rather than in the more populated islands, difficulties in interisland communication, and continued poor relations with the government.

In spite of the slow growth, the Church's infrastructure in Tahiti was developed during this period, preparing the way for subsequent success. The first mission complex, built in the Orovini neighborhood of Papeete, was completed in 1906 at a cost of $11,100. It included a home for the mission president, a mission and printing office, and a meetinghouse. The printing press, purchased by the Association of Returned Missionaries in Utah, made possible the printing of tracts, lesson manuals, translated Church books, hymnbooks, and Tahitian grammar books. In addition, a mission newspaper, which would change names and evolve over the years, was printed and distributed. From 1920 to 1948 twelve chapels, five recreation halls, and several missionary quarters were built.

Surprisingly, World War I had very little direct impact on the mission except for increasing provision prices. The number of missionaries actually increased slightly because American missionaries were no longer being sent to Europe.

The greatest impact of the war was indirect. With war often comes pestilence, and in 1918, the Spanish influenza spread throughout the world. A ship from San Francisco stopping at Tahiti in November 1918 introduced the influenza, which quickly spread throughout the islands, infecting the eleven thousand inhabitants like a medieval plague. Islanders had no natural immunity to the disease and over three thousand died.[19] The Latter-day Saint missionaries were called upon to care for and bless the sick and to bury the dead. Earlier, in the first decade of the twentieth century, when a series of violent storms brought death and devastation to the islands, members and missionaries also did all in their power to help the broader community rebuild after such tragedies.[20] Their service was noted and appreciated by governmental officials.

During the first half of the twentieth century, several outstanding mission presidents served in French Polynesia (see fig. 2). One of them was Ernest C. Rossiter, a former missionary to Belgium who would serve twice as mission president during this period. In 1915, while still a young man, he was called with his wife, Venus, to preside over the mission. His ability to speak French helped him greatly improve the strained relations with the government, and he was successful in gaining legal status for the Church in French Polynesia. Working long hours, President Rossiter also learned Tahitian. He had a tremendous impact on the Tahitian Saints, including healing their sick. He even recorded an incident of bringing a dead child back to life.[21]

One of his most memorable contributions was helping the Saints of the Tuamotus get out of debt. Many were burdened with long-standing debts to the trading companies incurred during the pearl shell diving season. The Saints asked President Rossiter to help them resolve the problem. For three days he made it a matter of fasting and prayer and then presented his plan: the Saints would have their own diving operation, bypass the white traders altogether, and the Mormon divers would pay their tithing and apply their surplus income to pay off their debts. The

Fig. 3. An LDS brass band from Papeete, Tahiti
Courtesy of BYU–Hawai'i Archives

missionary elders would supervise all operations. The Saints seemed humble and repentant and anxiously agreed to the plan. Over three diving seasons this operation was highly successful. In the end, all debts were paid off, and the Saints returned to a higher level of obedience to gospel principles.[22]

Another two-time mission president who rendered notable service was LeRoy Mallory. As a young elder and then later as mission president, he organized a brass band on Takaroa and subsequently taught many Tahitians to read music. The band traveled and performed throughout the territory and did much to improve the image of the Church. Little by little, the Church was becoming accepted by not only governmental officials but by the Tahitian population as well.

The Mission During World War II

Unfortunately, the impact of World War II on the Church in Tahiti was far more significant than World War I. After the outbreak of war, mail was censored, imports were halted, and travel became more problematic. Three months after Eugene M. Cannon arrived to serve as mission president, the mission was officially closed, and the American elders were called home to enter the military. President Cannon and the missionaries departed in November 1940, leaving a local leader, Ah-ni Mariteragi, temporarily in charge. Perhaps remembering what had happened during the Church's long absence in the nineteenth century and not knowing what the future would bring, Church leaders in Salt Lake City decided to send President and Sister Rossiter back to Tahiti as caretakers during the war years. The Rossiters arrived with their son in June 1941. With no other missionaries present, President Rossiter relied heavily on Ah-ni Mariteragi to assist him in the work. Leaving Ah-ni in charge in Papeete, for instance, allowed President Rossiter to travel to the outer islands, particularly to Takaroa where new buildings were under construction.

On one occasion, Ah-ni came to the mission home looking extremely ill. He was suffering from asthma-like symptoms, extreme fatigue, and pain in his joints. President Rossiter noticed that he was limping. Ah-ni mentioned he had run a fish bone into the joint just under his big toe. Ah-ni's condition degenerated rapidly, but he refused to go to the hospital. Several days later when President Rossiter stopped to check on him, he found Ah-ni lying prone on his bed with his joints locking up. Immediately an ambulance was called, and at the hospital it was determined that Ah-ni was suffering from lockjaw resulting from the fish bone injury. The doctors removed the bone but informed Ah-ni's wife and President Rossiter that because there was no tetanus serum on the island, there was no hope for him. For the next two days, the members fasted and prayed, but Ah-ni's condition continued to worsen. Finally, President Rossiter left the hospital and climbed to a secluded little grove up a steep mountain where he had previously gone to

Fig. 4. Ah-ni Mariteragi
Courtesy of Yves and Kathleen Perrin

pray in extreme emergencies. There he remained in prayer from early morning until late afternoon, pleading with the Lord for Ah-ni's life to be spared. As evening fell, President Rossiter felt a holy influence whisper in his mind, saying, "Be glad in your heart, his life will be spared." When he later arrived at the hospital, the doctor greeted him, saying, "We have great hopes now that your friend will live, but remember it was not because of our skill or medicine . . . It must have been God."[23] Ah-ni did indeed fully recover, and later his help was invaluable as the Rossiters themselves faced health challenges that ultimately required them to return to the United States.[24]

The Postwar Era

Edgar Bentley Mitchell was the first postwar mission president. His immediate focus was to refurbish mission headquarters and to gather scattered members. Ah-ni Mariteragi had done the best he could, but with no financial support from Church headquarters in Utah, things were in poor condition. President Mitchell even had to reconstitute the mission records because the originals had been taken by President Rossiter during his long hospitalization and had not yet been returned to the mission. In addition to his efforts to reorganize the mission, President Mitchell was also instrumental in bringing about significant changes that would set the stage for future Church growth. He implemented a program of home Primaries (which later proved to be the seedbeds for future branches), instigated missionary work among the Chinese population, purchased land for a new mission complex to be built in the Fariipiti neighborhood of Papeete, and, at his recommendation, received the special commission upon his release to find an appropriate sailing vessel to improve interisland travel within the mission.

That vessel, the *Fandango*, was found in California. It was purchased, refurbished, and renamed the *Paraita* in honor of Addison Pratt. Led by a nonmember captain, the crew, consisting of former missionaries to Tahiti as well as newly called missionaries, prepared to sail the *Paraita* to Tahiti. Elder George Magnusson, who had served in Tahiti from 1946 to 1948, was a member of that untrained crew. He recorded that on March 10, 1950, President McKay arrived in California to dedicate the ship and promised the crew that they would have an "uneventful voyage." After ten days out, the captain expressed concern about the weather and his crew's lack of experience. He had watched the barometer fall all afternoon. As Elder Magnusson wrote, "Black clouds encircled us on the horizon." The crew gathered for a special prayer and slept that night without incident, awaking to a clear and beautiful morning. When they arrived in Papeete, mission president LeRoy Mallory asked them anxiously about how they had fared in the storm. They answered that there had been no storm. He then informed them that reports from other ships told of a hurricane-force gale thrashing the seas where their position was calculated. President McKay's prophetic words had been fulfilled.[25] The *Paraita* served the Church in French Polynesia for over ten years until interisland travel improved and there was no longer a need for the mission to own a sailing vessel.

The Second Half of the Twentieth Century

Though there was little change in the size of the Latter-day Saint population in French Polynesia between 1850 and 1950, the next fifty years would see Church membership mushroom. This growth was facilitated by the acquisition of adequate property, the availability of the standard works in French and Tahitian, local members who were better prepared to take over leadership and full-time missionary roles, and the improved reputation of the Church. However, the period from 1950 to 2000 was not without its challenges. Relations with the government, which had always been strained, continued to present difficulties in the 1950s, particularly with the

purchase of property, the granting of visas for foreign missionaries, and the importation of religious materials. During this period, there were even governmental restrictions imposed on Latter-day Saint gatherings.[26] On the other hand, in their zeal to spread the gospel, American missionaries sometimes spread anti-French sentiments or claimed the superiority of American political institutions. At times they suggested that Tahitian Saints would eventually need to gather to Zion (Utah). Understandably, such messages were not popular with French officials. Until the Church and its missionaries recognized the importance of completely supporting the government in power, rather than criticizing and undermining it, this continued to be a problem. Today, relations with the French government and local Tahitian officials are better than they have ever been, and the tensions of the past for the most part have been forgiven and forgotten.

Other isolated incidents impacted the Church less universally, but one in particular, the *Manuia* tragedy, merits particular mention. On May 22, 1963, the newly-constructed Haapu Chapel on Huahine was dedicated by visiting Apostle Gordon B. Hinckley. Saints from throughout the Leeward Islands, including most of the branch members from the nearby island of Maupiti, had traveled by boat to Huahine to participate in the celebration. After the day's events, the *Manuia*, a locally constructed island trading boat, took off overloaded with Saints and in poor weather for the return trip to Raiatea and Maupiti. By the following morning when the ship approached Maupiti, the pass was boiling like a giant's cauldron. Suddenly, before reaching the pass, the boat was whipped by an enormous wave and flipped sideways onto the reef. Fourteen members of the Maupiti Branch, including all but two of the branch's Relief Society sisters, lost their lives that morning. Upon learning of the accident, Elder Hinckley insisted on traveling by boat to Maupiti with mission president Kendall Young to offer his love and support. President Young recorded, "He [Elder Hinckley] took the grieving family members in his warm embrace and wept with them. It was evident that all the residents of Maupiti deeply appreciated Elder Hinckley's visit."[27] Nonetheless, it required many years for the Leeward Island Saints to recover from this blow.

Another challenge during this period was finding a way for the Tahitian Saints to attend the temple. Isolation and expense made it nearly impossible. In 1959 arrangements were finally made for a group of about thirty to travel aboard the *Paraita* to the Hawai'i Temple. Approval for the voyage had been given by local authorities and by Church leaders in Salt Lake City, so the members were surprised when former mission president Ernest Rossiter, who was in Tahiti to help resolve the Church's problems with the government, also delivered a special message from President David O. McKay that the trip should not be made. Though greatly disappointed and discouraged, the Saints accepted the counsel from their prophet. A few days later, when they would have been at sea, the ship's captain received an urgent message from the harbormaster. The *Paraita* was sinking in the harbor. An undetected rotting pipe had burst, and the Saints would have been three hundred miles from land if they had left as scheduled. Furthermore, it was discovered that the gears in the transmission were completely worn out and could never have made the trip to Hawai'i and back. The faith of the Tahitian Saints was strengthened knowing that a prophet of the Lord had been inspired regarding their welfare.

Finally, four years later a group of Saints was able to travel to the recently completed New Zealand Temple, where the first temple session in the Tahitian language was conducted on December 20, 1963. That launched an era of regular temple attendance by the Tahitian Saints that required great financial sacrifices but also brought great spiritual blessings. The impact of temple worship on Church growth in French Polynesia is noteworthy. Endowed members provided the leadership core necessary for the organization of

Fig. 5. The Papeete Tahiti Temple, dedicated on October 27, 1983
Courtesy of Yves and Kathleen Perrin

the first stake in Tahiti in 1972. Their continued faithfulness culminated in the dedication of the Tahiti Temple in Papeete on October 27, 1983. In turn, this facilitated increased temple attendance, which resulted in stronger families and an increased level of commitment to gospel principles by Tahitian members.

As with the opportunity for temple attendance, other factors in the last half of the twentieth century that have positively impacted Church growth in Tahiti are similar to those elsewhere in the Pacific and indeed in the rest of the world. They include a period of general world peace, greater financial prosperity, better transportation enabling more frequent visits from General Authorities and other Church leaders, an increased focus on youth through stronger auxiliaries and seminary and institute programs, improved methods of proselytizing and an increased number of missionaries, improved record keeping, and improved curriculum materials available in the vernacular (in this case, both Tahitian and French).

Other factors promoting Church growth are unique to Tahiti. Foreign missionary quotas were increased, and a new thrust in missionary work placed an emphasis on the most populous areas rather than on the outer islands at a time when many French Polynesians were migrating to the island of Tahiti. Another major factor was the Church's improved relationship with the French government. This development permitted the opening of a Latter-day Saint school that operated in Papeete from 1964 to 1982. The school, in turn, prepared Tahitian youth for advanced education both in Tahiti and abroad. Record numbers of Tahitian students enrolled at Brigham Young University–Hawai'i and Brigham Young University in Provo. A more educated membership helped improve the Church's reputation and standing among nonmembers. It also resulted in better-trained local missionaries and more effective priesthood and auxiliary leaders. Such developments eventually led to the creation of several stakes on the island of Tahiti.[28]

As the century drew to a close, revitalized economies in the outer islands resulted in strong members once again moving to the outer islands and rebuilding weakened branches there. The first stake outside of Tahiti was created on December 5, 1993, on the island of Raiatea. Two years earlier the first branch of the Church was organized in the Marquesas Archipelago, a Church history milestone in French Polynesia.[29]

Conclusion

It took 128 years for the first stake in French Polynesia to be created (in 1972), but today, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, there are 6 stakes, 3 districts, 48 wards, and 30 branches. Out of a national population of 236,891 in 2003, the Church has a membership of 20,039, or just about 8.5 percent of the population.[30] Today, all stake and ward leaders are locals, including the temple president. French Polynesians could provide 100 percent of their missionary force, but calling expatriates affords the opportunity for more Tahitian elders and sisters to serve missions overseas. Missionaries from French Polynesia have served in such places as Africa, Australia, Canada, the Caribbean, Europe, Fiji, Japan, Madagascar, New Caledonia, New Zealand, South America, the United States, and the West Indies. These missionaries return with broader experiences to strengthen their home wards and branches.

In September 1846, Addison Pratt had a discussion with George Chapman, the American consul in Tahiti, and with a Mr. Wilson, the son of an English missionary. Pratt recorded that "they said there had never been a mission started in the Pacific Ocean that had met with the success that this had, and when our means and encouragement from home were considered it was a wonder."[31] Today, Addison Pratt, whose name Hyrum Smith promised would be "had in honor until the latest generation," must, with the other faithful Latter-day Saint pioneers of French Polynesia, look down upon the Saints spread among the islands they so dearly loved, and smile.

Kathleen C. Perrin wrote Seasons of Faith and Courage *with S. George Ellsworth. She served with her husband when he was president of the Tahiti Papeete Mission.*

Fig. 6. Faculty at the LDS elementary school in Papeete, Tahiti, in 1967
Courtesy of BYU–Hawai'i Archives

Notes

1. S. George Ellsworth, ed., *The Journals of Addison Pratt* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1990), 114–15.

2. Ellsworth, *The Journals of Addison Pratt*, 115.

3. In his journals, Addison Pratt used the spelling "Telii," although the more common spelling of this name is "Terii," which is more representative of the correct pronunciation. Both the "l" and the "r" in Tahitian are pronounced as a rolled "r."

4. Quoted in S. George Ellsworth and Kathleen C. Perrin, *Seasons of Faith and Courage: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in French Polynesia* (Sandy, UT: Yves R. Perrin, 1994), 7.

5. Quoted in Ellsworth and Perrin, *Seasons of Faith*, 9; emphasis in original.

6. Benjamin F. Grouard, Journal, 84–85, 88, 90, Archives of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City; hereafter cited as Church Archives.

7. Ellsworth, *The Journals of Addison Pratt*, 300.

8. Ellsworth, *The Journals of Addison Pratt*, 305.

9. See Ellsworth, *The Journals of Addison Pratt*, 275–77.

10. See Maria S. Ellsworth, "The First Mormon Missionary Women in the Pacific, 1850–52," in *Voyages of Faith: Explorations in Mormon Pacific History*, ed. Grant Underwood (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2000), 33–47.

11. James S. Brown, *Giant of the Lord: Life of a Pioneer* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1960), 249.

12. Brown, *Giant of the Lord*, 140.

13. This episode is recounted in detail in Brown, *Giant of the Lord*, 259–66.

14. Benjamin F. Grouard, "To the Editor of the Deseret News," *Deseret News*, January 8, 1853.

15.The RLDS Church has maintained an important presence in French Polynesia. The last official census that included religious affiliation dates back to 1971. At that time, RLDS membership was listed at 9,500. RLDS members are called "Sanitos," the Tahitian word for saints (see *Atlas de Tahiti et de la Polynesie Francaise* [Singapore: Times Editions/Les Editions du Pacifique, 1988], 41).

16. Quoted in Ellsworth and Perrin, *Seasons of Faith*, 39.

17. Ellsworth and Perrin, *Seasons of Faith*, 49.

18. Ellsworth and Perrin, *Seasons of Faith*, 62.

19. Christian Gleizal, ed., *Papeete 1818–1990* (Papeete, Tahiti: Cobalt Productions, 1990), 76–78.

20. For a firsthand account of the storms written by the Latter-day Saint district president in the Tuamotus, see H. J. Sheffield, "Missionary Experience of Heber James Sheffield in Tidal Wave and Cyclone in the Society Islands," Church Archives. A summary is provided in Ellsworth and Perrin, *Seasons of Faith*, 76–80.

21. Rossiter's experiences (including raising the child from the dead) are detailed in "Missionary Experiences as told by President Ernest C. Rossiter of the Tahitian Mission," a typed collection of ten inspirational stories taken from his correspondence to his children or from his personal journal, Church Archives, portions of which are reproduced in Ellsworth and Perrin, *Seasons of Faith*, 328–37.

22. Ellsworth and Perrin, *Seasons of Faith*, 328–31.

23. Quoted in Ellsworth and Perrin, *Seasons of Faith*, 336–37.

24. Venus Rossiter suffered from asthma, and she and her son left Tahiti for the United States in December 1943. In 1944, President Rossiter met a serious epidemic of the dengue fever in Tahiti. He set to nursing the sick but soon contracted the mosquito-born illness himself. He was nursed by Ah-ni Mariteragi. Although the crisis passed, President Rossiter was so weakened and debilitated by the disease that doctors advised him to leave Tahiti. He cabled the First Presidency who, through the intervention of the U.S. Navy, managed to arrange his transportation to San Francisco via Sāmoa and Hawai'i. After ten months of hospitalization, he was finally deemed sufficiently recovered to return to Utah, arriving in May 1945 (see Ellsworth and Perrin, *Seasons of Faith*, 91–92).

25. Magnusson's entire account is published in Ellsworth and Perrin, *Seasons of Faith*, 345–46.

26. For example, in 1958 the traveling Latter-day Saint Church Choir was not permitted to present an official public performance in Huahine, and the following year, in spite of having followed the correct procedure of requesting permission from the governor, the Church was prevented from holding various fundraising events, dances, and "cinemas." Tension escalated to the point that in 1959 Ernest C. Rossiter was sent by the First Presidency to help resolve the conflict with the French government (see Ellsworth and Perrin, *Seasons of Faith*, 153–60).

27. Ellsworth and Perrin, *Seasons of Faith*, 182.

28. A landmark sesquicentennial celebration of the Church's presence in French Polynesia was held in Tahiti in 1994. During those activities, on May 8, Elder Russell M. Nelson (re)dedicated the land of Tahiti for the preaching of the gospel, in part because no record had been found of a previous dedicatory prayer.

29. Since the turn of the twentieth century, many unsuccessful attempts had been made to establish the Church in the Marquesas Islands. In 1989, however, the barrier was finally cracked. On September 1, under the direction of mission president Yves Perrin, six missionaries were sent to the Marquesas Islands, including a Tahitian couple, Rodolphe and Marie Tua. On the island of Hiva Oa, the Tuas found Ziella O'Connor, a

member from Tahiti who had married a Marquesan, Robert O'Connor. The Tuas taught and baptized Brother O'Connor and his children, and this family served as the basis for the first branch, organized on October 12, 1991. Brother O'Connor, by then an endowed member, was called as the branch president.

30. Gerry Avant, ed., *Deseret News, 2003 Church Almanac* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 2003), 333.

31. Ellsworth, *The Journals of Addison Pratt*, 287–88.