

## Chapter 6

# Thirty Years of Pioneers on Pohnpei, Micronesia

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Even today, the islands of Micronesia (meaning “small islands”) remain largely unknown to many Latter-day Saints. Micronesia was the site of many World War II battles, where American forces fought the entrenched Japanese to win a foothold in the Pacific. One of those marines was future Apostle L. Tom Perry, who was stationed in Saipan and Tinian. Names like Guam, Saipan, and Chuuk (Truk) bring back haunting memories to veterans who fought there. But these lush islands, with their breathtaking coral reefs and swaying coconut trees, are also home to some of the kindest, most generous people on earth.

The Micronesia Guam Mission offers daunting challenges to its mission presidents, who supervise both the ecclesiastical and missionary work on the islands. As the twenty-first century dawned, the mission was the world’s largest geographically, with an area the size of the continental United States but a total land mass smaller than Rhode Island. Because of their physical distance from mission headquarters and the language barriers, local leaders are largely on their own to run Church programs and maintain doctrinal orthodoxy. Additionally, missionaries receive no formal training in the mission’s seven major languages, have no electricity or running water in many locations, and have to endure a hot, humid climate; plentiful mosquitoes; and bouts with tropical diseases such as dysentery.

This essay tells the thirty-year history of pioneering members on the island of Pohnpei (pronounced “PONE-pay” and

means “on the altar”). Capital of the Federated States of Micronesia, Pohnpei is a mountainous, volcanic island west of Hawaii and northwest of Fiji. Because of the similar name, it is frequently confused with Pompeii, the famous Italian city destroyed by Mount Vesuvius. Pohnpei is a melting pot, bringing together people from the outlying islands of Kosrae, Kapingamarangi, Chuuk, Pingelap, Mortlock, and Mwokil, among others. Each group has a different language and culture. In 1988 selections from the Book of Mormon were published in Pohnpeian.<sup>1</sup> This essay features previously unpublished accounts from members and missionaries, including oral interviews conducted by Ricky Joel, former president of the Kolonia Branch.

Several themes emerge from these reminiscences. When the converts joined the Church, each overcame strong cultural challenges, including peer pressure from family, friends, and members of other religions. Like most new converts in Micronesia, they face ostracism from members of the Catholic and Congregational churches, respectively 52.4 percent and 39.7 percent of the island’s religious base.<sup>2</sup> Most Latter-day Saint converts have to give up smoking, chewing betel nut, and drinking alcohol and *sakan*, a narcotic drink made from pounded roots. In addition, converts must transition between the easy-going island way and a Latter-day Saint culture of sacrificing time and talents to strengthen their homes and serve their fellow Saints.

## Opening of the Work

The first missionaries to Pohnpei, Elders George L. Mortensen and Aldric L. Porter, arrived from the Hawaii Honolulu Mission on October 23, 1976. They came at the request of native

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1. Lee Warnick, “Book of Mormon in 80th Language,” *Church News*, January 9, 1988, Z3.
  2. Maureen Fitzgerald, *Whisper of the Mother: From Menarche to Menopause among Women in Pohnpei* (Westport, CN: Bergin and Garvey, 2001), 15.

Pohnpeian Ohren R. Ohry, a convert baptized in Hawaii while attending college there, who urged Church leaders to send elders to the small Pacific island. Several months of hard work yielded fruit despite persecution from members of other faiths. On March 5, 1977, several members of Ohry's family were baptized, along with Seisero Salomon. It is fitting that the first baptisms occurred in Madolenihmw, home to the ruins of Nan Madol, an ancient canal city called the Venice of Micronesia. This area retains a cultural and historical significance because of the civilization that once flourished there.

A week later, in the capital city of Kolonia, a convert named Perden Samson and the Naped S. Elias family<sup>3</sup> likewise entered the waters of baptism. "Kolonia is really starting to blossom like a rose," wrote Chris Harrison, a young missionary from Arizona, on March 21, 1977. "Last night we had 42 people at sacrament meeting. This was only our fifth sacrament meeting in town. Very soon our apartment will not be near big enough if this growth keeps coming."<sup>4</sup> In 1977 the missionaries baptized three more families who are the main focus of this article: the Herlino Makaya family, the Rinster Joel family, and the Wainas Ioanis family.

### **Herlino and Rosa Makaya**

Herlino and Rosa Makaya first met in Hawaii when Rosa was there for heart surgery. When he saw her in the hospital, Herlino

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3. Unpublished history of missionary work in Pohnpei, located in missionary apartment in Kolonia. Naped Elias and his wife, Srue, traveled to Honolulu, Hawaii, on June 18, 1978, and became the first Pohnpeians to be sealed in the temple. Naped later served as branch president in Kolonia.
  4. Journal of Chris Harrison, March 21, 1977, Micronesia Guam Mission Web site; <http://www.mission.net/micronesia/guam/stories.php?sID=451>.

says he fell in love with her and knew they would be married. After her recovery they went back to Pohnpei and were married. Herlino first met the missionaries through an introduction by his wife's relative in 1977 on his way home from his job at the island's communications station. They invited him to listen to their message. Though Herlino disbelieved their message at first, he was impressed with how the young men conducted themselves. He thought it strange that they both had the same first name—Elder Harrison and Elder Mortenson.

Herlino's and Rosa's parents, however, did not like the missionaries. They told Herlino that he and his wife would be evicted if they continued to let the missionaries teach them. When Herlino was baptized in September 1977, he and his wife were kicked out of their home. But Herlino and Rosa were allowed to remain on the surrounding land, so they moved up toward the mountain and built a little shed for their new home.

About two months later, Rosa washed her clothes in the stream and began crying. Herlino thought she was upset because her family had given her a hard time because of his baptism. After he asked Rosa three times why she was crying, she said, "I'm joining the Church!" She said that Herlino had become a new man through his conversion. He now lived the Word of Wisdom and stayed home instead of going out drinking. Rosa had also observed the missionaries and knew there was no reason to hate them. Led by the Spirit, she decided to be baptized, although the choice was difficult. When Rosa asked her parents for permission to be baptized, they said, "If you do that, we'll disown you!" They were upset when she was later baptized, but they chose not to cut her off from their family. Their hearts eventually softened, and they even attended church with Herlino and Rosa.

Herlino was soon called as a branch president in Madolenihmw. Moreover, the Church Translation Department asked him to assist Matterson Elwin and Mark Norman in translating

the Book of Mormon into Pohnpeian.<sup>5</sup> Herlino later translated the temple ordinances into Pohnpeian in the Salt Lake Temple. He eventually served as district president for Pohnpei and was noted for his enthusiastic leadership.

In 1998 the Makayas moved to Honolulu, Hawaii, to get medical care for Rosa. Despite this, she still suffered several strokes and passed away in 2001. Her death was devastating for Herlino. In Hawaii, he visited his old friend and former missionary, Chris Harrison, and reminded him of a story Harrison had told him as a missionary. The story involved a boy who was not a fast runner but wanted his father to see him race. He told his dad he would probably come in last place. The race began, but as the boy neared the finish line, he looked up to see his dad and tripped. Hurt and alone, the boy finally crawled across the finish line. His teacher picked him up and told him, "Well done; you have finished the race." After Herlino passed away on November 21, 2003, Chris Harrison wrote this tribute: "Herlino . . . fell several times in life. He kept crawling, and he did finish his race well. His Master Teacher has embraced him and thanked him for all that he did that was so very good. I love Herlino and Rosa and will miss them until I finish my race."<sup>6</sup>

### **Rinster and Bella Joel**

Another household important to the Church in Pohnpei was the Rinster and Bella Joel family. In March 1977, Rinster was hired to build a new lighting system for the airport runway. Previously, whenever a plane would approach at night, the local radio station would broadcast a call for every available

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5. Warnick, "Book of Mormon," Z3.

6. Chris Harrison, November 26, 2003, Micronesia Guam Mission Web site; <http://www.mission.net/micronesia/guam/stories.php?sID=578>.

vehicle to shine their lights on the runway so the approaching pilot could see where to land.

One day Rinster met the missionaries at their apartment, where he had lingered two hours in the rain to talk to them. “As he entered our home,” wrote Elder Harrison, “he said he had been waiting for us so he could set up an appointment. He said after the first time we talked for only five minutes, he knew that we had a true message and he wanted to know what he and his wife must do to hear our message and be baptized.” Harrison testified, “I know that it was nothing we said in those five minutes that got him so excited. I know that it was the Spirit touching his spirit.”<sup>7</sup>

Even though Rinster felt the Spirit’s witness, he faced opposition from his fellow islanders, including Bella’s grandfather, a minister in another Christian denomination. Living on Pohnpei is the ultimate small-town experience. People know each other so well that they sometimes exclude those who are different.

Rinster and Bella lived with her grandfather, and they felt uncomfortable about having the missionaries visit them there. They sometimes made up excuses to have the elders leave. Sometimes when the missionaries arrived, Bella would begin chopping wood or cooking, signaling that she was busy. However, they were patient and promised to return. They usually came back an hour or two later. She remembers them as being very persistent. Bella joined the Church on September 24, 1977, because of her husband’s wishes, not because she had a witness from the Holy Ghost. After joining the Church, Rinster and Bella were persecuted by people of other faiths. “One day after I had joined the Church, our neighbors, who were mostly Baptists, claimed that I burned a pamphlet made by their church,” she recalls. “They said that they felt sorry for me and my husband and our two

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7. Journal of Chris Harrison, March 17, 1977, <http://www.mission.net/micronesia/guam/stories.php?sID=451>.

young children because I had put kerosene on the pamphlet, lit it, and watched it burn all the way to light a cooking fire. I can't recall if I had actually burned the pamphlet, but they just said I was a worshiper of the 'anti-Christ.'"

Her testimony began to grow as she continued to attend Church meetings. Bella is grateful for the impact of the gospel on her children, who were spared from many of the challenges Western culture had on the islanders, including alcoholism: "Above all the other reasons I am thankful for the Church is that when I hear screaming (young men drinking and disturbing the peace) I know that Ricky is not involved," she notes. "My mother says I am a lucky mother because of what the Church has done for my children. My children are better children because of the Church."<sup>8</sup>

Their son Ricky eventually served a mission in Los Angeles, California, and attended college at Brigham Young University–Hawaii. During impressionable times in his young life, Ricky was able to learn from President Gordon B. Hinckley: "President Hinckley spoke during some of the major highlights of my single life, during my mission in Los Angeles, where three missions gathered to hear him speak, while being a college student (January 2000), and during my graduation ceremony at BYU–Hawaii," Ricky writes.<sup>9</sup> Ricky was later called as the branch president in Kolonia. Inspired by the spirit of family history, he began gathering stories and photos of many of these early pioneering members.

### **Pioneer Day Celebration**

Ten years after missionaries arrived in Pohnpei, Latter-day Saints from the three branches on the island (Kolonia, Mand,

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8. Bella Joel, interview by Ricky Joel, February 2007.

9. Ricky Joel to Devan Jensen, e-mail correspondence, May 23, 2007.

and Sapwalap) met on October 24, 1986, to celebrate their pioneer day. They commemorated the efforts of the first missionaries and the islanders who courageously joined the Church despite tremendous peer pressure. It was the biggest gathering of Saints on the island, and was a time of great joy. The district presidency—Herlino Makaya, Walter Simram, and Ianser Edwards—conducted the celebration.

Members and missionaries met on a lush, green hill and sang hymns, including “Oh, How Lovely Was the Morning” and “Come, Come, Ye Saints.” Following a generous, luau-style feast of roast pig, rice, taro, coconut, bananas, and other fruit, the Saints played volleyball and celebrated with dance and song. Colorfully costumed Kapingamarangi girls from the village of Mand sang and danced; they were led by Rodenson Saikul, the elders quorum president, and his wife, Sarina, a seminary teacher.

Each branch participated, and sisters from the Kolonia Branch sang several songs while pounding with sticks on a long board. Bedecked with leis, brown-skinned girls with flowered dresses danced the hula. In a lighthearted moment, seventy-year-old Moses Saimon, the oldest member on the island, joined the hula dancers for an impromptu dance while the audience cheered. This celebration was uplifting for all. Having served on the island as a missionary for only three weeks, I wrote in my journal, “Felt strength today. Hurray! Maybe 120 members gathered. The members were strong, organized, happy. Beautiful dances. Good fellowship.”<sup>10</sup>

### **Wainas and Elsihpa Ioanis**

When I arrived in the village of Mand in October 1986, the branch president was Wainas Ioanis, a round-faced, cheerful

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10. Richard Devan Jensen, missionary journal, available in Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City.



fellow who was also a terrific ping-pong player. Like so many Pohnpeians, he and his wife, Elsihpa, were generous with everything they owned. Their conversion in 1977 occurred over several months: “Wainis would avoid the missionaries at first,” his wife recalled. “He did not believe in the Church. He said it was a false church. One night, he had a dream. He said that in his dream, he wore a white shirt and had on a necktie. He dreamt that he had become a branch president. He told me of the dream and said that he was going to get baptized. He must have still doubted the Church and his dream. It took Wainas and me two months to get baptized after his dream.”

Wainas gave up gambling and smoking, and he helped convince his parents and siblings to join the Church. Elder Alan Winter baptized them. Elsihpa and Wainas loved the missionaries and enjoyed feeding them fried turkey tails, rice, bananas, and coconuts.

Unfortunately, the community soon ostracized the Ioanises. “When we were using the school building to hold our meetings, they would say, ‘Oh, look at those monkeys, they are thirty years old and still going to school.’ When we would cross paths going to our separate churches, they would say we were the ugliest, dumbest monkeys,” said Elsihpa. “I have to admit that sometimes I was so ashamed walking by their church that I would ask Wainis if we could walk along the stream to get to our church so we could avoid the comments and ridicule.”

One day the missionaries were forced to move out of Oren Ohry’s house. They came home one day and saw their belongings had been put outside the house with a note saying never to stay there again. The missionaries moved to the Ioanis home, where they “built a shack for us to worship in and a small box which they stayed in,” wrote Elsihpa. “I call this a box because it had just one door and no windows. The only opening to get air was the space between the walls and the roof of the house.”

Those missionaries did not even have access to drinking water, so they asked the Ioanis family to apply for water rights. The community refused to give permission, but Wainas told them they could not restrict water rights because it was for everyone. Wainas pleaded for water to be given to the missionaries because they were men of God. When the day was over, the pipes were installed and the missionaries were able to have access to the water.<sup>11</sup>

Wainas served faithfully as branch president for approximately seven years in Mand. Under the leadership of David J. Rollins, then president of the Micronesia Guam Mission, missionaries were instructed to help the people become more self-reliant and essentially wean themselves from the missionaries. For example, missionaries were not to conduct sacrament meetings, bless the sacrament, play the piano, or perform other duties that members could do for themselves. This instruction did create an awkward transition because the members were so accustomed to the missionaries' help, but it helped set the branches on the road to greater self-sufficiency.

One of the great blessings of the Ioanis family's lives came in 1995, when Wainas flew to Salt Lake City on a Church translation trip. From Utah he purchased a ticket for his wife to join him. They were sealed for eternity in the Bountiful Utah Temple.

When Sister Ioanis and a group of Pohnpeians were in Salt Lake City during that same trip, I happened to be eating lunch in the downtown ZCMI Center food court. Someone tapped me on the shoulder. It was Franklin Lihpai, one of the first native Pohnpeian missionaries, who asked, "Excuse me, don't I know you?"

Overwhelmed by this inspired meeting, I invited the group over to my home in Bountiful to feed them a meal. The people

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11. Elsihpa Ioanis, interview by Ricky Joel, March 15, 2007.

of Pohnpei are renowned for their generosity, and this was the least I could do for all the delicious meals they had fed me.

Wainas served as branch president in Kolonia for about five years; he was then called to serve in the district presidency and flew to Guam for a training seminar hosted by Phillip G. Pulsipher, president of the Micronesia Guam Mission. Several years later, on April 18, 2006, Wainas passed away. Elsihpa said before Wainas died he asked her to remain true to the Church. She testified: "I know this church is true. I am thankful for what the Church has done for my children when they were young. Now they are married, and they have to live on their own testimonies. . . . My parents said that every church is true; but this church seems to have brought us more joy. Our children are unlike others in my family. My sisters have asked that I go back to them and back to my former church, but I said, 'Don't tire yourself out; no one is going to take me away from this church.'"<sup>12</sup>

### Walkner and Iosepa Joseph

In 2004, Walkner and Iosepa Joseph, both seventy-two years old, joined the Church in Uh (pronounced "oo") after years of hearing the missionary discussions. They invited members in their community to meet in their *nabs*, an open-air meeting place like a bowery. With approval from mission president Phillip Pulsipher, the Church donated money to improve the meeting place and built an outhouse with a septic tank and flush toilet.<sup>13</sup>

Both Brother and Sister Joseph died within two weeks of the dedicatory services. "This chapel is a monument to a wonderful little couple who embraced the gospel," wrote President

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12. Elsihpa Ioanis, interview by Ricky Joel, March 15, 2007.

13. "A Place to Meet for a Growing Branch," *Church News*, January 14, 2006, Z14.

Pulsipher. “The timing was perfect for the seeds of the gospel to sprout in the hearts of Walkner and Iosepa. . . . Those gospel seeds that first sprouted in Walkner and Iosepa have spread to include many and will continue to spread. Walkner and Iosepa were true pioneers in their little corner of the world.”<sup>14</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Based on the conversion accounts and missionary work in Pohnpei, the following pattern appears. First, the Lord moves the work forward according to His own timetable. The large number of baptisms at the outset of missionary work in 1977 suggests that the Lord was raising up local leaders who would be able to guide the work. Second, island converts to the Church face strong peer pressure to conform to tradition. Though islanders can be easygoing, there is tremendous pressure to belong to the dominant Christian religions and to follow island traditions, such as drinking sakau and chewing betel nut. Third, new converts are especially vulnerable in their first year of Church membership to return to past behaviors, especially smoking, drinking, and socializing with old friends. Regular Church attendance and frequent contact with their local leaders is vital during their first year as Latter-day Saints. Fourth, converts who persevere despite opposition are usually those called to serve in leadership positions. A culture of service and sacrifice seem to be passed along to the next generation, sparing them from many vices of Western civilization.

The people of Pohnpei face a new challenge in the twenty-first century. The United States government, anxious to retain a military foothold in the Pacific, is creating a welfare state by sending food and supplies. When people are given free rice, corn, and pork, they lose the incentive to cultivate crops and

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14. Phillip G. Pulsipher to Devan Jensen, e-mail, March 1, 2007.

raise animals. The Pohnpeians' self-sufficiency is thus being undermined. Yet their way of life can be preserved as parents pass along habits of hard work and self-reliance to the next generation. As Latter-day Saints blend their adopted Church culture with the best of their easygoing island lifestyle, their homes and branches will be strengthened. It seems that the image of a branch is especially appropriate for the lush island of Pohnpei. Like the great banyan trees that grow on the island, the gospel message has taken many years to take root. Thirty years after the initial seeds were planted, the branches of the Church are spreading over the island.

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