

Family and Community Building in the Pacific

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Encompassing approximately 1/6 of the earth's surface is the Pacific Ocean. Sprinkled liberally throughout this vast expanse are a myriad islands. The multi-faceted cultures, races, and traditions, combined with a unique geography weaves a rich and diverse tapestry of the human condition unlike any other region of the world.

Successive waves of migration over the past ten thousand years has served to populate a great majority of the Pacific islands. Hawaii to the north, Tahiti to the east, New Zealand on the southern edge, Papua New Guinea and the Caroline Islands (to name a few) on the western side form the general boundaries of the island countries of the Pacific.

Cousins all. The Micronesians, the Melanesians, and the Polynesians are one sprawling family of sea-faring adventurers and island dwellers. They are loosely tied together by a similar and common history. Separate experiences, distinct mores and customs, plus countless square miles of blue ocean dissuade these family members from unconditionally embracing one another.

For thousands of years the peoples of the Pacific interacted, unaware that a new wave of migration was imminent. Known as the "Palangi," "Pakiha," "Howlie," or other designations, the European race was soon to wash over the Pacific Archipelago initiating changes so dramatic and far reaching that the entire face of the region was altered. Christianity, reading and writing, western commerce and judicial law all served to raise the standards of living while at the same time irrevocably destroying age-old traditions within virtually every culture found throughout these climes.

As we stand at the door of the twenty-first century there is no such thing as a "traditional" Pacific culture. The organic nature of culture can clearly be seen in the unalterable changes wrought by 250 years of contact with outside influences. The present-day Pacific, then, is a blend of ancient culture, half-forgotten traditions, all mixed with a liberal amount of European influence and a sprinkling of contact with an emerging Asia.

A new and dynamic Force now stands poised over the region. The teachings of Baha'u'llah offer all people the practical and spiritual means of coming to terms with the oneness of the human experience. The social and ethical teachings are just beginning to exert their force for good in communities in every island country. As the next century unfolds this Spirit of oneness will ultimately allow the people of the Pacific to cast aside their every minor difference and embrace as one common family. Establishing strong communities, built upon the mighty Teachings of Baha'u'llah is, then, one of the foremost challenges facing the Baha'is of the Pacific as we enter the new millennium.

Nestled deep in the South Pacific is the Kingdom of Tonga. It is located 1000 miles north of New Zealand, 500 miles east of Fiji, and 400 miles to the south of Samoa. There are some 93,000 inhabitants in

this Polynesian country. The approximately 4,000 foreigners are fairly evenly distributed between Asians and Europeans. Tongan is the primary language. English is widely spoken. Three major island groups lie north to south at about 100 mile intervals. Tongatapu, with the capital Nuku'alofa, lies to the south. Ha'apai is the center group. Vava'u and surrounding islands form the northernmost group of islands in the Kingdom.

Because we have lived in Tonga for seventeen years we will use it as a focus for our discussion. For the past thirteen years Vava'u, with a population of 17,000, has been our home. We have raised three children there, two of our own and an adopted Tongan girl. Through our association with the Baha'i and non-Baha'i communities we have become conversant with the general situation facing the Pacific today, aware of the efforts to build Baha'i communities in Tonga and the surrounding countries, and developed a feeling for the future potential of the region. The Tongan experience parallels that of other countries in the South Pacific. We have chosen, therefore, to use examples from our experience with the belief that the reader will gain a feeling for the wider island community through study of one of its members. Due to lack of space and time we have chosen to center our thoughts on three distinct areas: 1) Education; 2) Women and family development, and; 3) Institutes.

Before exploring specific topics there is one overriding aspect of life in the Pacific which pervades every level. It is at once, perhaps, the regions greatest asset and at the same time its largest liability. No understanding of the Pacific islands will be complete unless this factor is taken into account. Life is easy! No one starves, nobody dies from war, everyone has a family, and things can always wait until tomorrow. The content born of such an environment gives the islands its calm and peaceful quality. It gives rise to the attitude of tolerance and easy going friendliness found throughout the region. Yet, the very contentedness which makes the Pacific so attractive is at the very root of the causes holding back development and frustrating innovative change. Why change when life is so good? Why progress to a higher economic and educational level when most everything needed is already supplied without expending extra brain power and commitment? This attitude pervades religion, the family, education, and economic endeavors.

Any initiatives by the Baha'i community must take this all encompassing pattern of life into account. Traditional ways have been entrenched for centuries and the societies found in the islands have become quite conservative in nature. Conservatism is extremely resistant to change.

Therefore patience, persistence, understanding and realistic expectations must characterize the attitude of anyone wishing to instigate change in the Pacific.

Education

Written language has been present in most islands of the Pacific for less than 200 years. Most literature has been religious in nature. Tradition, knowledge, wisdom, and culture have been (and continue to be) handed down orally. Reading and book learning, then, are still seldom valued for two reasons. First, the strong oral tradition still persists and secondly, the lack of literature in the local languages.

Tonga, thanks to an aggressive educational policy by the government, has developed quickly in the realm of literacy. Some 96% of the population can read and write in the Tongan language. This certainly makes it one of the most literate countries in the world! The potential is present for great strides to be

taken at all levels of society; for if a people are educated they will progress! Samoa and Fiji are at similar levels of literacy.

The challenge for the Baha'i community lies in three areas: 1) Promoting education; 2) Making more literature available in Tongan; 3) Assisting the friends in acquiring a better understanding of English. Two examples of projects in Tonga will serve as examples of the types of projects which may be found in different countries around the Pacific.

The New Era Baha'i Kindergarten in Vava'u:

First opened in 1984, this developmental project of the Local Spiritual Assembly of Neiafu has run continuously for eleven years on 100% local support! Statistics show that children who have been in that school are now found almost always in the upper 1/3 of their class in high school or secondary school. The New Era curriculum is centered around reading readiness, basic math, English, and music. A strong emphasis is placed on Baha'i spiritual values, even though the Baha'i Faith itself is not stressed openly. Many of the students are not Baha'i. Therefore, a conscious effort is made to include parents in the school activities. This has led to a feeling of goodwill towards the Baha'i community which did not necessarily exist in the past. As a result of the success at New Era, the National Spiritual Assembly is planning on opening two new schools in the near future.

One will be a kindergarten on the island of 'Eua (near Tongatapu). A more ambitious project is being carried out on Tongatapu. A primary school!

Baha'i Primary School in Nuku'alofa:

In an attempt to widen the influence of the Faith and at the same time raise the standard of education among the population, the National Spiritual Assembly has embarked on a program designed to open a Baha'i elementary school by February of 1996.

Initially the school will include grades 1-6. Three teachers, an administrator, secretary and maintenance person will staff the facility. As the school matures staff will be expanded and the number of students increased. The vision is to eventually have a school, grades 1-12 (Form 6), run as much as possible on Baha'i principles. The value of such an institution to the country needs no elaboration. A further goal is to raise the credibility of the Faith to such a degree that the process of entry by troops will be greatly enhanced.

Women and Family Development

The position of women in Tonga has always been a secondary one. They have been mostly relegated to child rearing and household activities and not much more. The men, on the other hand, have had free reign to come and go as they please. Consequently, the men have dominated the family, but the day-to-day life has been directed mostly by the women. The advent of Christianity strengthened the traditional station of women.

Baha'u'llah's Teachings on the family are visionary in nature. In a conservative society they are seen as nothing less than revolutionary! That women are equal; men required to assist the wives in the early education of children; the idea of consultation over dictatorship; children's rights and more are all anathema to Tongan society - to both men and women!

Needless to say there has been a great amount of resistance among the Tongan men in the area of women's development. The equality of women is essentially as much a man's issue as it is a women's issue. No lasting progress can be realized until men are willingly brought into the process.

The Baha'i Faith has a tremendous advantage in this respect over other religious and social groups. To be a Baha'i male automatically involves you in the process of women's development. Because of this inherent advantage men in the Baha'i community are coming to grips with this challenge at a much faster rate than men in the wider community. Gratifying advances in this area are being made throughout the Kingdom and assuredly throughout the whole of the Pacific islands. A few specific examples will help explain.

A recent report cited the divorce rate in Tonga to be over 30%. The rate of divorce among Baha'is is virtually nonexistent. We can remember only three divorces among Baha'i couples in the past 17 years! Patterns of marriage among Baha'is are visibly changing. While men are still much freer than women we see many men home with their families at night, involved in child rearing, and assisting with household chores. Wife beating is a popular pastime in Tonga. Among Baha'i men it has dropped drastically.

On a wider scale there are also advances. More and more women are serving on the institutions of the Faith. Men are sharing more speaking time with women at all meetings. The chairman and secretary of the National Spiritual Assembly are both women. Three young ladies have served at the World Center (as opposed to two young men). Local Baha'i women's committees have recently reached out to begin the educational process for women in the general community. Workshops are being held to raise the public awareness on subjects such as Family Life, Women's Role in the Community, and Women's Responsibility in the Education of Their Children. While there is still a long way to go, the continuing signs of progress are apparent throughout the community.

How has this progress been achieved? Probably the single most important effort has been in children and youth education. The past twenty years have seen hundreds of children and youth trained in an atmosphere ever more conforming to the Baha'i principles. As these young ones have married, family patterns have started to change. New believers enrolling today have a structure of Baha'i family life to which they are encouraged to conform.

This positive cycle is creating an ever increasing Baha'i atmosphere in the country.

Over the years literally hundreds of programs have also been presented within the Baha'i community on women and family development, marriage, and consultation. These workshops, lectures, and more recently institute programs have served to keep the Baha'is focused on the importance of these issues in our development as a community.

The Role of Institutes in Development

Perhaps the most significant and exciting addition to the Faith in Tonga is the advent of the Nur Institute, formally the National Teaching Institute. It is the first permanent teaching institute in the South Pacific and has been in existence for three years.

The role of the institute cannot be over estimated when considering the future of the Faith. The institute concept can help community building in a number of ways. First, the method of study encourages active participation. Each individual who participates is at once teacher and student. No one person

dominates the process nor is there one speaker and a group who passively listens. Secondly, the material used is centered on the Holy Writings. Quotes are presented and then studied in depth using a variation of short answers, true or false, discussion, and fill-in questions. Thirdly, the institute seeks to center the believers on the holy Writings and prayer in conjunction with some form of service to the Cause. This service may be in the form of teaching, children's classes, community service, or some other area of endeavor. New believers are encouraged to attend institute programs.

From this institute environment the believers are prepared to set out on a path of service which is the surest way to confirm a person into the Faith. The Nur Institute has adopted the motto "Teaching ourselves, teaching others." This implies a three pronged approach which includes 1) Teacher preparation; 2) Deepening new believers as they are enrolled; 3) Continuing courses of deepening for all Baha'is. The Board of the Nur Institute feels it is the role of the institute to develop human resources for the Cause: Individuals who will arise and serve their Lord in all areas of the ever spreading World Order of Baha'u'llah.

One caution should be mentioned at this point. We sometimes refer to an institute as a "Ruhi" or the "Ruhi style". While the Ruhi Institute is a prototype for institutes worldwide, it was developed for a Catholic Christian, rural population, in South America. Much of the material they have developed is applicable everywhere. However, each area is different. For example, the approach used in Tokyo will differ in many ways from that used in the small towns of Europe or the islands of the Pacific. Each Institute will be unique. It is the overriding concept given to us through the International Teaching Center which must be translated into appropriate form in each country and even within different areas of the same country.

The scope of this talk is too limited for a lengthy discussion. Much more information may be obtained from the Ruhi Institute in Colombia, the National Teaching Institute of the Philippines, or the Nur Institute of Tonga. The Teaching Institute of Kurume City here in Japan can undoubtedly provide much information on the institute concept and how it is already being applied in Japan.

Future Prospects

We are told in the Baha'i Writings that perfection is unlimited. Community building, therefore, is a process which will never really come to an end. In this early dawn of humanity's coming together we can dimly visualize the basic patterns which will eventually constitute the bedrock upon which the World Order of Baha'u'llah will stand. The unfolding of a new form of education, progress of women, the building of a distinctly Baha'i family structure are three areas which are vital to the development of the Faith of Baha'u'llah, even more, that of mankind. As we enter the first critical decades of the twenty-first century the followers of the Blessed Beauty in the Pacific are challenged to facilitate the maturity of the nascent Baha'i community as quickly and as thoroughly as possible.

The tremendous endeavor of transforming our world from its childhood to its youthful maturity will not be easy, in fact it will often be frustrating and even agonizing. But it will be done. The Blessed Perfection made that promise! We may look confidently towards a future characterized by the following words of the beloved Guardian.

“And now as I look into the future, I hope to see the friends at all times, and of every shade of thought and character, voluntarily and joyously rallying around their local and in particular their national centers of activity, upholding and promoting them with complete unanimity and contentment, with perfect understanding, genuine enthusiasm and sustained vigor. This is indeed the one joy and of yearning of my life.”