THE TONGAN RESPONSE TO THE GOSPEL

Rev. Dr Sione 'Amanaki Havea
President, Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga


1. Greetings.

2. I have a confession to make. I am no historian nor a son of an historian. My only history to make is that I am a Wesleyan from Tonga. I am a third generation Wesleyan minister. My grandfather Siotame was one of the first ministers to be ordained. Then my father was a Methodist minister. My father was born in 1869. So I must say that my particular clan have lived in parsonages for more than 120 years. I have three sons who are in the Methodist ministry. Some history! I am very proud of it, and I hope this tradition will continue for many generations to come. I also believe in ecumenism. My thoughts go back to 1953 when I was a student in America, and I was elected to represent the Methodist Church of Australasia as a delegate to the World Council of Churches Second Assembly in Evanston, United States of America. Then later I have been involved in many ecumenical conferences.

In 1961 I was one of the founding members of the Pacific Conference of Churches. Then I have attended World Assembly meetings at New Delhi, Uppsala, Nairobi and Vancouver. So these two factors remain in my heart: first I am a Wesleyan and secondly I believe in ecumenism. John Wesley believed in ecumenism. He wrote to a Roman Catholic and offered him his right hand of fellowship even though they believed differently, but they had so many things in common.

3. The history of Tonga starts with the history of Missions and especially with Wesleyanism. The Methodist Church in Tonga is known as the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga (FWCT), and we owe that to the first Wesleyan Missionaries who came to Tonga in 1822 and later in 1826. I will come to this later.

4. The first Europeans to discover the Tongan Islands were Spaniards, Scouten and Lemaire, in 1916 and Abel Tasman in 1643. Captain James Cook visited Tonga three times, in 1773, 1774 and 1777. He named Tonga the Friendly Islands. But according to stories there was a plot against his life, and if he stayed one day longer he would have been a Cooked Captain!
When Captain Cook returned to England he told many fine stories about the South Seas Islanders, which moved many Christians to start a missionary enterprise to the Pacific.

5. The Churches got together to raise funds to send missionaries to the Pacific. The London Missionary Society (LMS) was established in 1797 and the Missionary ship Duff arrived in London with missionaries to evangelize the South Seas. Some were left in Hawaii and Tahiti and in 1799 ten lay missionaries landed in Tonga. Most of these lay missionaries were artisans to teach the people about western civilisation, then later to evangelize them. Unfortunately they came at a time when there were civil wars in Tonga. Their tools were much needed for weapons. They found shelters amongst the political chiefs and there was insecurity in their lives. There was suspicion in the people when the men sang hymns for their worship on Sundays, and, because there was war at that time, the people blamed the missionaries for bringing with them these troubles.

They tried to stay together but it was not long before more wars broke out and three men were martyred. This was a big blow to the rest and they finally decided to leave Tonga when a boat from Australia called. Some lived in Sydney and some returned to England. The missions in Hawaii and Tahiti were more successful, but the only thing that happened in Tonga was that the 'blood of the Martyrs became the seeds of the Gospel'.

6. The Wesleyan Mission. In England, there was a young man who offered to be a missionary. His name was Walter Lawry. He found a wife in Sydney, Miss Mary Hassal, whose parents were missionaries in Tahiti. In 1822 they left for Tonga and established at Mu'a on the eastern side of Tongatapu. Lawry stayed only for less than two years and decided to return for the sake of Mrs Lawry's health. There is a new book on Mrs Lawry's letters and it is worth reading, which brings out the other side of the missionary wife's life which is so often overlooked.

On 28 June 1826, two Wesleyan missionaries, the Rev. John Thomas and John Hutchinson, landed in Tonga on the western end of Tongatapu. In spite of some hardships they moved slowly inland. At this time, there were two Tahitians who came to take the Gospel to Fiji. The King at that time, Aleamotu'a, invited them to teach him and his people about the Gospel. They stayed and started in Nuku'alofa while John Thomas and John Hutchinson pushed in from the west. Few people were converted at the beginning but gradually the Church and Mission was established. The first Church was built by Aleamotu'a for the two Tahitians.

More missionaries were sent from England and Australia. A theological school was started in Vava'u together with a printing press. Schools were started in the villages. The bible was translated and printed in Tonga.
7. Politically Tonga was never under any foreign rule, and it was fortunate that the missionaries came under the British flag. In December 1845 King Tupou I was crowned the King of Tonga. While I talk about dates, let me give some important dates and events and they are valuable to us.

i) On 23 July 1834, the great revival took place which marked the growth of the Church. A layman preached in a village church, and after the benediction, the people did not want to go home; they stayed and prayed all night and in the morning they received the blessings of the Holy Spirit. This event spread right through Vava'u, then Ha'apai and Tongatapu. The wind of the Holy Spirit caught the sail of the boat, and the Church grew fast. Missionaries were sent to Fiji and Samoa.

ii) 1839, the Vava'u Code—which gave the commoners their right of ownership to the land. The observance of the Sabbath day was established.

iii) 1862—the Emancipation of all peoples and the beginning of the Parliamentary rule.

iv) 1875—The Constitution of Tonga was passed by the Parliament. The Tonga Flag and Coat of Arms were introduced with this motto: "God and Tonga are my inheritance".

8. The Church in Conflict. While things ran smoothly, there was a great upheaval. This got started between missionaries. In 1865 the Tupou College was started with the Rev. James Egan Moulton as its first principal. The Rev. Shirley Waldemar Baker, at the same time, was Chairman of the Tongan District. They were both eager leaders but no one wanted to give way to the other, so both ends of the same string stretched to its extreme.

There is a rumour that the trouble was started or got inflamed from the two wives over a dispute on a common clothes line! So the two husbands took it up and without noticing the 'heat' turned into a destroying fire! This resulted in the severing of the Tongan Church from the Church in Australia, and then instead of one Mission Church, another Church was established and built churches next door to the other church. There were two parsonages in most villages. Two church bells rang to call people to worship. The King favoured the new Church and his supporters persecuted the few loyal Wesleyans who did not join the new Church. Some Wesleyans were exiled to Fiji for three years. A new Government school was founded side by side to the old Tupou College. The students of both colleges caused hatred against each other. The Church was divided and the result of it was that there are four new splinter Churches. In 1924 an effort was made to bring the two churches together. This resulted in Union with a continuing Free Church. In 1929 a group broke away from the Free Church. In 1979 another group broke away, and in 1987 a new Constitutional Free Church was
constituted. Some say its a joke that they all started by the strains of the clothes line! But it is no joke to put strain on the Body of our Lord.

In 1855 Wesleyan Missions was handed over to the Australian Church and since then we have been associated with Methodist Overseas Missions of Australasia, until June 1977 when the Methodists joined the Uniting Church in Australia. We are now autonomous and are linked with other Methodist Churches of Fiji and Samoa through a Methodist Consultative Committee of the Pacific (MCCP) which meets once a year.

At present we have missionaries from England, Australia, New Zealand and the United States of America. We have an Annual Conference which meets every year.

**Tonga Today**

One of our heavy tasks is the running of secondary schools. About 90 of secondary education is administered by Churches and Missions. So, about 40 of our Church funds are spent on education. This year, for the first time, we will receive funds from the Government to subsidise our schools. This will help support our teachers' stipends.

For four years now the Church has been engaged on its Mission in Renewal and Evangelism. There are three departments for Christian Education, Evangelism, and Continuing Education for ministers and pastors who carry out the programs for Renewal and Reconciliation. We aim at reconciling with other Wesleyan related churches for unity and solidarity.

Next year we will celebrate the 250th year of John Wesley's Conversion and hope that we will enjoy closer relationship with the other Churches. We anticipate the blessings of the Holy Spirit to guide us.