

CHURCH LIFE IN SAMOA

Talofa lava Greetings to you all in the Name of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. It is a great pleasure for me to share with you some aspects of our Samoan Worshipping life, especially the prayer life of the people.

The Christian Church in Samoa was established in the early nineteenth century. Then the three major denominations which spread the Christian gospel in Samoa were the Congregational Church (formerly known as LMS) the Roman Catholic and the Methodist. Up until the mid twentieth century other denominations such as the Mormon, Seventh Day Adventist, and the Assembly of God started to spread throughout Samoa.

Church life in Samoa is very important. Most villages have two to three worship services each Sunday. The morning service time is varied either between 8 -11 and the afternoon service time is always from 3.00pm. Other church activities including youth fellowship, continue later in the evening.

Children's Services are normally held at the Minister's house every Sunday evening. The children play a big part in the worship life of each denomination. Children and young people are encouraged to have choirs. These choirs are used in main services. There is a special Sunday each year allocated to the young people to lead worship. Children are asked to perform dramas, action songs or hymns. It's the time where children read memory verses from the Bible.

This Sunday is called "White Sunday" (Lotu Tamaiti).

The reason Samoans call this special Sunday, White Sunday is because everyone has to wear White. White is the important most colour in any church in Samoa. It relates very much to the missionary concept of white for purity. In Samoa white is regarded as the symbol of a 'pure heart'. Because the missionaries who came to the island with the good news, they wore white clothes, so naturally the Samoans followed their footsteps. It has now become very much part of the Church culture.

The way we dress from head to toe is very important in the Samoan Church life. Women are expected to wear hats. They also wear a *lavalava* and a top or very neat dresses. Men wear *lavalavas*, a shirt and a tie. Men also desire to wear a suit. You would never see a man going into a church wearing a t-shirt or jeans. Everyone has to dress in their best. I've heard a Minister of the Uniting Church said "It doesn't matter what you look like on the outside, it's what is in the inside that matters". But to us, whatever you look like on the outside, shows what the inside is like. We believe God is pure and holy, so we should be entered into His house in purity and clean both on the inside and outside.

Sunday is the most important day in our Samoan lives, and that's why every village have their own policies when it comes to Sunday. In Samoa, between services we would stay home, read the Bible or just rest. If you get caught having a swim in the sea, sorry, you will be paying a fine to the Village Council!

The Minister of each village has the right to manage everything and oversee things when it comes to ministry with the help of elders and lay preachers. The Sacrament of Holy Communion is held every first Sunday of the month and only confirmed people are allowed to take it. Some denominations allow only ministers to officiate but others use elders to assist the ministers.

When a child turns 14, he or she is allowed to attend a Confirmation Class, where one gets confirmed before one partakes in the Holy Communion. The Minister has to work close - hand in hand and shoulder to shoulder with the titled men (chiefs) in any village. The High Chief has to look after the village with the help of the matais (chiefs) or titled men, but the Minister, with the Elders, help run the church.

Every village also has a policy for the evening devotion. At about 6 in the evening you will hear the first bell that is to tell you to get ready for devotions. So wherever you are and you hear the first bell, make sure you go into the house closer to you. It doesn't matter which family you pray with, the main thing is that you have to be inside a house, once the first bell goes. In five minutes the second one goes, and that's for devotions, and you will hear different kinds of hymns from every family. This lasts for 15-20 minutes. If you get caught after the second bell goes, you will be sorry for yourself because you will be paying a big fine.

The Samoan Culture is mainly linked to Ministry.

The strength of the Ministry comes from the uniqueness of the Samoan Custom and Culture; because the ministry in a Samoan Context has that richness and quality to hold on and carry on with life and that's the main thing we are trying to do here. To build up our relationship together in singing, dancing in good times and bad times, or even reaching out to the community, church or unchurches people. Whatever race, whatever colour, or whatever language we use. We have to keep in mind that no matter what, we are one in Christ.

God bless you all. Thank you.

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In an upcoming paper, Rev Samata Elia will share how Samoan people are finding a new home in the Uniting Church and in what ways they are maintaining what is important from their heritage and open to doing things in new ways.