

E. The Church and the Pacific Islanders of Micronesia

The United Church of Christ has a historic ministry to Pacific Islanders and the people of Micronesia. It began in 1852 when missionaries from the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Mission (ABCFM) headquartered in Honolulu and Hawaiian missionaries were sent to Micronesia to spread the Gospel to the inhabitants of these remote islands and convert them to Christianity.

The Missionaries first landed on the island of Kosrae where they established a station. As the Kosraens became more God-fearing people, the missionaries began reaching out to the other Micronesian islands of Kiribati, Phonpei, Chuuk, and the Marshall Islands. However, Kosrae remained the home-base of operation.

A mission training school was established on Mwot, Kosrae, to train men and women in church ministry. Pupils were recruited from different islands and sent to this school to study and prepare for ministerial duties. At the completion of a four-year training session, they returned home full-fledged, ordained ministers and, if so selected, were assigned to nurture new churches in villages, districts, and different atolls.

During the period prior to the breakout of World War II in the Pacific, the Congregational Church in Micronesia, as it was then known, was one of the only two major denominations in Micronesia, and it garnered a larger membership. That was a time when the church was very productive and quite influential in the islands. The church was the center of every community daily activity. The Micronesians were always dedicated and faithful members of the church. They were taught to be good Christians by practicing the Golden Rule.

As the war broke, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) recalled its overseas missionaries. All of them returned to the United States with the exception of one, the Rev. Carl Heine. The departure of the missionaries also brought the closure of the mission training school on Mwot, and it created autonomy for each of the Micronesian island churches.

Presently, there are many other denominations that were sent to the region of Micronesia and which have since established strong ties and influence in the communities. However, the denomination that the missionaries first started in the islands, at present known as the United Church of Christ, still has its individual churches in each district on Chuuk, Kosrae, and Phonpei of the FSM. The United Church of Christ

is still the major denomination in the Marshall Islands with at least one church on each atoll and two or three on the major islands.

After World War II, the administration of these Pacific Islands shifted from the regime of the Japanese Imperial Army to the protection of the U.S. Navy and afterwards to the Department of the Interior. Under this protection, Bikini and Enewetak atolls in the Marshall Islands were used as nuclear testing sites of 67 atomic bombs.

Fifteen years ago, under separate agreements, these Pacific Islands of Micronesia negotiated their Compacts of Free Association with the U.S., which created the independent countries of the FSM and the RMI. The compacts allow for free entry (immigration) of FSM and RMI people into the United States to live, find employment, attend schools, receive better medical care, and better themselves.

As one of the newest immigrant groups to Hawaii and the rest of U.S., Pacific Islanders daily face numerous difficulties socially and economically. Many of these difficulties must be addressed by our church and people of conscience. The need to establish places of worship so Pacific Islanders can worship in their respective languages is one priority. The UCC needs to renew and strengthen its commitment to the Pacific Islanders in its new church starts and assist in providing training in the new setting.

Over the years, with assistance from the Hawaii Conference UCC, some Micronesian ministries on different islands of Hawaii were started. At present there are eight Chuukese ministries, two Kosraens, three Marshallese, and a new Pohnpeian ministry. This new church, with its newly assigned pastor, will begin its ministry this November on Maui.

In his June address, the FSM Consul General reported that there are 12,000 people from the FSM who reside in Hawaii. There are at least 2,000 Marshallese according to another source.

The Micronesian population is greater in the continental United States than in Hawaii, yet there are only five Marshallese Ministries throughout the continental United States. There is one Chuukese ministry in Portland, Oregon, and one called the Micronesian Outreach Ministry of the U.S., based in San Diego and started by Pacific Islander seminarians to address this lack of island churches and ministries. Thus, the national setting of the UCC needs to make concerted efforts to address the needs of Micronesians and other Pacific Islander groups in the United States and offer assistance as they try to establish and supply their own pastors.

As in similar cases with other ethnic minority groups who have immigrated to the United States, the Marshallese and the citizens of

the Federated States of Micronesia have come to the United States to seek better schooling for their children, better employment opportunities, and currently advanced medical services. Under a separate Compact of Free Association treaty with the U.S. Government, the Micronesians are free to enter, seek employment, live anywhere, and enlist in the Armed Forces in the U.S.