

The ICA in the Kingdom of Tonga: 1982 – 1984

The Pacific Training Schools

Mary Laura Jones, May 2025

The Kingdom of Tonga is located south of the Equator and west of the International Dateline in the amazing vastness of the Pacific Ocean. Tonga is made up of 150 islands scattered over 140,000 square miles. Thirty-six of the islands are inhabited and they are divided into 5 districts: Tongatapu, Vava'u, Ha'apai, 'Eua, and the Niuas.

The Institute of Cultural Affairs first encountered Tonga in the 1970's when ICA staff members George and Ann Ensinger visited Tonga from the ICA office in Western Samoa. The Ensingers met Dr. Sione Amanaki Havea, head of the Methodist Church in Tonga who later became the Archbishop of the Pacific Island nations. Dr. Havea was a published theologian and author of papers on the unique "Pacific Island Theology" based on love and care for one's neighbors. His thesis and books may be found online. In the later 1970's, Al and Sharon Roberts visited Tonga from the Western Samoa office. They were welcomed by Dr. Havea and also by the progressive King of Tonga.

In late 1981, Mary Laura Jones and Palamen Telakau were assigned to go to Tonga to discuss launching a Pacific Training School (PTS) there in 1982. They first visited Dr. Havea who welcomed the ICA back to Tonga since having regular House Church events with the Ensingers and meetings with the Roberts in the previous years. We were hosted at a Tongan Guest House.

Our first visit was with Dr. Havea. He welcomed us warmly and supported the launch of a Pacific Training School on the capital island of Tongatapu. He selected Sina Vaipuna from his office to be our local guide and advisor in setting up and organizing the Training School for January 1982. Sina was one of the finest Tongan leaders and organizers that we could have worked with. She was wise and wonderful and she knew everyone we needed to meet. She guided us in the set-up of all three Pacific Training Schools in January of 1982, 1983, and 1984. Sina arranged meetings with the Queen of Tonga and recruited many people who became the leadership and the glue of the three successful Pacific Training Schools in the Kingdom of Tonga in the 1980s.

It was decided to have the first three-week PTS at the local college on the main island of Tongatapu. The College was available in January when the school was on vacation. There were classrooms, housing, a big kitchen and large dining room along with Teachers' Prep spaces and meeting rooms.

By the time the PTS started in January 1982, there were 165 people in attendance for three weeks. Included were 14 ICA staff members from Asia, Australia and the US including David Reese, John Montgomery, Priscilla Wilson, Roger Butcher, Mike Chapman, Jaime Vergara, Esme and Rebecca Grow. ICA staff living in Tonga included Don Bushman, Mary Laura Jones, Marilyn Whiting, Colleen Smith, and Ken and Clare Whitney. Two persons attended from each village on Tongatapu (one man and one woman). An additional 15 trained Tongan Scholarship students, fluent in English and Tongan, translated while they were home for the month of January.

The Tongan staff included: Asinate, Ikani, Muli, Semi, Sina, Maria, Paul, and Pohiva. The staff was made up of Tongan students who had received four-year scholarships from the Tongan government to study in Australia, New Zealand and Fiji for their college degrees. They came home for December and January which allowed them to join the staff of the Pacific Training School. They spoke excellent English and were trained translators from English to Tongan and vice versa. They were invaluable as teachers and translators for the PTS. Teaching Teams were made up of experienced ICA international staff and the Tongan scholarship students who designed lesson plans and taught together.

One of the great innovations in the PTS was the Wednesday Workdays. 165 participants were divided into 37 Village Field Teams. Each Village Team visited their village by boat for three consecutive Wednesdays. The first week was a Village Needs Survey. All the villages wanted to build a preschool in their own village because preschoolers could not leave their home island to go to a distant preschool by boat. The second Wednesday was a Village Meeting where the village residents named their hopes for their village and the blocks to those hopes. The third Wednesday the residents removed the blocks and actuated practical actions to build a preschool or an agricultural project in all 37 villages. The Workdays were followed by a Village feast to thank all the PTS work teams. There was a grand celebration with reporting from each Village Team when the teams returned to the PTS from the outer islands.

In September 1982, the ICA was invited to move its offices from Western Samoa to Tonga as the Salani Village Project had completed its two-year plan. Tonga invited the ICA staff to move to Tonga to prepare for the two additional PTS Training Schools on Vava'u and Ha'apai Islands in 1983 and 1984. Housing was provided for the entire staff of nine. Again, Sina Vaipuna came to the rescue with housing for all the ICA staff.

The staff turned its attention to the PTS scheduled for January 1983 on the island of Vava'u. One hundred sixty-five villagers signed up and the curriculum was similar. The experienced young Tongan faculty was divided between teaching in the Vava'u Training School and attending Advanced ICA Training in Suva, Fiji. Many of those young Tongans have gone on to responsible positions in government and business in Tonga. Mike Chapman from ICA Australia managed the logistics for the Wednesday Workdays on Vava'u in the complicated new geography with many island villages to reach. Finding boats for 200 participants going to so many islands went off without a hitch and Mike was the hero. Priscilla Wilson took slides of the Training School and the Village Workdays.

In January 1983, the third Pacific Training School was launched in the Ha'apai Island Group. The curriculum was repeated successfully with ICA and Tongan leadership. The School was led by Ken and Clare Whitney and the Tongan faculty repeated their excellent teaching and translation in Tongan and in English.

There is a legend in Tonga about a lifelong lesson from Queen Salote. Queen Salote of Tonga was invited to attend the coronation of Queen Elizabeth. They were both young women then. They were riding in separate open carriages through the streets of London to the Coronation and it started to rain. A representative of the English government came to Queen Salote's carriage and offered her a rain cover which would have hidden her from the cheering English crowds along the way. Queen Salote asked politely, "Is Queen Elizabeth covering her head?" The representative replied, "No, her

people must be able to see their Queen.” Queen Salote replied to him, “Then, I shall also be uncovered to greet the English people this day”.

When Queen Salote returned to Tonga, she made a radio speech to all of her people in the five Island groups. She reported all the wonderful things she had seen and she said, “As you travel the world and meet many different people and ways of doing things, respect and learn from those people, but always remember and share that you represent the Kingdom of Tonga and a long tradition of a wise and loving people”.

A sweet memory of the Pacific Training Schools was the Tongan singing in the evening. After the long days of teaching and prep for the next day, everyone headed for a night’s rest. The housing was in classrooms around a center quadrangle. The Tongans love to sing hymns any time they were together. They would all gather at the quadrangle center and sing hymns into the night. Many of the older adults would head for bed and fall asleep to awesome hymn singing each night. After the PTS was completed and the faculty all returned to the Capital city of Nuku’alofa, many of the young Tongans returned to the ICA House in the evenings and sang us all to sleep. It was a fitting end to a glorious experience for all who had been a part of the Pacific Training Schools in Tonga.