

Tonga: Cultural Traditions and Where Tonga Is Today Post-Volcanic Eruption, Earthquake and Tsunami

Report of in-person program on Sunday, September 18, 2022, 1:00 p.m.
at Faith United Methodist Church, Torrance
cosponsored by Faith's Social Action Committee and GLA JACL



From left, 1) Minister Ainise Isama'u is Church Life Coordinator at Faith. She is in last semester at Claremont School of Theology. There are 11 UMC Tongan churches in Southern California. Ainise may eventually be assigned to one of them. Ainise is President, Board of Directors Executive Committee, United Women in Faith, a national organization. Ainise is 2nd daughter. 2) Rev. Amelia Sivi Finau, a UMC minister, is mother of 4 daughters. Rev. Finau was the first Pacific Islander to become a UMC elder in United States. 3) Tema Finau is a UMC missionary. She is Youth and Children's Ministry Coordinator in nonprofit homeless shelters in Tampa, FL. She is first daughter of Lile Lokotui. 4) Lile Lokotui, oldest daughter of Rev. Finau. 5) Mele Finau, 3rd daughter 6) Anntalisa Finau, 4th daughter

The speakers are wearing the Tongan traditional attire for women, puletaha. Rev. Finau is wearing a kiekie, waist garment. The sisters are wearing ta'ovala, waist mats.

They were wearing somber colors because they were attending a funeral after the program.

For snack after the program, the family provided a Pacific Islander dessert – panipopo - haupia rolls or rolls with coconut cream. Panipopo was also provided for snack after the 10:30 service which Ainise and Rev. Finau co-preached. The panipopo came from Poly Grill & Bakery, 1329 E. Carson St., Carson, owned by an aunt.

Tonga is an archipelago of 171 islands, 45 are inhabited, located south of Samoa. Population is 105,000, 70% reside on main island, Tongatapu. Capital and largest city is Nuku'alofa. Tonga has the only remaining monarchy in the Pacific.

Religion is 98% Christianity with 54% Methodism. The royal family belong to the Free Wesleyan Church. Everyday life is influenced by Polynesian traditions and by the Christian faith. Sundays are sacred in Tonga. On Jan. 15, 2022, an underwater volcano located 40 miles north of Tongatapu, erupted with the force hundreds of times more powerful than the Hiroshima atomic bomb. Undersea telecommunications cable connecting Tonga to the rest of the world snapped. The 150,000 diaspora were in prayers. Communications was restored a month later. Whole communities were left under a blanket of volcanic ash and mud from the tsunami that followed the eruption About 84% of population was affected. There were only 3 deaths. Tonga is in phase of reconstruction.

Following the presentation on Tonga, donations were received for Tongan Relief. The donations will be sent to the UMC California-Pacific Conference to be used for Tongan Relief. GLA JACL donated \$50 to the Relief.

The recording of the program is on the GLA JACL website: www.glajacl.org in Programs.

report by Louise Sakamoto, (with help from the presentation, Ainise and Wikipedia)

Ainise's script for the presentation on Sep. 18, 2022, 1 pm, at Faith UMC
(The presentation differs in many ways from the script.)

PLAY VIDEO: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MVMu3UmkBTE> **END at 3:02**

MOM:

As you have just seen, on January 15 a volcano erupted in the island kingdom—one that NASA scientists later claimed was hundreds of times more powerful than the Hiroshima atomic bomb.



The blast dumped a layer of ash several inches thick onto buildings, cars, plants, and trees and generated waves that reached estimated heights of 50 feet, sweeping away coastline villages and resorts. Rushing water pushed boulders and debris onto roads. The undersea telecommunications cable connecting the South Pacific nation of 105,000 residents with the rest of the world snapped.



LILE:

And yet, the people of Tonga feel that they have been the subject of the prayers of the worldwide community.

Anxious about the fate of our loved ones, many in Tonga's 150,000-person diaspora held all-night prayer marathons, organized vigils, and used social media to implore fellow believers to plead to God for the safety and protection of their loved ones.

There were many sleepless nights for all of us Tongans around the globe. We were desperately waiting to hear any word of life from the kingdom. While our communication line was down with family and the people of Tonga, we leaned onto our faith. We knew that our communication line with God was always open and that we could petition for God's mercy and protection.

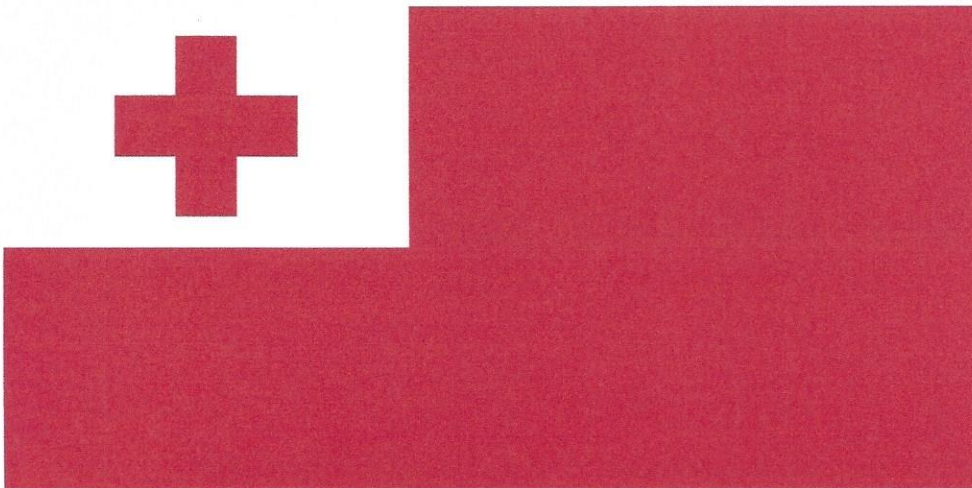
Many see the hand of God looking out for the kingdom of some 170 islands, given the disparity between the intensity of the disaster and the low number of casualties (three in total).

Many have been in prayer day and night, thanking God that he spared Tonga because when you try to see Tonga, you almost have to use a magnifying glass; it's just a little dot. The tsunami and the eruption could have wiped Tonga out in a second.

NISE:



We weren't just crediting the prayers that began after the volcano went off. Many point to King Tupou I, who dedicated the islands to God and in 1839 adopted a new motto for his kingdom: *Ko e 'Otua mo Tonga Ko Hoku Tofi'a* ("God and Tonga are my inheritance"). Tupou I was among the first generation of Tongans to become Christians after Western missionaries arrived at the end of the 1700s.



In addition, in 1875 it was written into the nation's constitution that a new plain red field with a white rectangle and red cross top left was adopted. The national flag can never be changed. All the elements of the flag reflect Christianity.

Even Sundays are sacred in Tonga. Many businesses and transport are closed on this day. Bakeries are open only in the morning so people can purchase bread and butter for teatime after church. The only distinct sound that is heard is the ringing of a bell or lali. Letting the village know that church will be starting.

TEMA: We also hold the 4 Gold pillars sacred. In her speech at the opening of the Tonga Cultural and Heritage Society (1964), Queen Salote emphasized four values that underpin the reciprocal relationship between the nobility and the people of the fonua (land).

These four Pou (Pillars) are:

- i. Faka'apa'apa (acknowledging and returning respect)
- ii. Anga fakatokilalo/loto tō (humility, open to learning)
- iii. Tauhi vaha'a/vā (keeping the relationship ongoing, alive and well)
- iv. Mamahi'i me'a (loyalty and passion in application of self).

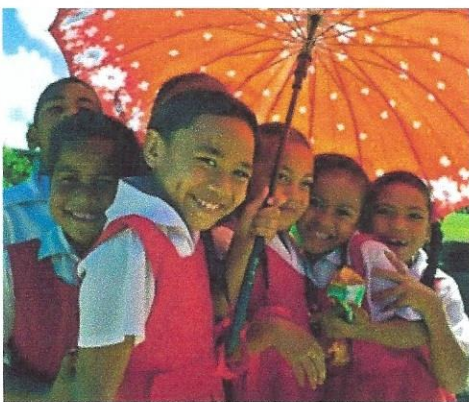
'Ofa (love and care, kindness) is the foundation/ground on which the Pou stand.

MELE: Today, the only remaining monarchy in the Pacific is overwhelmingly Christian. Protestants make up nearly two-thirds of the population (64.9%), with the majority—including the royal family—belonging to the Free Wesleyan Church.

Tongans, like all Pasifika people, see themselves connected and are a part of the *moana* (ocean). For this reason, when Tongans are in diaspora all over the globe, we still feel connected through the moana. After all, there is only one moana.

"A hymn, called '*Eiki Ko e 'Ofa 'A 'Au*' ('Lord, How Great Is Your Love'), all Tongans learn growing up. The hymn is immensely heartfelt and meaningful for Tongans; many know it from memory. The lyrics of this song were shared on all social media pages after the volcano and tsunami. The lyrics bring a sense of peace and remind us to lean and trust in God alone. The song uses the ocean as a metaphor, and it is an accurate account of Tongans expressing their love for God and vice versa. For Tongans, the ocean is not only a symbol of life; it is their lifeline, a way of life, an eternal inspiration.

ANNTALISA: Since the eruption, relief has been traveling across the ocean, with New Zealand, Australia, the US, and the UK sending ships. Tonga remained a COVID-free country until the supplies arrived. Thankfully Tonga was prepared. With over 70 percent of the country having received at least a second dose of the vaccine, Tonga has reopened its borders after nearly two years.



Despite the destruction, life has been returning to normal (at least for the pandemic). Last week, children returned to school and churches opened their doors. Even as ash still covers large parts of the islands, the people of Tonga continue to gather together to help one another.

Tonga was to a large extent saved by forces that are beyond us. It was almost like a miracle. If we're estimating the explosion to have been [many] times the explosion in Hiroshima, it's just a surprise and wonder that we're still here. We are in God's hands. He has brought us through a number of disasters and we've come out safe and sound.