

“And Ye Shall Be Witnesses unto Me”

ALTON L. WADE

Most of you will have seen a picture depicting Christ instructing His apostles on the outskirts of Jerusalem prior to His ascension. The last words uttered by Christ on earth before He went to His heavenly home were: “And ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

The Lord also proclaimed, in Joseph Smith’s translation, that “this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world, for a witness unto all nations” (JST, Matthew 24:32).

In a 1978 regional representatives seminar, President Kimball said:

We have an obligation, a duty, a divine commission to preach the gospel in every nation and to every creature. . . .

. . . What is the significance of the phrase, “uttermost part[s] of the earth”? He had already covered the area known to the apostles. Was it the people of Judea? Or those in Samaria? Or the few millions in the Far and in the Near East? Where were the “uttermost part[s] of the earth”? Did he mean the millions in what is now America? Did he include the hundreds of thousands or even millions in Greece, Italy, around the Mediterranean, the inhabitants of Central Europe? What did he mean?

*Or did he mean all the living people of all the world or those spirits assigned to this world to come in centuries ahead? Have we underestimated his language or its meaning? [“The Uttermost Parts of the Earth,” regional representatives seminar, 29 September 1978; *Ensign*, July 1979, 5, 6]*

Today I would like to present three examples—all of which are personal testimonies to me of how the Lord prepares the way for the message of His restored gospel to be taken to the “uttermost part of the earth.”

In the early part of 1972, the principal of a small, private elementary school in the Gilbert Islands (now known as Kiribati) sent a letter to the director of our Church schools in Tonga requesting the opportunity for some of their elementary graduates to attend the LDS Liahona High School in Tonga. The letter was forwarded on to me in the Church Office Building in Salt Lake City. Some quick research revealed that there were no members of the Church in Kiribati, and I set the letter aside. Several months later I received a large envelope

Alton L. Wade was vice president of Student Life at Brigham Young University when this -devotional address was delivered on 4 April 2000.

containing approximately 30 personally handwritten letters from some of the students at the school pleading for the opportunity to continue their secondary education at Liahona High School. I was deeply touched by the sincerity of the contents of the letters and took the packet to Neal A. Maxwell, then Church Educational System commissioner, who in turn discussed the matter with the CES board of trustees. The immediate question was, “If we allow some of the Gilbertese students to go to Tonga, and if while there they join the Church and then later return to their home islands where there is no Church organization, what will become of them?” However, after careful consideration, the board decided to allow 12 students to go to Tonga on a trial basis. Brother George Pucket, the Church Educational System administrator in Tonga, was instructed to go to the islands and select the students. While at Liahona during that first year, all 12 were baptized into the Church.

As a result of the success of that first year, authorization was given to enroll 12 more, and most of them also joined the Church. It soon became clear that the question raised by the Brethren in the beginning was coming to pass. Some of the students were ready to graduate and, we hoped, would return to the islands. With this concern, I and Dr. Ken Beezley, then CES associate commissioner, were instructed to go to Kiribati and assess the situation.

As we flew over the group of 16 islands, it seemed as though the airstrip occupied half the landmass of the central island of Tarawa. Upon landing, we exited the small propjet plane not knowing what to expect or exactly where we were going. All we had was the name of the school. We climbed into the backseat of an old World War II Jeep held together by wire and whatever else was available. I handed the driver the letter identifying the name of the school and asked him to take us there. After traveling a short distance on a small coral road bordered by coconut trees and ocean on both sides, the

driver suddenly stopped in front of several thatched huts and informed us that we had reached our destination. As we walked toward the huts, a young boy was standing nearby. I asked if the headmaster or principal was around, and he pointed in the direction of one of the thatched huts. Looking inside we saw a man sitting on a woven mat with his back toward us. As we entered, he suddenly turned and was surprised to see two strange Caucasian men. We quickly introduced ourselves and stated the purpose of our visit. He rushed over, gave us a big embrace, and began to cry.

Because the plane only arrived and departed every three days, we spent our time getting acquainted with the principal, Waitea, the students, and the circumstances under which the school was being conducted. Two of the huts were classrooms with coral floors, with nothing but mats to sit on and no teaching tools or materials of any kind except a few old hand-me-down textbooks and some paper and pencils. The other two huts were resident halls—one for the girls and one for the boys. Their beds were simple woven mats with a small wood-log pillow. In the late afternoon the girls went out looking for firewood and taro, and the boys fished in the bay. They then prepared their meals in an open earthen oven.

At the end of the three days we paid a final visit to the school. The students assembled out in the open under the palm trees dressed in white shirts and blue lavalavas. Brother Beezley and I each gave a short speech and expressed our gratitude for their hospitality. Before presenting us with native handicraft gifts, the students sang several songs of farewell. It was an emotional experience, and my life was changed forever by being in the presence of these students and their teachers.

We returned to Salt Lake City and submitted our report to Commissioner Maxwell. The Church Missionary Committee then asked President Ebby Davis of the Fiji Mission to look into the possibility of taking missionaries to the

islands and establishing the Church formally in Kiribati. President Davis visited with the government officials and made the formal request. Much to his surprise, the governor granted his request, except there was one major condition. Any missionaries coming into Kiribati had to be Gilbertese citizens. The governor, prompted by the Catholic bishop, knew very well there were no Gilbertese members of our church and that the approval given to President Davis could not be put into effect. Of course, the governor didn't realize that the Lord was several years ahead of the situation. In April 1975, six of the first group of 12 students who enrolled at Liahona were graduated and had already served several months as missionary companions to Tongan elders. Three months later, accompanied by their new mission president, Ken Palmer from New Zealand, the six traveled back to their homeland. They went to an ocean inlet on the main island of Tarawa, where during World War II the first American amphibious assault against a fortified atoll took place, marking one of the major turning points of the Pacific war. Here, in a war memorial cemetery, President Palmer knelt with the elders and dedicated the land of Kiribati for the preaching of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ.

In March of 1976, President Palmer officially established the first branch of the Church in Kiribati on Tarawa. It was determined that the continued existence of the school was desirable to meet the educational needs of the young people and parents who were joining the Church. Waitea, the principal, who had also joined the Church, suggested that we should take ownership of the school. That suggestion was resisted for a period of time, but it became clear that if our members were to receive an appropriate education and if the Church was to continue to flourish, we would have to assume the responsibility. During one of my several trips to Kiribati in late 1976, Brother Paul Sorenson and I sat on a log next to one of the thatched huts and talked about the possible

name of the school. During that discussion it was suggested that it temporarily be called Moroni High School. In June of 1976, Grant and Patricia Howlett and their family of eight children were called as special CES missionaries to direct the school. In September of 1978, Brother Richard Pratt and his wife Adeline were called as missionaries to Kiribati. Brother Pratt was a retired seminary teacher and also a master builder. He immediately started the process of replacing the thatched huts with brick classrooms and a chapel for use as a school building during the week and church on Sunday. Tongan teachers from Liahona High School and CES missionaries from the mainland were brought in to staff the school and to continue the construction process. In the meantime the missionary work continued, and several branches of the Church were established on the outer islands. Today Moroni High is the finest school in Kiribati, and the students are known as Moroni Warriors. It is staffed partially by former students who graduated, served missions, went on to earn their degrees from BYU—Hawaii, and are now back as teachers and administrators.

On August 13, 1996, I received a letter from Waitea, the original principal:

Dear Alton Wade,

It was a long time since you first came to Kiribati to give assistance to me for the plans and ideas in establishing the Church school and the Church itself as well. I am very happy that the Church in Kiribati at this time is not a branch but a stake, and the school is rapidly improving. It is now the most beautiful of any other church schools and even the government schools. I myself wish to give the greatest thanks to the Church in Utah for their financial aid for all the school needs and equipment at the beginning. Now parents on Tarawa and other sister islands wish to send their sons and daughters for schooling in Moroni. I thank our Father in Heaven for presenting me the long life to live so that I may see all the great and rapid changes. . . .

*With many thanks.
Yours sincerely,
Waitea Ataria.*

On August 9, 1996, Elder L. Tom Perry of the Quorum of the Twelve dedicated Moroni High School, and on August 11, 1996, the Tarawa Kiribati Stake was created. In February of this year, en route to Australia, President Hinckley made a stopover on the island and held a meeting for the Saints and government officials.

Now let me go back to what President Kimball said years ago:

We have an obligation, a duty, a divine commission to preach the gospel unto every nation and to every creature. . . .

*. . . If we could only make a small beginning in every nation, soon the converts among each kindred and tongue could step forth as lights to their own people and the gospel would thus be preached in all nations before the coming of the Lord. [“The Uttermost Parts of the Earth,” regional representative seminar, 29 September 1978; *Ensign*, July 1979, 5, 8]*

As some of you may know, the Church operates a number of elementary and secondary schools in the Pacific Islands. One of those schools located in Apia, Western Samoa, is called the Church College of Western Samoa. In 1975, during the time I was a Church Educational System zone administrator over that area, we found ourselves unable to fill two positions in the science department of the college with qualified Latter-day Saints. The positions were therefore advertised through the local paper. To our surprise, two highly qualified Indian women appeared at the college office dressed in colorful saris. They were interviewed and hired, and they started teaching the following week. As the school year progressed, their exposure to the Church through day-to-day contact with students, faculty, and

staff heightened their interest in knowing more about the Mormon faith.

At this point in the story, it is important to understand how these two outstanding young women from India—one of the *most* densely populated countries in the world—happened to be in Samoa—one of the *least* densely populated countries in the world. In 1975 the Western Samoan government, working through the United Nations, requested the assistance of an internationally known tropical agricultural scholar to come to Samoa and assess their agricultural policies. Through an extensive international search, Dr. Edwin Dharmaraju was identified, and he consented to spend two years consulting with the Western Samoan government. On this assignment he was accompanied by Mrs. Dharmaraju and their two daughters, Lata and Asha. The Dharmarajus had arrived in Samoa just a few weeks prior to our advertisement for science teachers.

At the conclusion of each school day, Lata and Asha would go home to their apartment in Apia and share with their parents not only the experiences they were having in teaching at the college but also their intense interest in what they were learning about the Mormon faith. It was not long until the family requested missionaries to come to their home and teach them in more depth about the doctrines of the Church. In a few short weeks, all four members of the Dharmaraju family were baptized. Several months after their baptisms, Brother and Sister Dharmaraju traveled back India to celebrate the wedding of their daughter Lata.

The following is a quote taken from their report of that visit.

A typical Indian marriage is a unique occasion for all families to meet. Having experienced several choice blessings since joining the Church, we felt it was our duty to share the restored gospel with our families in India. We therefore took several copies of the Book of Mormon along with us. Lata’s wedding

took place in Hyderabad. The occasion provided us an opportunity to talk about the Church to all of our family members who had assembled. We also distributed the copies of the Book of Mormon. We found our family members taking an active interest in wanting to know more about the Church.

After their two-week visit in Hyderabad, the Dharmaraju family returned to Western Samoa and soon began receiving letters from their families in India requesting more information about the Church. Dr. Dharmaraju wrote a letter to Brother Arthur Haycock, secretary to President Spencer W. Kimball, informing him about his family in India and their desire to know more about the Church. Brother Haycock responded in a letter stating that President Kimball was aware of the request and that “the matter of the work in India is being very carefully considered.”

During one of my frequent visits to Western Samoa, Dr. Dharmaraju informed me of his correspondence with the Church leaders in Salt Lake City and indicated he was eagerly awaiting word that a couple would be appointed by the First Presidency to go to India to work with members of his family. Several weeks later, and just prior to my again returning to Western Samoa, I was contacted by President Cannon of the International Mission and told that the First Presidency had authorized him to extend a three-month mission call to Dr. and Mrs. Dharmaraju to return during their normal leave of absence and serve a three-month mission to their family in India. Two weeks later, as I arrived back in Apia, I was met at the plane by a pale and extremely humble Dr. Dharmaraju and his wife. He rushed over to me, embraced me, and whispered in my ear, “Brother Wade, you will never in all the world guess what is happening to us!” Believe me, there were several moments of tears and extreme emotion as we stood there on the airport Tarmac. The Dharmarajus accepted the call and went on their three-month mission to their homeland.

Following are excerpts from their March 31, 1979, report to the First Presidency, which Brother Dharmaraju shared with me.

We left Apia for India on December 9, 1978. We had brief stopovers in Suva, Auckland, Sidney, Singapore, and Kuala Lumpur. We were now on the plane to India. Suddenly we realized the magnitude of our responsibilities as missionaries, and we were seized with fear. Anything wrong said or done by us would hurt the Church and damage its future. We had several doubts. Were we capable of providing all the answers to the questions that would be asked of us about the Church? How many of them would agree to be baptized? As these anxieties bothered us and the plane was nearing India, Sister Dharmaraju opened her Doctrine and Covenants for comfort, and these were the words that came to her:

“Lift up your heart and rejoice, for the hour of your mission is come; and your tongue shall be loosed, and you shall declare glad tidings of great joy unto this generation” (D&C 31:3).

“Yea, I will open the hearts of the people, and they will receive you. And I will establish a church by your hand” (D&C 31:7).

We read these verses again and again, and the words uplifted us and gave us courage as the hour of our mission was fast approaching. Whatever anxieties we had earlier slowly disappeared as we arrived in Hyderabad, India. My parents and our older son David had already arrived earlier by train, and also my sister and brother-in-law Ramish from Iran. All of the other families had already assembled at my brother’s place. Without wasting any further time, we told all the members of our families that had assembled in my younger brother Henry’s house the purpose of our visit. They were very happy that we had come and, therefore, we talked on several topics at great length. We spoke of God’s kingdom in the latter days and the restoration of the gospel and how the Book of Mormon is a new witness for Christ and it fulfills the Bible prophecies. We mentioned to them the restoration of the priesthood authority and the ordinances of baptism. We also discussed the Sabbath day, the law of tithing, and the Word of

Wisdom. Finally, we stressed to them the need to study the gospel, to strengthen their individual testimonies, and to enter into the waters of baptism.

On the suggestion of our families, we fixed the baptismal service for December 27, 1978. My younger brother, Henry, placed at our disposal the water pool in the compound of his house for the baptism. The pool was cleaned up and painted, and fresh water was let in. This was the day for which Sister Dharmaraju and myself were praying for and looking forward to. All of us were dressed in white—the ladies in saris and the men in loose-fitting Indian-style jackets and trousers.

The first to be baptized were my parents. It was a thrilling moment for me when I stood in the water with my father, holding his hand. I said, “Samuel David, having been commissioned of Jesus Christ, I baptize you in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost. Amen.” And the thrill continued as I held my mother’s hand and my son’s hand and those of my brothers and sisters and repeated these words. I baptized a total of 18 members of my family on this day. Immediately after the baptisms, I conducted the confirmation service the same evening.

The next day Sister Dharmaraju and myself traveled about six hours by train and baptized four more persons of my family. These baptisms had to be done on the banks of a river that is about two miles away from downtown.

In all, I baptized 22 persons during the present visit to India. I also ordained four persons to the Aaronic priesthood.

From Hyderabad we went to see my wife’s parents, who live approximately 16 hours away by train. Perhaps most of the Church members are unaware that, for the last 14 months, Sister Dharmaraju’s father, Reverend P. Sreenivasam, has been engaged in the translation of the Book of Mormon into the local language of Hyderabad State, called Telugu. This language is spoken by nearly 50 million people. Reverend Sreenivasam is an ordained Baptist minister. While we were at his place, he showed us more than 500 full-scale, neatly handwritten sheets of the translation. He has been translating the Book of Mormon at the rate of a

little more than a page per day and expects to complete the translation in another three to four months. Arrangements will be made with the Church to print the translated version of the Book of Mormon in India as soon as it is ready and approved. At this moment in time we just cannot visualize the impact this book will have on the more than 40 million people living in Hyderabad State. We consider this our greatest single humble contribution to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in India.

Before I conclude this report, I would like to submit in all humility that whatever work we did in India is just a minute droplet in the ocean. One must realize that India has a population of more than 610 million and is the most densely populated country in the world next to China. We have just sown the seed for the potential Church development in India. If my mission has been a success, it is primarily due to the hard work and the all-out support given to me by Sister Dharmaraju.

At the time of the Dharmarajus’ mission there were no known members of the Church in the Hyderabad region of 40 million people. Even though proselyting is not permitted in India today, there are now approximately 3,500 members and 21 branches.

Selections from the 700-page partial manuscript of the Book of Mormon translated into Telugu by Sister Dharmaraju’s father were printed in 1982. (See *Deseret News 1999–2000 Church Almanac* [Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1998], 335–36.)

A third example of the way the Lord is preparing the way for the opening up of nations is one that started in 1955 and is being fulfilled even today. I suggest you would find few Old or New Testament prophecies that have unfolded in a more dramatic or timely way than this modern-day prophecy made in 1955 by President David O. McKay during the dedicatory prayer at the groundbreaking ceremony for the establishment of the Church College of Hawaii on February 12, 1956:

*We dedicate our actions in this service unto thee and unto thy glory and to the salvation of the children of men, that this college, and the temple, and the town of Laie may become a missionary factor, influencing not thousands, not tens of thousands, but millions of people who will come seeking to know what this town and its significance are. [In Reuben D. Law, *The Founding and Early Development of the Church College of Hawaii* (St. George, Utah: Dixie College Press, 1972), 69]*

To understand the significance and importance of this prophecy, we must study it in its time frame of 1955. First, the Church could hardly be referred to as an international entity in 1955 as there were only 1,197 members in Mexico, 3,679 members in all of South America, 367 members in Central America, 392 along the whole Asian Rim, and a total of only 82,000 members of the Church outside the United States, Mexico, and Canada (source: Church Statistical Department).

Second, although Hawaii was beginning to be recognized as an attractive tourist destination, only approximately 100,000 tourists came to Hawaii in 1955, and most of them from mainland USA. Third, the north shore of Oahu was not considered a must-see part of the island of Oahu by either residents or tourists. The temple was just a get-out-and-stretch stop for the occasional circle island tour. And fourth, the Polynesian Cultural Center had not even been conceived of in 1955.

This then was the setting when a stately, white-haired prophet stood in the middle of a sugarcane field in the least-visited part of the island and prophesied that the college, the temple, and the community would be missionary factors in influencing millions of people. I can imagine that even the most faithful follower and admirer of President David O. McKay must have wondered if he or she had heard the prophet correctly. Satan himself must have even had a few chuckles over it. “Millions of people coming to Laie? You’ve got to be kidding!”

Nevertheless, the campus of what is now BYU—Hawaii was built and opened its doors to 150 students. Eight years later, in 1963, with little pomp and ceremony, but with a great deal of laughter and predictions of its total failure from the Waikiki entertainment community, the Polynesian Cultural Center opened its doors.

The PCC had a small and humble beginning with students occasionally standing along Kamehameha Highway flagging down the occasional circle island tourists and inviting them to visit the PCC. There were times during those first few years when the performers played to no more than 20 to 30 individuals.

As a member of the board of directors of the Polynesian Cultural Center, I attended our midyear board meeting just eight days ago in Hawaii and was informed that attendance at the PCC over the past 37 years has just exceeded 27 million guests from every corner of the world. Approximately one-third of those who have visited the Polynesian Cultural Center have also visited the temple visitors’ center just a few blocks away. Amazingly, little Laie has become a destination for people worldwide, and the center has been the number-one paid tourist attraction in Hawaii since the mid-1970s.

Were he not a prophet, how could President McKay have possibly known in 1955 what we would be experiencing today?

However, there is another side of this wonderful story that may, in time, eclipse even the importance of the large number of people from around the world who attend the Polynesian Cultural Center on a daily basis. When I was appointed president of BYU—Hawaii in 1986, a cooperative Asian Executive Management Internship Program had just begun between PCC/BYU—Hawaii and several mainland China government agencies. The internship arrangement allows for eight to 10 midlevel government officials to spend one year studying at BYU—Hawaii and interning at the Polynesian Cultural Center.

These individuals live on campus in residence halls with regular BYU—Hawaii students. At the end of the year they are given certificates of achievement in the various academic disciplines and professional activities at the Polynesian Cultural Center.

Over the past 15 years, approximately 135 of these mature Chinese individuals have gone through this program and returned to full-time employment in the government and business agencies from which they came. On two occasions since the inception of the program, Sister Wade and I were hosted by these agencies in China. During these visits we met with the supervisors and employers to assess the program and to recommend any changes or improvements that should be considered. Over a period of two weeks we met with approximately 50 of the former interns in four major cities in mainland China.

The reception we received from the former interns, their supervisors, and the government officials was overwhelming. To those who had gone through the program, we were like long-lost friends, even family. They simply could not contain their emotions and wanted to spend most of our time together hearing about BYU—Hawaii, PCC, Laie, and all of the friends they had left behind. In every case, upon completion of the internship and their return to China, they had been advanced to positions above those they had previously held.

During their time on campus, each individual registered for and completed a Book of Mormon course and, in many cases, attended church on a regular basis. Some joined the Church knowing full well when they returned to China there would be no LDS Church unit with which they could affiliate. However, they also understood that in the Lord's due time, they will have an important and prominent role to play in spreading the message of the

restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ, providing leadership and making friends for the Church. Even those who did not embrace the gospel expressed over and over again to us their admiration for the Church and the principles upon which it is founded. I am sure each one of them will be willing to speak in our defense if needed and when appropriate.

It is interesting to note the comparison of Church membership in stakes and missions from 1971 to 1998. I was in Korea in the mid-1970s when the first stake was established by President Hinckley. In 1971 there were 5,165 members, no stakes, and no missions. In 1998 there were 69,000 members, 17 stakes, and 4 missions. I was in the Philippines in the early 1970s when there were 9,700 members, no stakes, and only one mission. At the end of 1998 there were 389,000 members, 62 stakes, and 13 missions. I was working in Chile and Brazil in the early 1970s when the Church was struggling for identity. These two countries combined had 55,000 members, four stakes, and three missions (source: Church Statistics Department). As of 1998 these two countries have a combined membership of 1,102,000, with 300 stakes and 34 missions (see *Deseret News 1999–2000 Church Almanac* [Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1998], 280–86, 298–302).

I repeat again the last words uttered by Christ on earth before He went to His heavenly home: “And ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

What I have described today is not unusual. Similar stories are taking place in other areas of the world. I bear solemn testimony that the restored gospel of Jesus Christ is rolling forth under His direction and in preparation for His second coming. This I testify to in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.