

INVITE PEOPLE TO CHRIST: CHURCH IN TAHITI



The missionary boat, Evanelia, carried missionaries from island to island in 1894-1896



Claud Roger visited Tahiti in 1873

BUILDING ZION IN THE SOUTH PACIFIC

The story of the church in French Polynesia began with four missionaries departing Nauvoo in 1843: Noah Rogers, Addison Pratt, Benjamin Grouard, and Knowlton Hanks. As the ship crossed the Atlantic, Knowlton grew increasingly ill and passed away in the arms of his friends. He was later buried at sea.

The ship rounded Africa and crossed the Indian and South Pacific Oceans, depositing the missionaries on the other side of the world in French Polynesia. There they eagerly explored the islands, interacted with the people, and baptized many willing converts. Eventually the men received the distressing word from Nauvoo that Joseph and Hyrum Smith had been killed. Addison and Noah returned home to be with their families, while Benjamin stayed behind.

Nearly twenty years later, two missionaries of the Reorganization on their way to Australia found themselves in Tahiti. While waiting for repairs to be made to their ship, they stumbled upon a local member who led them to a thriving

congregation of our church known as “Tiona,” from the Tahitian word for “Zion.” The missionaries took their seats on a long bench while the chapel filled with worshippers. It was then that the congregation began to sing, in Tahitian, “The Spirit of God, Like a Fire is Burning,” the beloved hymn written for the dedication of the Kirtland Temple. Rejoicing to have discovered one of Benjamin Grouard’s old congregations, the missionaries baptized fifty-one members in the nearby lagoon before continuing on to Australia.

As word spread about the growing church in Tahiti, church members in the United States rejoiced. The congregation meeting in the Kirtland Temple renamed itself the “Tiona Branch” in honor of their church brothers and sisters living in Tahiti. In 1874, the first church seal was introduced at the 1874 conference in Plano, Illinois. The design of the new seal included a palm tree, most likely a tribute to the growing church in Tahiti.

Church members in the 1890s raised money to build a boat for missionary work in French Polynesia. The gospel boat, “Evanelia,” set sail from San Francisco to Tahiti in 1894. The Pacific Ocean journey took more than thirty days.