

## **The Samoan Exchange**

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It was 10:00 in the evening when I stepped off the plane and the heavy, sticky, hot air hit me square in the face. I had just arrived in Pago Pago, the major city of American Samoa, an island in the South Pacific. My reason for going was to deliver some “much needed” school supplies, teacher resources, and P.E. equipment, and to impart some seasoned teaching advice on curriculum development and classroom management techniques at the formal invitation of the Iakina SDA School. I also had an ulterior motive . . . to provide encouragement to four Canadian student missionaries, two of whom were my sons, Ashley and Spencer Larsen. The other two SM’s were Jodi Boyd, whose father is a professor of theology at CUC and Ryan McMiller, whose father is the pastor of the Mission SDA church and the Director of ADRA for the B.C. Conference.

These SM’s had arrived at the Iakina SDA school during the month of July and were immediately and totally immersed in the pre-school preparation activities, including painting, moving classroom furniture, looking for textbooks, tiling bathroom floors and ripping up old linoleum. When I spoke to the local islanders, they were so amazed at the “out-put” of energy these SM’s had and how willing they were to work. Apparently, due to the humidity, the islanders worked at a different pace and because of constant advice-giving, soon our thick-blooded, Canadian kids joined their pace also.

On my first day on the island, I interviewed the school’s principal, Mrs. Save, to get as much background information on our school as I could. She told me that back in the 1960’s, the SDA church was growing at a steady rate in Samoa, so the Samoan Mission headquarters decided that it would be a good idea to build a school for the increasing number of children. They also felt that it would be a good tool for outreach in the community; therefore, Iakina SDA school was started. Iakina School is a little over 40 years old and has, roughly, 185 students. The Adventist to non-Adventist ratio is about 50:50. The school is under the leadership of the South Pacific Division which is located in Australia, and the Central Pacific Union which is located in Fiji.

Iakina is evaluated by both the South Pacific Division’s Education Department and the local Public Department of Education. The school had been evaluated by the local DOE, just before I arrived, and had received a good report. They still had a lot of expansion and improvement to do in their library. Iakina was to receive their accreditation by the Division, Union, and Mission Education Departments during this last March of 2008. I spent a fair amount of my time there in debriefing sessions with school administration and teachers, comparing our education system with theirs and then offering suggestions of what I felt they could gain from the adoption and application of some of our tried and true methodologies. I spent the full rest of the time there supporting our Canadian student missionaries through advice, mothering and general encouragement. I was, after all, most interested in seeing our SMs gain a rich blessing from serving in their capacity as Junior High and High School teachers at Iakina.

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I was most interested in the development of our young missionaries as successful student teachers, and strongly believe that this kind of experience is hugely beneficial in shaping their futures as responsible young leaders in our church. My followup interviews with them revealed what indeed was developing into an incredible experience.

**Question:** What compelled you to be a student missionary?

**Answer:** *Well, we've wanted to see the world and to help others, so what better way to be able to do both. Also, Pastor Jose Rojas came to our college and spoke to the student body about going to other countries to help others that are less fortunate, and it really got us excited and motivated to do it.*

**Question:** How prepared were you for the teaching when you got to the school?

**Answer:** *Not very prepared. We hadn't taken any teaching courses to prepare us for the making of lesson plans, how to use curriculum guides, or the "management" of the students. So, we just sort of had to "wing it" for awhile.*

**Question:** Describe the working conditions. Were there any supplies, teaching textbooks, and teacher resources?

**Answer:** *Teacher supplies and resources? (laugh) There were some teacher textbooks, but they were fairly old and in poor condition. (One of the subjects taught by one student missionary didn't have a teacher's edition with an answer key. He had to do all of the work first himself, the night before he taught the subject and assigned work to the students.) Sometimes, there weren't enough textbooks for all of the students.*

**Question:** Overall, what was the academic level of the students there?

**Answer:** *Like anywhere, there were the high achievers, the middle-of-the-road students, and the kids that were just goofing around and could care less. You could tell what students had plans to go further with their education, because they were the ones that did their homework, attended regularly, and paid attention in class. In Grade 12, out of 15 students, only 4 went on to college. The other students got jobs in the community, jobs at the fish cannery, or helped out in the family business. The students who knew they weren't going on to college or furthering their education, were the ones that were the discipline problems or the ones that didn't do their work. Some of the kids in Grade 8 and Grade 10 didn't know their times tables (multiplication) or simple division, so we had to go way back and teach that first.*

**Question:** You talked about discipline in the classroom. What form or technique of discipline did you use in the classroom, compared to the Iakina teacher's discipline?

**Answer:** *Well... (smile at each other), we basically talked to the students, ignored them or sent them to the principal's office. Some of the regular Iakina teachers, mostly the male teachers, would sometimes resort to the "switch." You know, "spare the rod, and spoil the child." They would go out to the courtyard of the school, cut a branch from one of the trees and use it on either the student's palm of the hand or their back side. That is done from Grades 1 -12. It's kind of a cultural thing, strict discipline. The parents usually*

*support the teachers if they've had to discipline their kid. The teachers are highly respected and looked up to.*

**Question:** What did you appreciate most about your experience, and would you recommend being a student missionary to other college-aged peers?

**Answer:** *Yes, yes, yes. We would highly recommend it to anyone. If we could, we'd do it again, in a flash. It was the best thing we've ever done, as far as enriching our lives and broadening our outlook on life. I guess we would have to say that we appreciated the people of Samoa the most. They were so unselfish, giving, loving, spiritual, supportive, and just took us under their wings and treated us like family. We loved the "laid back" lifestyle and the pace of living. Everyone helps each other and looks out for each other. We could be walking down the road to town, because we didn't have a vehicle, and someone with a pick-up truck would pull over and tell us to jump in the back and they would take us to town. You never had to worry, because everyone knows everyone or is related. Plus, since they are very spiritual people, they would just expect you to do special music, lead out in church, lead out in AYA afternoon meetings, Pathfinders, etc., and we know that our spiritual walk with the Lord has been strengthened because of that. We have had to depend totally on Him to get us through some of the situations we've been in.*

My interviews with our student missionaries obviously went further, but it would take another 3-4 pages to share just a glimpse of what they experienced.

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Overall, my experience in Samoa was absolutely enriching as I gained a huge amount of respect for the teachers of Samoa, partially because much of their resources are completely outdated and extremely limited but, more importantly, because they were being paid impoverished wages, approximately \$7,000 per year, with a cost of living not that far off that of Canada. As I toured the school and each classroom, I was impressed with the devotion and dedication of the teachers. Even though there were limited desks, supplies, teaching resources, and basic art supplies, the classrooms were full of happy faces and cheerful voices, with obvious learning taking place throughout. Of greatest importance was the fact that I most definitely felt the presence of Jesus there. To sit back and listen as they sang Christian songs with such enthusiasm and volume as to rival anything I have ever heard on our continent; to watch the girls giggle and joyously play games in their brightly colored pule tassies and uniforms and the boys playing their hearts out on the soccer field in their skirts called lava lavas; to see them light up as I would banter in humor with them . . . and, yes, the food was sensational with great volumes served where ever I went . . . left me culturally enriched. The generosity of these people is second to none as I was forced to purchase more baggage capacity to carry their mountains of gifts home. In the end, I believe I gained more from them than they ever gained from me.