

BACKGROUND TO THE CHANGE

On the 19th of May 1888, George Tenney, an Adventist worker from the US on his way to Australia, noticed that Christians in Samoa were out of sequence with their day of worship. They worshipped on what they thought was Sunday, but for that longitude it was the 7th day Sabbath. Similarly, Joseph Marsh, captain of the *Pitcairn*, (on the 2nd of August 1891), noticed that the LMS (London Missionary Society) Churches in Samoa also worshipped on the 7th Day, but they too thought it was Sunday.

The visiting Adventists hired a house in Apia for three weeks, selling and distributing literature. They worshipped on Sunday for those three weeks. The same “out of sequence” week days were observed by the next boatload of Adventists passing through Samoa. On the 27th of November 1891, the ship in which Ellen White travelled to Australia, stopped at Samoa and noticed that Friday, the 27th of November, was being counted ashore as Saturday the 28th. Note that it was the ships’ captains who determined this from their nautical charts. It was not just mistaken Americans imposing their time on the Pacific as some have suggested.

In 1892 the “king” in Samoa, Malietoa Laupepa, adopted the International Date Line (IDL) and recognised Samoa’s place in the Western Hemisphere with USA. The change was achieved by repeating Monday 4th July, so that what had been Sunday now became Saturday. Some have suggested that this was because of pressure from American traders, but the mother of Robert Louis Stevenson, who was in Samoa at the time, says this about the change:

It seems that all this time we have been counting wrong, because in former days communication was entirely with Australia, and it was simpler and in every way more natural to follow the Australian calendar; but now that so many vessels come from San Francisco, the powers that be have decided to set this right, and to adopt the date that belongs to our actual geographical position. To this end therefore, we are ordered to keep *two Mondays* in this week, which will get us straight.ⁱ

It is interesting to note that although Mrs Stevenson felt the same inconvenience as some people today, she makes the point that the change was made “because we have been counting wrong,” and change was needed “to set this right,” to bring the calendar into line with “our actual geographical position,” and to “get us straight.” So when the first resident Adventist

missionaries arrived (on the 22nd of October 1895), they worshipped on the same day of the week that their Adventist predecessors had recognised, but by this time it was called Saturday. They were health workers, led by Dr Frederick Braucht, who established the “Samoa Medical Mission” at Matautu-tai in Apia. He became known as the “Jewish doctor” because of the day of worship he and his colleagues honoured.

THE SITUATION IN TONGA

A few years ago, some church leaders of Tonga were concerned that the practice of going to church on Sunday was not giving a clear witness. This led in 2005 to the request by Trans Pacific Union to the Division’s Biblical Research Committee (BRC) to give study to the question. The BRC consulted widely among scholars, administrators and senior pastors within and beyond the division. Early in 2009 the BRC released a statement: “Principles and Considerations regarding Observance of the Sabbath in the Pacific around the Dateline.” This was forwarded to the SPD executive committee in Nov 2009 who passed it on to the GC Biblical Research Committee (BRICOM). This collection of 50+ scholars representing every division, endorsed the SPD statement.

THE SPD STATEMENT

The statement that was aired (as described above) was framed as a general statement to cover any similar case in the future. It reads in part, “As there is a general sense of agreement with present practice in the Pacific islands, and as any attempt to change would create serious and complicated pastoral problems, and as the present calendar is subject to change by any future government at any time, as has recently occurred in Kiribati, We recommend that

The present practice of Sabbath keeping in the Pacific Islands around the dateline be maintained.”

It is important to note that no country is mentioned in this statement, rather it is left open to cover any IDL change that may arise in future. Little did those who drafted this statement know how soon the issue would surface again. (This statement is now in an appendix at the back of the South Pacific version of the 2010 Church Manual.)

ⁱ Entry, “The Second 4th July 1892,” in M. I. Stevenson, *Letters From Samoa: 1891 – 1895* (Methuen, London, 1906), p. 191.