NIUE
Patrick Vakaotii

BASIC INFORMATION

The Land

Niue is the world’s largest raised coral island, with a land area of approximately 258 sq km. It has an Exclusive Economic Zone of 390,000 sq km. Its closest neighbours are Tonga and Samoa (Hoadley 1992:83; Douglas 1994:476). The island has one main administrative centre, the capital Alofi, which at the time of the 2001 census was home to about 34% of the island’s population (EPDSU 2001:6).

Records show Niue experiencing “disastrous hurricanes in 1959 and 1960” (Stanley, 2000:359). In January 2004 Hurricane Heta, a category five hurricane, struck Niue, leaving Alofi drastically affected. There were two casualties, a young mother who died in her collapsed house and her young son two weeks afterwards in a New Zealand hospital. “The hurricane demolished the island’s hospital which had just completed a NZ$2 million refit, totally ruined the national museum and its contents and badly damaged the government-owned hotel” (Keith-Reid and Salato-Farrell 2004:16). Other damage included the destruction of tourist accommodation and business premises, as well as of crops like vanilla, lime and coconuts (Keith-Reid and Salato-Farrell 2004:16). The effects of Hurricane Heta not only had economic implications for Niue, which has long been plagued by a decrease in population, but also raise the question of its political survival as a sovereign nation. The future of this heavily vulnerable and dependent nation looks bleak with reports that about 500 Niueans “will give up and head for New Zealand” (Keith-Reid and Salato-Farrell 2004:14). Time will reveal what becomes of Niue, but according to its Premier, Young Vivian, it “will be back to normal say within 18 months in terms of the economy, fisheries, tourism and the growing of vanilla” (Keith-Reid and Salato-Farrell 2004:14).

Land Tenure

Land on Niue is organized and owned by the magafaou or extended family, and much is used for subsistence farming. The 2001 census reported that households used a total of 1026.3 hectares for their crops, which include taro, coconuts, kava, nonu, vanilla and cassava (EPDSU 2001:33). Although descent traditionally dictated ownership rights of land, the government has in modern times introduced a system of land registration in order to deal with disputed cases of ownership (Douglas 1994:469). Land cannot be sold but is available for a maximum of 60 years lease (Faitala 1983:31). According to Stanley (2000:359), Ekalesia Niue (the dominant church on the island) owns three-quarters of the land, while the government has under its ownership some land on which national infrastructure such as the airport and administration buildings have been built (Douglas 1994:469).
The People

Niueans are Polynesians by descent. For a self-governing state Niue has a very small population. The latest census conducted in 2001 revealed that the nation had a population of 1,788 (EPDSU 2001: 4), a decline since 1997 when the population was estimated at 2,088. The latest figures show Niue experiencing a “negative population growth rate of 3.8” (EPDSU 2001:4). Apart from Niueans others on the island include Tongans, Samoans, Fijians and a small expatriate white community (EPDSU 2001:16). As New Zealand citizens most Niueans (18,474) live in New Zealand rather than on the island, as shown by the 1996 New Zealand census. Many continue to leave, for access to basic services and employment opportunities. This has had a great impact on the island’s population, with many of those left behind being young (under 15) or elderly (over 60). A trip around the island reveals the common sight of empty and boarded houses in every village (Douglas and Douglas 1994:468). Emigration is the major threat to Niue’s existence as a nation state.

| Table 1: Population Size and Change, Niue 1997 and 2001 (EPDSU, 2001: 7) |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| 2088            | 1788            | -300            |

Language

The main languages are English and Niuean. History reveals that Niue was “colonized by the Samoans in the 9th or 10th century AD, then Tongans invaded in the 16th century” (Stanley 2000:358). Thus Niuean, which is used predominantly at home and at social gatherings, has evidence of Samoan and Tongan influences. English however is the language of instruction in schools and in the workplace (Pacific Island Travel 2004).

Health

Health services on Niue are well established, with the Lord Liverpool Hospital in Alofi providing free basic medical and dental services. Clinics are also available in three of the bigger villages, with smaller ones hosting visiting doctors twice a week (Douglas and Douglas 1994:470). Major health concerns and cases are however referred to New Zealand.

The people of Niue enjoy high standards of hygiene and are fortunate to be free of most tropical diseases, but do from time to time experience outbreaks of diseases like dengue fever (Pacific Island Travel 2004). Currently the government is placing emphasis on the care of the elderly population as the extended family continues to disintegrate (Douglas and Douglas 1994:470).

Education

Education for those between the ages of 5 and 14 in Niue is compulsory. The 1997 census reported that only 2 per cent of Niueans had never attended school. Thus the island boasts the existence of an educated population (Demmke and Haberkorn 1999:xiv). In the capital there is at present one primary school and the island’s lone Niue High School. Higher education can be attained through distance programmes offered via the University of the South Pacific’s Niue Centre. However most Niueans pursue fulltime university studies
in either Fiji or New Zealand. Successful students rarely return to Niue, because of the limited opportunities on the island (Pacific Island Travel 2004).

**Economy**

With a small economy and a relatively small number of able-bodied individuals, Niue relies heavily on imports and aid from New Zealand, Australia and the United Nations (Pacific Island Travel 2004). Stanley (2000:358) states that “overseas aid totals about NZ$6 million a year”. Many other factors contribute to the country’s inability to attain economic stability, including “the small physical size of the country, the shortage of good, arable soil and reliable water supplies, …the relative isolation from possible markets,” and inconsistent shipping and air transport schedules. Thus Niue stands to gain very little from the SPARTECA agreement by which its exports receive preferential prices to Australia and New Zealand (Douglas and Douglas 1994:471–472).

Remittances from overseas, however, play a big role in sustaining the Niuean economy. These supplement personal income derived locally either from self-employment or as a government employee. The government is the main employer, providing employment to 60.03 per cent of the population (EPDSU 2001:31).

Tourism development was mooted by the New Zealand government in 1996, by means of the extension of the island’s airport runway, costing NZ$10 million, and the construction of a new hotel, but these have not done much to increase tourist arrivals. Niue is off the main air routes and a side trip to the island is very costly (Stanley 2000:359). Most visitor arrivals are Niueans living abroad who come home for holidays.

Because of the island’s limited economic potential the Niue government has ventured into money making schemes like the granting of fishing licenses in its EEZ (Douglas and Douglas 1994:471) and the establishment in 1993 of a “financial centre [tax haven] similar to those of Vanuatu and Cook Islands to support overseas firms trying to avoid taxation in their places of business” (Stanley 2000:359). Another venture included the renting of telephone circuits for the phone sex business in New Zealand. This however was stopped as a result of local opposition. However the country continues to profit from the sale of “its internet ending .nu” (Stanley 2000:359).

**Government**

Niue became a self-governing state in free association with New Zealand on 19 October 1974 and is “governed by a premier and three other ministers” (Hoadley 1992:83). The current premier is Young Vivian, founder of the National People’s Action Party (NPAP) (Lal and Fortune 2000:594).

Under the arrangements of free association, New Zealand is tasked with the responsibility of overseeing Niue’s defence and foreign affairs, with the responsibility of assisting economically and administratively if and when the need arises (Douglas and Douglas 1994:469).

Since the attainment of self-government the Island Council developed in 1959 has been replaced by a legislative assembly comprising “20 members (one from each village and six elected from the general population)” (Stanley 2000: 358; Pacific Island Travel 2004). In addition there is a system of local government, in the form of 14 village councils. Initially established in 1967, each council has “three to five councillors elected for a three year
term”, whose main responsibilities are to encourage and oversee local development (Douglas and Douglas 1994:469).

THE RELIGIOUS SITUATION IN NIUE AND CONTEMPORARY DEVELOPMENTS


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<tr>
<td>Ekalesia Niue</td>
<td>1,749</td>
<td>69.1</td>
<td>1,588</td>
<td>71.0</td>
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<td>6.7</td>
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<td>1.3</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>2.1</td>
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<tr>
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<td>3.0</td>
<td>46.0</td>
<td>2.0</td>
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<td>1.9</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>3.0</td>
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<td>0.5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.1</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>2,531</strong></td>
<td><strong>2,239</strong></td>
<td><strong>2,088</strong></td>
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Data Analysis

For a small country Niue is home to a comparatively large number (8) of religious organizations, but they are much smaller in membership and organizational structure than churches in other larger Pacific countries. As evident from the table above, the majority of Niueans belong to the historic Ekalesia Niue, with the other churches (Latter-day Saints, Catholic, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Seventh-Day Adventist) having a considerable number of adherents also. Pentecostal churches, namely the Christian Outreach Centre (COC) and the Apostolic Church on the Rock, together with the Bahá’í Faith, are not specifically mentioned in the census breakdown and are assumed to be grouped under the ‘Other’ heading. This category has doubled since the 1997 census and now boasts a growth of 5.1 per cent. It is highly likely that the two Pentecostal churches are attracting converts mostly from the dominant Ekalesia Niue.

Conversations with converts reveal that the new churches offer spiritual and lifestyle changes. As noted by one particular convert:

There has been dramatic change in my life since I became a ‘born again.’ That is something the Ekalesia does not practise....To me it's mainly a life change. I used to party with people and all these kinds of things....When I first went there [to the Apostolic Church] I could see people smiling and could see that they were happy. They worship freely.

A female convert commented on how her present pastor differed from the one in her previous church. “For me, I find the COC pastor more approachable and you can talk freely to him. From my experience we have always been scared of pastors....They are like kings. You cannot just go into their house any time. You can't just talk to them anyhow.”
The most notable observation however is the overall decline in church membership, affecting all churches: the result of emigration. The highest decline is that shown by the Ekalesia Niue, with a decrease of 656 members between 1986 and 2001. The Roman Catholic Church, while also on the decline, nevertheless has a slight percentage increase in relation to other churches. This is illustrated in the 2001 census, in which the church had a 7.37 per cent share of the population compared to 6.4 per cent in 1997.

It is worth highlighting an increase in the number of people who in 1997 did not state their religion or who objected to the question about religious affiliation. This is confirmation of the observations made by certain elders and church leaders about growing secularism on the island — a pattern of change certainly associated with changing modern lifestyles, choices and needs, and reflecting Niue’s integration into the global environment.

THE NATIONAL CHURCHES IN NIUE

Ekalesia Niue

Ekalesia Niue, also known as the Church of Niue, became fully self-standing or independent in 1970, apparently the final Pacific church with historical ties to the London Missionary Society (LMS) to do so (Makani 1993:123, 124). The church’s history however dates back to missionaries under the banner of the LMS who first arrived on Niue in 1830. Although John Williams and Charles Barff were unsuccessful with their initial attempt, William Pascoe Crook renewed contact in 1831 when he returned with two Niueans who tried to introduce Christianity. When Peniamina, a Niuean who had become a Christian in Samoa, returned in 1846, a widespread conversion took place, which was greatly extended with the arrival of a Samoan missionary, Paulo, in 1849 (Garrett 1982:135–136). By 1854 the whole population, totalling about 4500 at that time, was converted (Lal and Fortune 2000:594). The first British missionary was W.G. Lawes, who arrived in 1861.

The advent of Christianity saw the reorganization of social arrangements, with the establishment of “thirteen proper village settlements” that became centres for “further evangelization work” (Tukutama 2002:2). In addition, the early European missionaries played an active role in politics, seeing to the introduction of British values and attitudes as well as to the recruitment and training of locals for the evangelization of other islands (Garrett 1982:137–138).

Today Ekalesia Niue is very much part of the social and political fabric of Niue. It has a well-established structure in every village. Ministers ordained by the church oversee its activities and are assisted by elders, lay preachers and deacons. The Fono Ekalesia Motu (Church Council) which meets every quarter governs the church as a whole (Makani 1993:130). Likewise the church maintains a strong relationship with the government of the day. This is reflected in consultations that take place with regard to important social issues, and in the government sponsorship available for trainee ministers. Ministers are trained locally at Vailahifou Theological College or attend overseas colleges such as Kanana Fou in American Samoa, the Pacific Theological College in Fiji and the School of Ministry at Knox College in New Zealand (Pihiga 2002:1).

Ekalesia Niue has played a major role in developing ecumenism amongst the churches on Niue. It is thus a member of the newly established National Council of Churches (NCC)
and has been part of the Pacific Conference of Churches (PCC) for some years now (Pihiga 2002: 3).

Mindful of members who have taken the decision to live abroad, the church established a branch in New Zealand in 1988, and on 21 October 2002 signed an agreement with the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand and the Congregational Union of New Zealand (both of which also have members who were in the Ekalesia Niue before migrating). It covers “existing and future Niuean congregations and ministers in New Zealand....Key points in the agreement include the sharing of overall strategies, resources and information, discussion before the establishment of new churches and acknowledgement of people’s right to choose the church they wish”. In addition ministers from each church will be recognized across the three churches (Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2001:1; Pihiga, 2002:7).

A major threat to the church’s existence is the declining population on the island. The General Secretary explained that the Ekalesia has requested the government to create ways that would discourage emigration (Pihiga 2002:1). The attainment of this objective is however acknowledged as difficult, considering the appeal of emigration and the lack of internal incentives to stay. The church is also conscious of new religious groups as a factor in its decline, a trend observed by Makani (1993) some 10 years ago. While they do not discourage the existence of such movements they are concerned about the repercussions in such a small community (Pihiga 2002:7,9).

**Roman Catholic Church**

The Roman Catholic Church in Niue is affiliated to the Diocease of Tonga. The congregation is fairly small with members belonging to the only parish on the island under the guidance of a lone priest and a few nuns (Falemaka 2002:1).

The priest, nuns and catechists are instrumental in what can be seen as ‘re-evangelization’ on the island. This sees members of the church divided into teams for the purpose of outreach work directed specifically at young people. The church in Niue does not view membership in terms of numbers as important. The aim is to keep the church active and alive. The presence of new religious groups allows the church to do this as well as strengthening its bond with other mainline churches. Niue as an offshore parish gives the Diocease of Tonga the opportunity to exercise its missionary and evangelical role (Equasi 2005: interview with author).

**Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS)**

The LDS (Mormons) first arrived in Niue in 1942, and according to Garrett (1997:256) offered “tempting prospects of education and money.” But it was not until ten years later, in 1952, that the first missionary Robert Goodman and a couple of elders began community evangelization. They faced a difficult time, with people throwing rocks at them and chasing them away (Hekau 2002:1).

The LDS Church is administered from Tonga. It is the second largest in terms of church membership, which is estimated to be nearly 300 (Hekau 2002:3). The main challenge today is declining membership as the result of emigration.
The Bahá'í Faith

It is unclear when the first Baha'i group was established in Niue. One of the few remaining members on the island recalls that it was in 1971 that Tongan Bahá'í teachers arrived to establish their first spiritual assembly. The Niuean Bahá'í members are affiliated to the New Zealand National Assembly. Their numbers are so small that they are loosely organized and are unable to maintain a local assembly, which requires a minimum of nine adult members. In view of continuing emigration the future of the group in Niue looks very bleak (Talagi 2002:1-3).

The Seventh-day Adventist Church (SDA)

With a membership constituting about 2.5 per cent of the total population in 2001, the SDA Church has always been small, although it was the second church to arrive after the LMS missionaries. Early accounts of the church's establishment date back to 1915 with the arrival of a part-Samoan Niuean by the name of Vai Kerisome. Other Adventist missionaries followed, but they made little impact on Niuean society, for teachings like "abstention from pork, proper sexual behaviour [and] the observance of the Seventh-day Sabbath were hard to promote" (Garrett 1992:222). The faith however has been kept alive, but with only about four families today as most members have left for better opportunities abroad (Latu 2002:1).

Like the Mormons the SDA on Niue are affiliated to the church headquarters in Tonga. On the island the church is under the guidance of a lone pastor who coordinates activities and leads services from the church in Alofi. The SDA Church has only observer status on the Niue National Council of Churches, due to some differences in beliefs, but this does not in any way affect the good relationship between it and the other churches (Latu 2002:3).

Jehovah's Witnesses

At the time of this study there was only one existing congregation consisting of about 26 publishers in Niue (Watchtower Bible and Tract Society 2002:36). With a declining population and the absence of an able local leader a couple of Maori descent from New Zealand are on the island to guide the local church (Taylor 2002: interview with author).

THE MOST RECENT ARRIVALS

Christian Outreach Centre

The COC in Niue began as a fellowship and was officially registered with the government's Justice Department in 1999. The membership remains relatively small. Eight families, numbering approximately 25 people, make up the church. They hold services at a newly renovated building situated in the vicinity of the pastor's home in Alofi (Gafa 2002:2).

The COC is a member of the National Council of Churches and participates actively in its various activities. While the church remains politically neutral it is dedicated to serving the community through works of charity and keeping up tradition by means of a cultural group made up of young people (Gafa 2002:5).
Apostolic Church on the Rock

Influenced by the Apostolic Church in New Zealand, the Church on the Rock in Niue began as a “loose fellowship” in the late 1980s and established itself as a Pentecostal church in 1994. There is no record of membership statistics, but the church has about eight families in total. Members are mostly converts from the main Christian denomination Ekalesia Niue. Church elders comment on how conversion has led to lifestyle changes and a deeper sense of spiritual existence (Pasene and Kapage 2002).

The beliefs of the Apostolic Church on the Rock are based on Pentecostal teachings, with special emphasis on being ‘born again.’ Worship follows a charismatic style, according to Pasene and Kapage (2002:2), who state that they believe in “clapping, praising and in the lifting of hands.”

The church is administered under the Apostolic Church of New Zealand and is guided by eleven tenets or beliefs. With a small congregation the church is headed by elders.

The church is funded by the tithes of members, and also, interestingly, by the government via the NCC (Pasene and Kapage 2002: 8). Being part of the NCC can be seen as a relationship of economic convenience, as the government does not confine its financial assistance through the NCC to the Ekalesia Niue.

The church organizes Sunday school classes and from time to time hosts overseas evangelists on outreach missions.

As a member of the NCC the Apostolic Church can be seen to be partially co-operating with other churches for the sake of unity, which is important in a society threatened by a declining population. However there is a clear distinction when it comes to worship. Elders of the church emphasize that in their understanding it is wrong for ‘born again’ Christians to attend mainline churches that do not believe in that concept (Pasene and Kapage 2002:1).

ECUMENISM IN NIUE

The Niue National Council of Churches consists of five religious groups: the Ekalesia Niue, the Roman Catholic Church, the Apostolic Church on the Rock and the Christian Outreach Centre. The Seventh-day Adventists have an observer status in the Council.

Ecumenism in Niue has an added dimension in that the National Council of Churches is recognized by the government, which automatically qualifies member churches for access to official funding.

SUMMARY AND OUTLOOK

The religious situation on Niue is fairly stable, but the churches face the common threat of membership decline due to emigration. It would be interesting to ascertain how much the recent Hurricane Heta has affected people’s decision to leave. The dwindling population can be said to influence the lack of evangelization on the island and the view of Niue as an unattractive destination for expanding religions. While this is positive for existing churches, the ongoing challenge is ensuring that the few remaining on the island have their needs met amidst identified social concerns like drinking, smoking and adultery.
References


Interviews

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