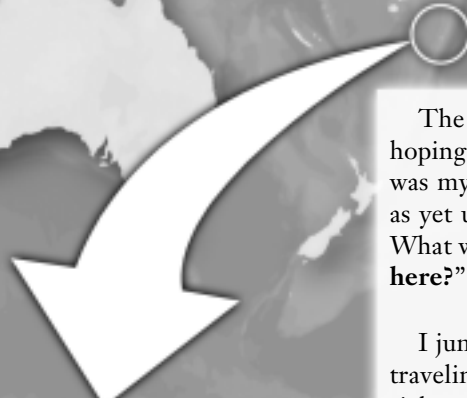


Sione Tu'uta

# Where Can I Find Methodist Worship?

An islander's perspective



The boat was shaking and rocking when I leapt from it, hoping to land on dry, solid ground. What I found instead was my legs shaking and sinking into the sand of an island as yet unknown to my family and me. “Will this be home? What will this church family be like? **How will we worship here?**” I wondered—a little boy, scared, but excited.

I jumped off of the bus in Fiji, a teen-aged rugby player, traveling to play in a foreign land. Moments before, on the rickety, open-shell bus, we were leaning into the middle aisle to avoid mud splashing through the open sides. Shaky bus, shaky legs, shaky spirit. I wondered again, as I had so many times growing up, “How will we find our welcome here? **Will this be a place we can find worship?**”

Stepping down into the exit tunnel off of the plane in Taiwan, every huge Tongan athlete made the floor quiver as if to give way beneath us. Here again, legs shaking in a foreign place, I wondered what our welcome would be. “How would we find worship in this land? **Would we be free to worship the way we knew how—in the Tongan way?**”

Arriving in Los Angeles, in the dark of night, the city lights stretching way beyond the size of any islands in Tonga, this frightened young man was wondering, “Will this be home? Will I be able to worship here?” Again I wondered, “**Can I walk into any Methodist church here or anywhere and be home and find worship?**”

*This is how my journey as the son of a Tongan Methodist pastor began.*



For a Tongan, as may be the case with you, worship is a way of living. It is life. In this way of living, life is family, and family is life. At the center of life is congregational worship. The family life of worship is shaped and molded around this congregational life of worship. So, wherever we are, we are looking for worship and expecting worship.

Growing out of the Tongan Wesleyan Methodism, I learned that worship simply means an ingathering of willing, restless and incomplete islanders— islanders who are restless for a God they know as the one who makes a symphony with ocean waves, rocks, sand, leaves, birds, sticks, and tall waving coconut trees - islanders who have a sense of a God who is walking on the Pacific Ocean to all the one hundred and seventy islands, day and night— islanders who are restless for hope in a God who is, was, and is to come even to where time began. These are Tongan islanders and this is how we live and understand worship.

Given this Tongan perspective and understanding, can I answer my questions now, having traveled over the world and experienced cross-cultural worship in a multitude of settings and with many varied persons? Yes, we Methodists can find worship in any Methodist congregation in any place in the world. Why? Because of our very identity as “Methodist.” Who we are as “Methodist” can be experienced in our worship: in our sacraments, in our liturgy, in our hymns, songs, our prayers, and most importantly in our theology of grace.

Let me share with you what I mean: It was World Communion Sunday. I stood in front of the choir, leading Tongan songs sung in Tongan. There is no other Tongan in Grace Community in Shreveport except me. Even so, there were people of many cultural roots united in worship who were, in a foreign language, singing of our relationship with a God whom we speak to in English. As people entered into the worship area, they saw a 6’3” 280-pound guy wearing a skirt (*tupenu*), leading the choir in music. I am sure it looked funny

and felt strange to unsuspecting guests.

If that was not strange enough, later on, when I spoke the words of institution, and the words of our Communion liturgy, I spoke in Tongan. Looking into the eyes of those who came to receive communion, I knew it did not matter to them that I was speaking in Tongan, and they did not understand the exact words. Those big tears and shaky hands reach-

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ing for the broken body and the shed blood surely signaled something powerful, like active lava moving in the hidden depths of their bellies. Some locked eyes with me and softly whispered “thank you,” signaling to my mind’s heart a deep connection to the Holy Spirit that is beyond my intellectual explanation.

Methodists recognize that the sacrament of baptism is God’s activity made available to everyone and that the invitation is to all generations of all people to

partake in God’s grace. This inclusive, multi-generational activity reflects our understanding of the charge in Mathew 28:19-20. I have found this faithful practice to be consistent in all the Methodist churches where I have worshipped.

Another way that our identity as “Methodist” becomes unifying and cross-cultural is in our hymns and songs. We are singing people. People in the congregation join with those leading worship by lifting our voices together to sing our faith, our theology, our witness, and our prayers. Many of these hymns and songs are the Wesleyan hymns, some even in the language of the 18th century, when sung in English. Other translations of the same hymns become 20th and 21st century hymns, new and alive with each new language.

In the winter of 2001, I was in Mexico City, taking classes at the Methodist Seminary, when I was assigned to partner in ministry with Jose, one the Mexican student pastors there. This was to be an eye-opening, cross-cultural experience packed into one long weekend that culminated with a worship service on Sunday. We set out on Thursday to make the six-hour journey to his home, a journey he made each week into rural mountain farmland where he pastored his church. On Sunday, after a weekend of exploring the community, we arose before dawn for the 1 1/2 hour bus ride to the village where we caught a taxi that would take us to the church. That morning, as we left his house, heaven unzipped and poured out a drenching blanket of water. When our taxi stopped, and Jose jumped out and ran, I

looked around, unsure about what he was doing. I did not see anything I could recognize as a church. After stepping out of the taxi to follow Jose, I realized that the taxi had stopped because it had gone as far as it could amidst the water and the mud covering what surely was a road underneath, somewhere. Running tentatively through ankle deep mud, I followed this young preacher, wondering again the questions of my youth, “What kind of welcome will we have? What

will we find? Will there be worship?" Then I saw the gate, just a few yards away, that led to a small brown stucco church building, fenced in with rusted chain-link, standing reverently at peace like an old horse in the downpour. Less than five meters directly behind it was an empty shell of bricks and a roof with open windows and a dog as the trespassing resident.

Even though there were less than a handful of people in attendance, the service began. Looking around, I discovered that I was alone, huge, and feeling out-of-place. I was the lone male in the congregation, did not understand the language or the customs, and I felt too exposed and vulnerable when I humbly recalled that worship will go on no matter how many show up.

When the young preacher got up to preach, I checked for the last time and found the final headcount to be seven little "senior" señoritas. Even in the dismal, cold, dirty, damp surroundings, my

friend and colleague was on fire. If you have ever stood by a barbecue grill and heard the sound of fat dripping on burning charcoal, you know the intense sound I mean when I say that preacher sizzled! And the rain fell.

After the preaching, there was singing; and oh, how delicious it was when I realized that the hymn being sung was a hymn that I knew from Tonga...home. I soon forgot that I did not know how to speak the native tongue. I was overwhelmed with the joy of being home... in this Methodist church, high up in the mountains of Mexico, freezing and cold...just as I was in those Methodist churches on the warm tropical islands of Tonga.

In that moment, I was connected, connectional, in the singing of the hymns, with the spirit of these seven senior señoritas, in the sludge, with the restless spirit of Christ, not for himself, but for the willing and the incomplete. I was connected with the restless spirit of

John Wesley, the pastor proclaiming the world as his parish. I was connected again to the restless spirit of those young rugby-playing islander boys, stepping shakily into foreign lands and looking for a family and a place to worship. And finally, I was connected again to the restless spirit of that boy I was, jumping into the unfamiliar sand...and I had my answer. Surely, surely this is worship. Surely, surely this is life. Surely, surely this is home. □



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