

The New Zealand Mission during the Great Depression: Reflections of a Former Acting President

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THE TIME WAS 21 April 1932; the place, New Zealand. I had served as a Mormon missionary for nearly two and one-half years, the normal period according to Church practice for a foreign assignment at that time. I was anticipating returning home to Rexburg, Idaho, in time to enroll at Brigham Young University that fall.

When I first arrived in New Zealand in late 1929, one mission covered both of the country's major islands. The Church had nearly fifty active missionaries and just under eight thousand members—roughly seven Maoris to every pakeha (white). The first Mormon missionaries arrived in New Zealand in 1854, less than a quarter century after the Church's beginning in New York State in 1830. The first LDS branch was organized a year later, with only ten members. Missionary work was sporadic, however, until around 1880, when proselyting, especially among the Maoris, met with considerable response. The ratio of Maoris to pakehas in Church membership is even more remarkable when you consider that during the 1930s, when I was there, the overall population stood at about 1,500,000, including only 68,000 Maoris.

I had been assigned the last two years to the Wairarapa District with headquarters in the small all-Maori Hiona Branch, located on the outskirts of the city of Masterton. I had been serving as district

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All correspondence and journal entries cited in this essay are in the personal collection of the author.

president for approximately fifteen months when a regularly scheduled *hui pareha* (district conference) was held at Hiona in early March of 1932. As usual, Mission President John E. Magleby, elderly, highly spiritual, and greatly loved by all, especially the Maori members, presided. He released me as district president and then called three local Maori elders to take my place.

The Wairarapa district was the sixth district in the mission (out of fourteen) for which President Magleby had called local leadership. The number of "Zion missionaries," those from America, had declined steadily and rapidly, not just in New Zealand, but in virtually all missions of the Church. The Great Depression made it increasingly difficult for Mormon families to provide financial support for their sons and daughters on missions. My own father had been having rather severe financial difficulties. In order to send the monthly checks needed for my support, he sometimes had to borrow money from the bank.

About one month following my release as district president, I attended the 1932 *hui tau* (mission conference) at Nuhaka on the east coast of the North Island. President Magleby spoke to me privately and invited me to report soon at mission headquarters in Auckland. He did not say why.

The morning after I arrived in Auckland, President Magleby showed me a cablegram from the First Presidency in Salt Lake City which read: "We honorably release you [to] return home. . . . Place capable missionary in temporary charge." He then asked if I would be willing to take on that assignment. He felt that it could last no more than three or four months, allowing time for him to arrive home and make his report, and then for Church Authorities to send someone older and more experienced than I to take over. This request/assignment hit me like a bombshell. What could I say? Extending my stay would mean postponing a much longed-for reunion with my family, postponing dating and eventual marriage, and postponing my schooling and my eventual goal of a Ph.D. Even the thought of taking on a position with such awesome responsibility almost overwhelmed me. Yet I could see the need and was honored to be asked. With little hesitation I said that I would do my best.

But new and unexpected developments soon made it clear that the matter was not entirely settled. My father, who was on the faculty at Ricks College, had written earlier to me: "The school held back part of our salary again because of the bank failure and the fact that students are not paying their tuition to any great extent." I learned at this time that, like many parents of missionaries at that time, he had also written to the President of the Church, explaining his situation and wondering if my release couldn't be arranged to take place rather soon.

Just a day or two after the cable releasing President Magleby, and after I had made my commitment to take over, another communication from the First Presidency arrived, recommending that I be honorably released due to financial difficulties at home. This had been written, of course, after President Heber J. Grant had heard from my father but before he could have received word from New Zealand about my appointment as interim mission president. Still, President Magleby, in showing it to me, gave me my choice. I could choose to go home, despite my acceptance a few days earlier. But without hesitation I told him that I had committed myself and would stay.

In the days that remained to him, President Magleby taught me all he could about the responsibilities and routines of a mission president. He introduced me to some of his business friends, carefully went over the books and office procedures, and arranged for me to board at the mission home without cost and to draw traveling expenses plus five pounds (about twenty-five dollars) monthly from the mission funds for personal expenses. He formally set me apart for the new calling and combined this with a blessing, all of which was duly recorded.

On the morning of 3 May 1932, President and Sister Magleby set sail, together with a few released missionaries and some local Saints who had been called for a few weeks of temple work in Hawaii. Hundreds of friends and well-wishers gathered at the Auckland wharf to say farewell. I shed a few tears, too.

I returned to the mission home feeling very much alone and as if an extremely heavy load had been placed upon my shoulders. "Will I make good?" I asked in my journal and then answered, "Yes, if God permits."

In my initial letter to the First Presidency, I wrote: "My length of stay will depend entirely upon your desire." In the somewhat frequent correspondence that took place between us, I never once raised the question of my own release. I did, however, plead for more missionaries each time that I wrote. For my own part, I continued to think that surely the First Presidency would act rather soon on my case, and I even so much as half expected a release each time a letter arrived from them. That did not happen, however, until after I had served as acting president for a full fifteen months. By then the entire period of my missionary service was just under four years.

Somewhat typical of correspondence from President Grant is this extract of a letter I received in late 1932:

We have full confidence in your ability to direct the affairs of the New Zealand Mission. Regret that there has been such a marked decrease in number of missionaries. Conditions do not look very encouraging towards increasing this num-

ber. Many of the missions are utilizing the services of the worthy local brothers and sisters, who devote their spare time to this important and sacred service.

The feelings of “aloneness” or of the “heavy load” that hit me at the very beginning soon eased. It was not long before I began to feel quite comfortable in my new role, while trying at the same time to remain humble and on-track.

I should explain the reasons my feelings eased. President Magleby had established policies and generally well-functioning programs before his departure. The remaining missionaries and many outstanding members gave me their support and let me draw on their strength. I received regular encouraging letters from the First Presidency in Salt Lake City in which they offered both suggestions and assurances of their confidence in me and my work. And—perhaps of primary importance—I tried always to stay in tune with the spirit by keeping busy and attending to my duties, but also through prayer and occasional fasting. For example, at one point I wrote in my journal: “I have been fasting for two full days and intend to continue until tomorrow night. I must keep myself humble in order to carry on with this great and important work.”

Although perhaps as much as half of my time as acting president was spent at the Auckland headquarters taking care of necessary administrative duties, the other half was spent “on the road,” usually attending conferences. The schedule then called for district conferences every six months and an annual overall mission conference. During my tenure, I was privileged to preside over thirty-two district conferences and one annual mission conference.

My mid-1932 experience at D’Urville Island gives something of the “Maori flavor” of a Church gathering. A tiny “dot on the map,” D’Urville Island is located at the northeastern edge of New Zealand’s South Island, just a little southwest of the capitol, Wellington. This small island had no roads and few trails of any consequence; nearly all of the traveling was done by launch. The entire population totaled little more than one hundred people, most of whom were LDS.

Because of its relative isolation and size, the D’Urville Island *hui pariha* was not nearly as elaborate as were most of the others. But the format was similar, and the spirit was every bit as rich.

At Wellington on the evening of 15 July 1932, I boarded a small freighter and bedded down in one of its two cramped cabins. The seas across Cook’s Strait were rough, but I did not get seasick. I was awakened around three in the morning, when the boat pulled up at French Pass, an anchorage. Brother Ruroku met me there and took me in his small launch on a half-hour long journey to his home on the shore. His

wife was waiting with a light meal on the table and a large fire in the fireplace. After warming myself and eating and visiting a little, I went to bed once more. The next day we rode the launch over to the other side of the bay, to Madsen, a small Maori *paa* (village) named after a former Mormon missionary. Upon our arrival, the Saints there gathered together, and I went down the line that had formed pressing noses in *hongi*, the traditional form of Maori greeting. Later I wrote in my journal: "This Hui Pariha was one of the very best, even though the crowd was small. . . . They respected me as President, almost treated me like royalty. It was an occasion that I will never forget."

Before and after the scheduled meetings, I was treated to two exciting deep-sea fishing trips, one on Saturday and the other on Monday. Then came the time for farewell and departure:

It was after dark when we arrived back from fishing and there was a nice big fire awaiting us. I found that my suit had been cleaned and pressed while I was away. We visited for awhile and then the entire crowd gathered at the hall where we played games, danced, and sang songs. Then everyone walked down to the shore. We said our goodbyes and I, plus a couple of others who were taking me, boarded the launch. The moon was shining beautifully. The sea was calm. As we moved farther away from the shore and the crowd grew dim to our eyes we still could hear the sweet farewells in the form of Maori singing floating over the waters. I was touched by this new and romantic experience coming to me from Maori-land.

Farther out, the pilot of a small passenger liner, which followed a regular schedule between Nelson and Wellington, saw our signal and pulled up in mid-water. I boarded by climbing up a rope ladder.

The number of Zion missionaries working in New Zealand continued to decline both before and after I was appointed acting president. The fifty or so who were there at the time I arrived in late 1929 had been reduced to a mere fourteen (including myself) by the time I took over in the spring of 1932. Then, during the fifteen months that I remained in charge, not one single missionary from abroad arrived to bring us relief; on top of that, I was forced over time to release another six—three according to my own judgment and three because of requests from the First Presidency.

Feeling that my time would be short and not wanting to rock the boat, I aimed to follow through on policies and programs that President Magleby had established. Of course, I would innovate at times, but in the main I tried to stay the course. I attempted to meet the challenge of attrition in the number of Zion missionaries in two ways. First, we needed to organize or reorganize a number of Church structures. At the mission level, I started out by following through on a project that President Magleby already had well started. I organized, for the first time formally, a mission-wide genealogical committee.

Stuart Meha, who had been given some training at the Hawaiian Temple with this in mind, became its first president. And on my own I called and set apart Hohepa Meha, Stuart Meha's bright and energetic son, as the new editor of *Te Karere*, the monthly mission magazine, and Frederick Davis as the new superintendent of the mission Sunday schools. Davis, a young Tongan man, possessed outstanding musical talent and was in New Zealand essentially to study and promote his career. These were the first local members ever to hold these particular high positions, and both performed with distinction.

At the district level, I pulled Zion missionaries out of an additional three district presidencies—that is, in addition to the six districts in which President Magleby had called local leadership. However, whereas President Magleby had found enough faithful and competent local Saints to organize his six districts completely locally, I was able to do this in only one: the Poverty Bay District. In the other two—the Wellington and the South Island Districts—I left only the local branches still functioning, but arranged for occasional visits from mission headquarters and from nearby operating districts to give help and encouragement as they were able to do so. It was not an ideal solution but was the best that I could come up with, and I viewed it as temporary.

My second and major attempt to deal with the challenges created by the shortage of Zion missionaries was to increase the number of local missionaries. As a first move in that direction, I called and set apart four worthy female members to perform missionary service in the Auckland area. I then wrote a letter to all district officers and, in addition, published an article in *Te Karere* entitled “A Call to Service,” both of which stressed the need for missionary service and the blessings that would follow. I asked for volunteers, and the response was most encouraging. At the March 1933 *hiu tau* in Nuhaka, over which I presided, we set apart some thirty-three additional local members for missions of six months or longer. I instructed them and assigned each to the various districts in which they would be working. Together with others already in the field, this made more than fifty local missionaries working throughout the North Island—the largest contingent ever, by far, up to that point in time. After learning of my course of action, the First Presidency informed me that they looked upon it as “very gratifying.”

On 14 July 1933, Elder Rufus K. Hardy, a member of the First Quorum of Seventy, arrived to replace me. Only eight of us Zion missionaries remained at that time. Of course, of those eight, I had been there the longest. But each of the others was either approaching or already over the two-year mark. Five new missionaries accompanied

President Hardy, four of whom went on to serve in Australia; only the fifth remained in New Zealand. The Depression had taken its toll.

The two weeks between President Hardy's arrival and my departure were, for the most part, spent going over mission affairs with him. In addition, I enjoyed some heartwarming farewells for me, including a testimonial in the mission chapel. A large group of members and friends assembled down at the dock to see me off. There, to the delight of all, the missionaries who were staying behind, together with a few of their friends, performed several Maori action songs and *hakas* (traditional war dances).

Later, after I arrived in Salt Lake City, I went to Church headquarters by appointment to make my report to the First Presidency. I was ushered into President Heber J. Grant's spacious office and asked to be seated as part of a semicircle alongside his two counselors, Anthony W. Ivins and J. Reuben Clark. We were together for perhaps half an hour. I felt humble in their presence, but greatly honored. They asked about a number of things, especially concerning the morale of the remaining elders. They asked how members were responding to the new responsibilities given them and what, if any, recommendations I could make to further the work. I reported on a few specific problems and needs as I saw them, but also tried to be reassuring and to let them know that I and others had been doing our best. I again plugged hard for additional missionaries to be sent to New Zealand. They thanked me and expressed satisfaction and appreciation for my years of service.

I came home on a "high," feeling both successful and thankful for the opportunities that had been mine.

But how do I feel now, better than half a century later, after I have seen more of life and had more time to reflect and gain additional perspectives? I have less burning enthusiasm, to be sure, but still no regrets for having spent time on a mission. There were sacrifices, of course, and times of discouragement and even temporary doubt. But these were more than counterbalanced by the rewards that came from conquering difficulties and giving unselfish service to others. In sum, the pluses far outweigh the minuses.

First there is service: I firmly believe—backed up by what, to me, are meaningful evidences—that I did exert a positive influence in the lives of a number of people, both in and out of the Church. I was able to help some think, feel, and live on a higher plane and consequently to enjoy greater satisfactions in life. This, it seems to me, is the ultimate reward.

But there has been a personal reward as well. My exposure to another culture within the framework of conviction and service, espe-

cially when I was acting president, brought me a measure of maturity and skill in problem solving and leadership, to say nothing of added recognition and respect. These in turn helped me as a student at BYU. And academic success there provided an invitation to join the faculty, which then prepared me for my professional career and opened up a promising professorship for me at Purdue University—and so on and so on. One thing leads to another. Success, no matter how limited, can beget continuing success. In my case it did, at least.

Finally, there are heartwarming rewards, remembrances brought to the fore by events or by contacts that invite one to relive the past. In October of 1981 a large group of Maori Saints traveled across the Pacific to Salt Lake City to attend general conference and a special reunion of former New Zealand labor missionaries. They also came as a church choir prepared to perform with traditional songs and dances. They presented several well-received programs in Salt Lake City and later during their return trip, in St. George, Hurricane, and Las Vegas.

One hundred and fifty or more members of this group traveled on to San Diego to present an open-air concert at the Mormon Battalion Visitor's Center in Old Town. My wife, Alice, and I arrived there early, hoping to meet some older Maoris in the company who might remember me from nearly fifty years earlier. We met four, one man and three women; and they turned out to be members I had called on missions at the time of the 1933 *hui tau*, an event they excitedly recalled. The concert of old Maori songs and dances performed in native costume touched my heart and revived many fond memories from the past, but what thrilled me most was my preconcert encounter with those four former Maori missionaries who remembered me so warmly. Each of them embraced me, almost in tears. One of them called out, "Ehoa, homai te hongī." I responded by making the rounds grasping hands and pressing noses. What memories!