

Concerns Expressed in Samoa about the Dateline Change

December 29 is getting close and people are becoming very anxious about the change. Some are questioning the position taken by the Samoa-Tokelau Mission Executive Committee. The following general concerns have been voiced:

1. The Process in which the Decision was Made

The concern here seems to relate to personal convictions. If conversion and the decision to observe the correct Sabbath were a matter of personal faith and salvation, "Why should the executive Committee make a decision without consulting us first?"

This is a very valid concern. No council or creed can tell us how or what to worship. However this issue is being muddied by the true Sabbath being defined as "Saturday." In most places that is correct, but not in Samoa after December 29. Seventh-day Adventists have always defined the Sabbath in Biblical terms – as the seventh day of the week. After December 29, Saturday in Samoa will only be the sixth day, and Sunday will be the true seventh day of the Western Hemisphere, as a day will be dropped from the calendar. The choice is whether to continue to observe and honour the true seventh-day Sabbath of the Lord, in an unbroken cycle (regardless of what the day is called) or to observe Saturday (the sixth day), in order to be different to the Sunday-keepers.

Therefore, we believe the Executive Committee has made the right decision. The Executive Committee is recommending this to our membership because it is supported by a Biblical principle. The Executive Committee is there to offer spiritual leadership, and that is what they have done. However all members must make the decision individually and collectively. We are a united family, and we wish to move forward in unity!

Remember that early Adventist pioneers also worshipped with Sunday-keepers when Sunday was the true seventh day prior to 1892, and since Chief Malietoa corrected that situation, Adventists in Samoa have been worshipping on the seventh day of the week (now Saturday) for over 120 years as a part of their Adventist identity. Why would we change now and break the weekly cycle just because the name of the day has changed?

This decision must also consider the impact and implications for Sabbath Observance in American Samoa. American Samoa is also at this time part of the Samoa and Tokelau Mission. Although standing as a separate territory and political entity they are our brothers and sisters in both culture and spiritual family. Their views and feelings about this change should be considered also.

It is inconceivable that two countries and people so closely located geographically and under the same daytime should be worshipping on different days without a setting of the sun between them! Common sense demands that Adventists within the Samoan group of islands should be worshipping together on the same day. How could a sunny Sabbath in Pago Pago not also be the Sabbath in Apia, just because the Samoan government has drawn a line between Upolu and Tutuila so the day is called Sunday instead of Saturday? Surely Adventists in both nations should be worshipping together on the same seventh day. A commercial decision to link workdays with the countries of Australia and New Zealand should not change what is a God-ordained day of sacred time!

2. Doctrinal Concerns

a. The sequence of days when Jesus was crucified

Jesus was crucified on the Preparation day (currently Friday), He rested in the grave on the seventh day (currently Saturday), and rose again on the first day of the week (currently Sunday). There is no change in the calendar in Jerusalem where those things happened, so nothing changes there. The sequence of days does not change. However in Samoa, because the government has decided to “change times and laws,” by dropping one day from the week, the names of those days will change. Consequently, the preparation day, which is still the sixth day of the week, will then be called Saturday; and the Sabbath day, the seventh day of the week will then be called Sunday; and the first day of the week will then be called Monday. Sunday-keepers will actually be worshipping with us on the true seventh day! They will no longer be worshipping on the first day of the week (“in honour of the resurrection”), as the first day, Monday, begins the normal working week. So it is quite clear that when we go to church on the seventh day (Sunday), people around us may be confused, but we will still honour the original seventh day.

b. The Third Angel’s Message (Rev 14:9–11)

Adventists have always warned others about the Mark of the Beast. But perhaps this has wrongly been identified as a day (Sunday) rather than “an enforcement to worship” and obey the Beast. So the Executive Committee, in wishing to protect church members in Samoa, have recommended that we continue to worship God on His true Sabbath day – the seventh day of the week – as we have always done. We are not going to change simply because the government tells us to, or because the name of the day has changed. The seventh day across the Western hemisphere of the Pacific will always remain the 24 hours of holy time in which we must rest and honour God the Creator, regardless of what name we give it. And when in the future, governments or priests try to compel us to worship differently and to worship the Beast, that will clearly be, the “mark” of the Beast. So this change will not destroy our message of evangelism and prophetic interpretation. We will continue to invite people to worship God as Creator on the true seventh day, from sunset to sunset. Let us use this as a golden opportunity to proclaim the real meaning of the Sabbath. Most Sunday-keepers do not honour God for a full 24 hours! Our message will always be relevant and meaningful!

Some people are concerned that we will now worship on the same day as everyone else, as if that would prevent us from being persecuted. We should not make decisions and do things just to attract persecution. Persecution may come eventually simply because we are serving God. In New Testament times, the early Christians continued to worship on the same day as others, and that did not stop them from being persecuted! The seventh-day Sabbath and the correct day of worship is one of the key issues of last day events. We need to be sure we are doing the right thing, and the church leaders at Mission level, Union level, Division level and General Conference level are confident that the church in Samoa has made the right decision.

c. The call to come out of Babylon (Rev 18:1–8)

Again there is concern that we have nothing to offer the other churches if we are not different. This is simply not so. There are many characteristics other than “first day observance” that define the nature of spiritual Babylon. God’s call to “come out and receive not of her plagues” will continue to be relevant because of all the other false doctrines of other churches. True Sabbath observance is far deeper than superficial Sunday church attendance!

The other churches are concerned that they will end up worshipping on the same day as the Adventists. They will know that Sunday is indeed the true seventh day, and they no longer commemorate the first-day resurrection (which will be Monday). We should thank God for that evangelistic opportunity and make the most of it. We can encourage them with “You have come part way out, now come the rest of the way!” “Honour the Creator God on this true memorial of His creation from sunset to sunset as he ordained. Come and join us in worship on the Sabbath of the Lord”!

3. The Position of the Samoan Independent SDA Church

It looks like the Independent SDAs have changed their mind. Originally they were going to ignore the change and maintain true Sabbath observance on the seventh day of the week. But now it looks like they are going to buckle under pressure. Do we join them? Of course not. They are not doing the right thing. Should we make decisions based on what the Independents do? Or should our actions be based on what is true and biblical?

Some are concerned that some of our ministers and leading lay people will leave the true church and join the independents. This would be very sad, and we would encourage them to reconsider. But we cannot make a decision based on the fear of what others may do. We make our decision on a plain thus says the Lord – “Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy...the seventh day.”

Over the years, Seventh-day Adventists have consistently observed the seventh day of the Western Hemisphere regardless of what it was called. Prior to 1892 Samoans were calling the true seventh day “Sunday” by mistake. Then they added a day to the week and began to observe the “first day”. As they change back to that situation again in the future, Sunday will become the true seventh day. Seventh-day Adventists have never had to change, because God does not change. Human governments and powers may change, but the seven-day cycle begun by God at Creation can never change. The Sabbath of the Lord remains the same, regardless of what the Independent SDAs might do.

4. The Distinctiveness of the Church

It is argued that Saturday is the only recognisable difference we have with the other churches. This is not so. There are many doctrines unique to Seventh-day Adventists, including the non-immortality of the soul, but the main difference we have is with our eschatology – our understanding of events around the return of Jesus. As well as being Seventh-day people, we are also **Adventists**, and this is the time to highlight the Advent part. Jesus is coming soon and the world needs to know. The Second Coming is not secret, and people don’t get a second chance. There is a huge work to do and we need to start doing it.

5. Church Growth

It has been suggested that the church in Tonga has not grown because of its day of worship being the same as everyone else. This is unfair and untrue. You cannot compare Samoa and Tonga. They are two proud nations with their own proud traditions. They may have had a shared past centuries ago, but they are no longer the same. Each have their own cultural concerns and challenges, and the church in both countries must find the best way to speak to its community in ways that are applicable and understood.

6. Tonga's Situation

The youth congress held in Tonga in 2008 confused a lot of young people from other parts of the Pacific perhaps because of a poorly explained Sabbath rationale, and activities planned for Saturday that did not seem appropriate to most. This was a most unfortunate incident because it was not explained to the youths that what they understood as "Saturday" was in fact the sixth day of the week in Tonga. Technically speaking "Saturday" does not exist in the Tongan calendar. In Tongan, "Monday" is the first day of the week. "Friday" or "Falaite" in the Tongan calendar is the fifth day of the week. And, "Tokanaki," literally translated as "preparation" day is the sixth day of the week. "Tokanaki" is followed by the seventh day called "Sapate," literally translated "Sabbath." So, the incident at the youth congress was more one of misunderstanding and cannot be used as a reason not to go ahead with maintaining seventh-day worship in Samoa after December 29. All it does is highlight the importance of clearly explaining why we as Adventists maintain the same seventh day of worship in each particular place. It is up to the leaders of the church in Samoa to clearly explain that we worship in an unbroken sequence of every seventh day. The day before the seventh day is the preparation day, and we use that day to prepare for the Sabbath to make it a truly sacred event.

7. Taking a Practical Approach

Some argue that we should just take a practical approach. What this means is that we just go along with everybody else because that will cause the least trouble. People who do not live in Samoa also use this argument—those who have family back in Samoa and travel there regularly. They argue that they are not keeping every seventh day in their own experience, and the easiest way to ensure they are keeping their own seven-day cycle is to adopt the time of New Zealand or Australia. However, the seven-day cycle is not tied to individuals. It is tied to the land. In Old Testament times the land was given a Sabbath every seven years. The weekly Sabbath is related to that, so that if a person travels from one place to another, the Sabbath as measured by a locality is what counts, not a person's individual body clock.

8. Final Thoughts

Pastor David Hay shares these thoughts:

Malietao Laupapa in 1892 said that ... *"Through an error in reckoning the people of these islands have hitherto been using the wrong day and date as judged by our true position in longitude."*

This high chief was simply stating the fact that Samoa lies well to the east of the 180th meridian and needs to recognise that the country should be observing Western Hemisphere Day Sequence! This error was corrected on July 4, 1892.

Now, I don't think too many Samoans today would come out clearly and say that their respected leader was wrong and didn't know what he was talking about? So the counsel of this father in Samoa, who had the best interests of his people at heart, needs to be considered carefully before dismissing it.

Pastor Ray Coombe shares these thoughts:

The real issue here is to identify "What is the true seventh day Sabbath after December 29?" Is it still Saturday every week? No – because that first Saturday of December 31 is only the sixth day of that week. The seventh day of the week which is God's holy time will be Sunday, January 1. From then on, the day which will now be called Sunday in Samoa will be the true seventh-day Sabbath of the Lord. This is what Seventh-day Adventists are especially concerned about. We must identify and worship God on what is His true seventh day – in unbroken succession since the Creation of the world. Not just any seventh day – but the seventh-day Sabbath regardless of what name is given by earthly governments. We must honour God in this special 24 hour period as it moves across the Western Hemisphere. It will be observed by all Seventh-day Adventists in the same longitude (whether in American Samoa, Western Samoa, Tonga and Wallis & Futuna) no matter what people call it.

It is wrong to claim that our members in Samoa are being asked to begin worshipping on Sunday, after 100 years of Saturday worshipping. We are simply encouraging our members to keep on observing the "seventh-day" of the week in unbroken succession, because we are "Seventh-day Adventists" not "Saturday" Adventists. From January 1, 2012, Sunday will be the true seventh day in Samoa.

If we do not change, but continue observing Sabbath on Saturday simply because the government has changed the day, it will demonstrate to other Christians that we are not serious about identifying the true 'seventh day' Sabbath. They will know that we are compromising because of convention. They will know that we are really worshipping on what will continue to be the sixth day of the western hemisphere.

So the issue here is not "Sunday worship". The issue is true seventh-day Sabbath observance. From sunset on Saturday night, Dec 31, the Sabbath of the Lord will begin, and finish at sunset on Sunday evening. Adventists will not have broken the sacred weekly cycle. If we continue to worship on Saturday in the future – we will literally be Sixth-day Adventists! Let us pledge together to remain loyal to God and his memorial of Creation by continuing to keep holy the 'seventh day'. God has only blessed the seventh day – not the sixth day, or the first day, or any other day of the week. "The seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God". "This is the day that the Lord has made. Let us be glad and rejoice in it"!