

# Why our church apologized To Hawai'i

By Charles McCollough

*Editor's note: Following is the original, expanded version of an essay that appeared in the commemorative book, UCC@50--our history, our future.*

Before the Congregational missionaries arrived in Hawai'i, foreigners (traders, whalers and adventurers) had already brought alien commerce, alcohol, guns, and, most devastatingly, diseases for which Native Hawaiians had no immunities. Western diseases reduced the Hawaiian population by an estimated 80% between 1778 and 1858.<sup>1</sup> In a very different way, the first missionaries gave their lives to bring Christianity to Hawai'i. Our apology came out of a later time and new perspectives.

In 1820 the brig Thaddeus landed the first of 150 missionaries sent by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) to:

“aim at nothing short of covering these islands with fruitful fields and pleasant dwellings, and schools and churches; of raising up the whole people to an elevated state of Christian civilization...to turn them from their barbarous courses and habits.”<sup>2</sup>

By the time the U.S. military took over the main buildings in Honolulu on Jan. 17, 1893, Western men, some descendents of missionaries, controlled much of Hawai'i through business dealings,

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<sup>1</sup> These rough estimations vary widely as there is no way to be exact. One says that in the 80 years after western contact the population fell from about 300,000 to 60,000. See *Hawaii*, Hoefler, Lueras, and Chung, Hong Kong: Apa Productions, 1980, p. 41. Another estimate puts the decline at 1 million to 40,000 in a century after 1778. *A Call For Hawaiian Sovereignty*, M. Dudley and K. Agard, Honolulu: Na Kane O Ka Malo Press, 1990, p. xii

<sup>2</sup> *Instructions from the Prudential Committee of the ABCFM to members of the Mission to the Sandwich Islands* (Boston: Samuel Armstrong, 1819) pp.x-xi quoted by David Stowe, “Background for an Apology to Native Hawaiian People”, *New Conversation*, spring 1993, vol. 15, #1, p. 44. In this volume 15 we gathered the views of UCC leaders and an independent historian, Andrew Walsh, on Hawaiian church history. Volume 17, #3 gave voice to native people of Hawai'i and North America.

privatization of land and government influence. This, in brief, is the context of the highly successful evangelization of Hawai'i and the eventual apology by the president of the UCC on Jan. 17, 1993.<sup>3</sup>

But why apologize for actions done long ago? Part of the answer is in two other questions posed by a native North American: Why must native people today continue to suffer and pay for the benefits that Euro-Americans enjoy as result of the “cultural genocide” of native people? Also, are not the recipients of stolen property also as liable for the original thief?<sup>4</sup> We who vacation today on the beautiful beaches of Hawai'i and are entertained by luaus and hula shows certainly benefit from the overthrow, annexation and eventual statehood of Hawai'i. But there has been a heavy price that is rarely seen by tourists. Native Hawaiians were devastated not only by foreign diseases but by the total disruption of their culture, traditions and economy as well as their government. However, native religion had already virtually collapsed by the time the missionaries arrived. So Christianity became an attractive option especially to a number of Hawaiian royals who employed the missionaries as buffers against the manipulations of other outsiders.

### **“Missionary boys”**

#### **helped overthrow the Queen**

The ABCFM explicitly warned the missionaries against involvement in the government. The *original* missionaries could have had no part in the overthrow as all were dead or retired by 1893. Yet some of their descendents (the “Missionary Boys” as they were called) and families were part of the “committee of safety” and “Honolulu Rifles” that, along with the troops from the USS Boston,

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<sup>3</sup> The germs of westerners surely played a part in these conversions. Some historians note that Native Hawaiians saw how immune western Christians were from the diseases that decimated their people and converted to Christianity in mass. Though this cause for conversions is credible, of course, there is no way definitively to measure the inner motives of converts.

<sup>4</sup> See George Tinker, *Political Theology and American Indian Liberation*, and Minneapolis, MN: Fortress 2004, p.5.

overthrew Queen Lili'uokalani. The Hawaiian Evangelical Association, HEA (which later became the Hawaii Conference of the UCC. HAUCC) was generally supportive of the overthrow. In 1893, the editor of the HEA newsletter, *The Friend*, wrote, “Dead and rotten is the monarchy, beyond chance of resuscitation...so hopelessly fallen into heathen mental and moral vileness, it only remains to be speedily buried out of sight.”<sup>5</sup>

The immediate cause of the church's rejection of the Queen (a devout Christian) was her plan to strengthen the Hawaiian constitutional monarchy and support it by allowing gambling and opium importation. However, the larger context for the overthrow was the assumed superiority of the “elevated state of Christian civilization” as noted above in the ABCFM charge in 1819 and in the U. S. government's ideology of “Manifest Destiny” that sought to justify its imperial expansion from Cuba to the Philippines.

After 100 years, some native Hawaiians and their supporters in the UCC began to oppose this domination by bringing a resolution to the HAUCC annual meeting in 1990 and then to the UCC General Synod in 1991. The resolution called for support of Native Hawaiian sovereignty. General Synod recognized the missionaries' sacrifices and “generosity are an inspiration...their contributions endure”<sup>6</sup> Yet,

“in recognition of our historic complicities in the illegal overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy in 1893 [The General Synod] “directs the office of the President of the UCC to offer a public apology to the native Hawaiian people and to initiate a process of reconciliation between the UCC and native Hawaiians.”<sup>7</sup>

### **Paul Sherry's apology was a model for the government**

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<sup>5</sup> Sereno E. Bishop, editor, *New Conversations, Op. .Cit.*, p. 56.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Sherry, The Apology, *New Conversations, op. cit*, p. 5

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid* p. 3, 4.

Then-president, Paul Sherry gave this apology at the Kaumakapili UCC on Jan.17, 1993 and earlier gave a similar offering to a crowd of an estimated 10,000 at the Royal, Iolani Palace, both in Honolulu.

There was opposition and many revised drafts of the apology. The HAUCC decided only to “receive [President Sherry’s] visit...and wish him well.”, while sovereignty groups insisted a “redress” be added to it. This redress was eventually included and implemented through grants given by the UCC in Hawai’i and the Homeland and World boards in Cleveland. The apology and “process of reconciliation” was thus begun and then imitated, without the redress, 11 months later in another apology by the U.S. Government .

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