

The Anglican Observer to the UN: On a Mission, A Long Way From Home

By NICOLE SEIFERTH

Archdeacon Taimalelagi Fagamalama Tuatagaloa-Matalavea – known to her American colleagues simply as Archdeacon Tai – is a long way from home. A native of the Pacific island country of Samoa, the Archdeacon has lived and worked in New York for the past five years as Anglican Observer at the United Nations. In addition to the warmth and humor of her homeland, she brought with her a lifetime of experience working with the United Nations and for the Anglican Church.

The Anglican Observer serves as an advocate, lobbyist and facilitator to the United Nations for the Anglican Church. Given that the Anglican Church has member churches throughout the world, it is no small task. The archdeacon particularly focuses on six areas: women's rights; environment and sustainable development; children's rights; indigenous peoples; human rights; and economic and global security for countries under conflicts.

Tai keeps in close contact with the primates of the Anglican Communion, as well as other organizations throughout the church, such as the Office of Government Relations (OGR) in Washington, D.C. and the Peace and Justice Ministries of the Episcopal Church. "I go to UN missions to try and get some support for our issues. It is a matter of talking to UN staff, NGO [non-governmental organizations] members, going to the ambassadors and their staff to talk."

She officially took up the position of Anglican Observer just a few days before September 11, 2001. Having only been in New York for less than a month, "I said to myself, 'God really wants me to experience the pain of others.'"

"You are exposed to so much pain by doing the work of the United Nations," she affirms, but she copes with that pressure by working with other Christian groups and through the close ties she maintains with the people in the UN missions of her Pacific Region, as well as her colleagues at the Episcopal Church Center.

Working effectively with ecumenical partners, the archdeacon says, has been something she's encouraged since she arrived in 2001. "All the Christian churches, we have a stronger voice if we submit a statement we all sign, instead of just one person going to the UN. It's stronger if you have quite a lot more people."

Life in the Pacific

The archdeacon knows more than a little about how to get things done at the United Nations. Before being appointed Anglican Observer, she worked with the United Nations Development Program in the Philippines, Fiji and Samoa.

"I was a program officer," she explained. "I would sit at the table with government officers to discuss how funds we had in trust for their countries ought to be spent." It was, she summarized, "taking part in the government's development program and actually translating that into technical assistance."

Tai traveled to different island countries – some quite remote – for her work, which made her uniquely suited to another task: serving as the first lay archdeacon for the Anglican Church in New Zealand, Aotearoa and Polynesia. Her bishop appointed her in 1993 and part of her responsibilities, as the "eyes, ears and voice of the bishop" was to serve as an initial mediator in any crises that arose for the priests serving those islands.

Which is quite a long way from where the archdeacon grew up: in a village an hour bus ride from the closest town. That is, "it takes an hour by bus to go to my village if you knew the short route, but [otherwise] it took four hours."

"I grew up a village girl," she said. "My father was chief of the village; my Christian name is actually the name of the place...where my father could live and have his clan – that's Fagamalama. Taimalelagi...it's



Archdeacon Tai with Anglican delegates to the UN Commission on the Status of Women meeting. Photo by KARA FLANNERY/Courtesy the Office of Women's Ministries

actually a chiefly title and I inherited it from my great-grandfather."

That same great grandfather, she says matter of factly, "received Christianity to Samoa from the London Missionaries in 1830." She adds with a laugh, "So, maybe I was destined for this job."

The Archdeacon now goes by Taimalelagi, she says, because her 12 children insisted upon it. Three of her 28 grandchildren are also called Fagamalama and it was creating confusion. With the exception of one son, all the archdeacon's children and grandchildren live in Samoa. She's looking forward to getting back to them after she leaves her post as Anglican Observer this July.

"I miss my grandchildren," she says and she also has some exciting plans for her return to the Pacific.

"I really want to give back to my church...my church is a very poor church. We have very poor people but they have contributed some funds to this office every year...since I got here. In addition to the province, my own diocese sends a check for \$1000 every year and we could hardly afford it. So I want to give back something to my church besides worshipping God in a more relaxed manner, now I'll have more time on my hands."

Life in New York

Although she's looking forward to returning home, she also says, "I think I will miss the people here in New York. I will miss the people here at 815, I will miss the people at the Cathedral. Bishop Sisk and his family are wonderful people."

In addition to being a frequent speaker at EDNY parishes, the archdeacon has lived at The General Theological Seminary for the past five years. "You can't help but become a member of the community

there. There's a lot of life at General."

The archdeacon has also worshipped regularly at St. Peter's in Chelsea, almost since the moment of her arrival. Her sister, who had come to help Tai settle in and who now lives at GTS, as well, visited the parish with her. "That was the first church we went to and I said to myself, 'it's my first church...and we should stay here at St. Peter's.'"

Looking back, moving on

When asked what she's proudest of during her tenure as Anglican Observer, she gently redirects and restates the question to "What would you like to be remembered by?"

She points to a book, *Healing God's Creation*, which her office has published. It "captures the proceedings of our congress in South Africa a week before the world summit on sustainable development." The book, she says, has become a textbook for at least one Anglican seminary.

She also talks enthusiastically about her work with Anglican Women's Empowerment (AWE) and the women delegates from around the Anglican Communion who have come to New York for the past three years for the UN Commission on the Status of Women (UNCSW) meeting.

"I'm very proud of how the women have been empowered by coming here. They've gone back alert to what needs to be pursued," she says.

"If I have achieved anything, I would be happy to see the women now have a focal point where they can now go and talk business on the ground." (See page 8 and 9 for more stories on the Anglican women and UNSCW meeting.)

The archdeacon will return to the South Pacific in July, to live in New Zealand with her husband, whom she married in 2004, until his retirement three years from now. Then, they're going back to Samoa. She also has a son in New Zealand who is a doctor and, like his mother, travels extensively for his work as the doctor for the Samoa National Rugby Team.

"The deal is," she says, "that when I come back, he should also come back to Samoa." She adds with a mischievous and decidedly youthful smile, "To look after me in my old age."



CM ALMY
BRINGS YOU

ARTISTIC
SILVER

Ideal for teaching children
the life of Christ,
this beautiful enameled
cross will bring enjoyment
and enlighten the children
of your church.

70840 Silver Plate \$1995

228 Sound Beach Avenue
Old Greenwich, CT
Mon-Fri, 10-5 Saturday, 10-2
(203) 637-2739 www.almy.com