

“E le uma le alofa, Love never fa’ileth”

A brief history of the Piula College Chapel on the
Commemoration of its 100 Anniversary
1919-2019



Revd. Dr. Mosese Ma’ilo
Piula Principal
04: 08: 2019



“E lē uma le alofa, Love never faileth”

Folasaga: Address

Faatalofa ma faatulou atu i le paia o le Sauniga
Susuga i le Taitai, Afioga i le Peresetene Koneferenisi
Susuga i le Failautusi,
Afioga i Sea ma o latou Faletua
Saofaiga Faifeau Malolo
Maave Eseese o le au-valaaulia
Malo asiasi mai (Aiga o Misi Pati, Pardey Family)

It is indeed an honor and privilege to deliver this paper; a brief account of the history and significant of the Piula Chapel, named, “**Love never faileth.**” Referred to as the *Falesa o Piula*, we celebrate its 100 years today, rejoicing the *unfailing Love of God*, and remembering with gratitude and appreciation of the sacrifice of all those people who have contributed in one way or another to its planning, designing, construction, as well as its maintenance in the past 100 years.

O le tōfā taulagalaga: The initiative and purpose.

The initiative to build a Chapel for Piula College was raised at the Big Gathering or the District Meeting held at Gagaemalae Satuiatua on the 9-11 November 1911.¹ Misi Nili or Missionary Ernest George Neil was the District Superintendent, and Folau Taoa was the Secretary. The request was accepted and was immediately decided that Misi Nili would design and oversee the building project. The purpose for any Church building is clear, for worship and prayers. But this Church building project is unique according to the design. The inscriptions “Wisdom is better than rubies” on the plaque, as well as the Church architectural structure that includes 3 classrooms and a Library is significant. It says something about the purpose of the Church building with reference to Piula’s worship life (at the front), education, study and learning (at the rear). The mission of the Church needs graduates well-armed with a *wisdom that is sanctified*, “o le poto e faapaiaina.”

Matuaofaiva ma le fale-fa o le Aiga Kamuta Metotisi: The Builders.



Fig. 1. Revd. E.G. Neil

Misi Nili was formally appointed as designer and master builder of the building project. But there is no evidence (according to the missionary’s family) that he had any formal training in engineering or architect.² But Misi Nili had just completed building the Mission House at Gagaemalae, as well as the Wesleyan School at Satupaitea, where he demonstrated competent skills in architecture and building. He may also obtained some help from other missionaries, friends, or German colonial officers to whom he had very good relationships with.³ The builders included the Mission Carpentry Class (from the Wesleyan School at Satupaitea), 30

¹ Saunoa Sila, *E Tautala Aso: A history of Piula Theological College 1868—2018*. Apia: Piula Publications 2018, 37

² Leanne Weber, *A Light in the World’s Dark Places: the missionary work of E.G. Neil*. (A manuscript on the missionary work of E.G. Neil compiled by family members). December 2002, p. 13

³ Leanne Weber 2002 p. 12



Figure 2. Original Plaque

students of the Century High School at Piula, and 40 students and lectures of Piula Theological College. There were also Church members that helped in the construction of the building.⁴ No wonder why Misi Nili refused to engrave his name on the commemorative plaque when the Church was opened in 1919.⁵ It was the effort of a team of committed people who persisted for 7 years in the construction of what Wood calls ‘the finest college building in the South Pacific when it was built’.⁶ The plaque instead attributes the building to the staff and students of the College, and the mission carpentry class. Misi Nili left for Australia in 1918, and the construction work was completed under the supervision of Misi Segifili, Revd. Shinkfield who was then Principal of Piula College.

Mamanu ma le fausaga: The design, materials and construction.

The chapel is a stone building; stones all over its entire structure. There is a story that stones were tested by hitting them with iron to see if there is a lightning friction, the sign of a livingstone (maaola). The only material imported from Australia was timber. But “a cement substitute was made by crushing lava deposited by the active volcano, and crushed coral was used to make the beautifully moulded ceiling.”⁷ Misi Pota (Missionary Ron Potter in his brief history presented at Piula 100 years) refers to the building materials.

Cement for the walls was made on the spot from coral burnt in floral-pattern, plaster ceiling panels was done on the job. Each student was required to bring bundles of a stringy plant material called laufao. A mould in the shape of a table with raised edges was filled with soft plaster and into this the laufao fibre was pressed.⁸

When the ceiling was replaced in 2007, we found out the *laufao* fibres called the *tauaga* (as mentioned by the missionaries), masterly pressed and plastered with soft coral cement. It was merely creativity with what was available in the islands to produce building materials. The construction work took seven years (1912—1919) and through 1918, the year of the epidemic that claimed many lives in the Samoa islands. Construction work was done in daytime, and classes (for Piula and Century schools) were held at night time, indicating the commitment of everyone involved. Figure 3 below is the front elevation of the Chapel. We can see the stones and coral cement, with wooden scaffolds on site.

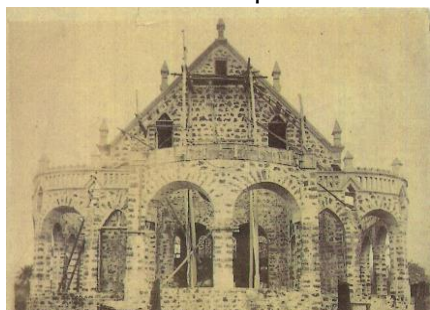


Figure 3 Front elevation during construction.
Courtesy of Jan Cook and the Neil Family
in Australia, 16 May 2019

One of our engineers and architect claims that the design of Piula chapel is called Victorian Gothic. This is due to a revival of the original Gothic style of building across Europe and especially in England. The characteristics of Victorian Gothic like grand tall designs, flying buttresses, pointed and rounded arches, vaulted

⁴ Saunoa Sila 2018, p.38

⁵ Leanne Weber 2002, p.13. The building was officially opened in 1921 according to some historians.

⁶ Harold Wood, ***Overseas missions of the Australian Methodist Church***. Vol. 1. Tonga and Samoa. Melbourne: Aldersgate Press 1975, 316

⁷ Leanne Weber 2002, p. 13

⁸ Ron Potter, ***Piula College One Hundred Years 1868—1968***. A brochure presented at the celebration of Piula College 100 Anniversary in 1968, Piula College.



ceilings, light airy interior, gargoyles and the emphasis on decoration and the ornate are all displayed in the design of Piula College chapel.⁹ Figure 4 & 5 below are side elevations of the Piula chapel during its construction.

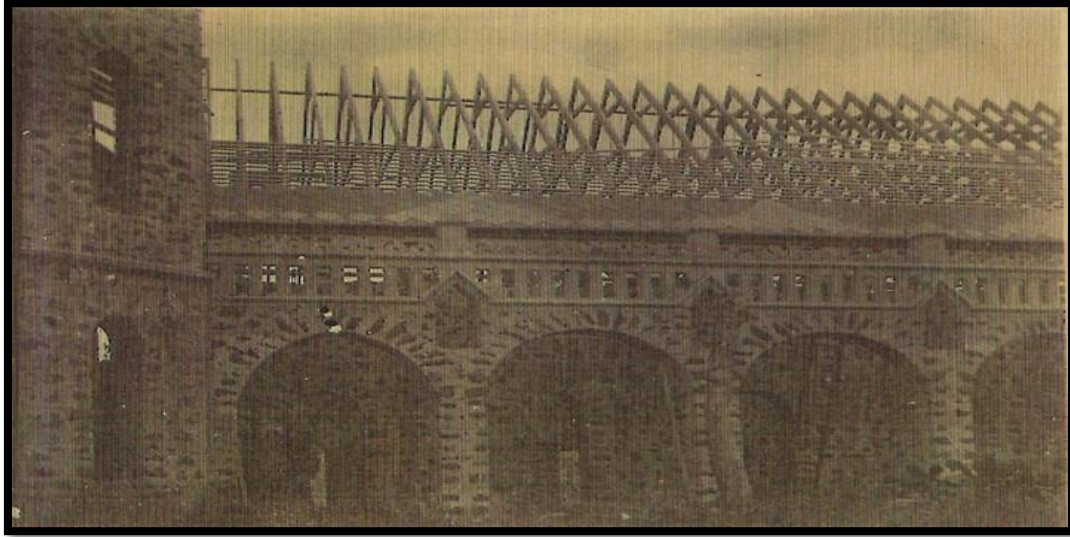


Figure 4 Eastern Side elevation during construction. Courtesy of Jan Cook and the Neil Family in Australia, 16 May 2019

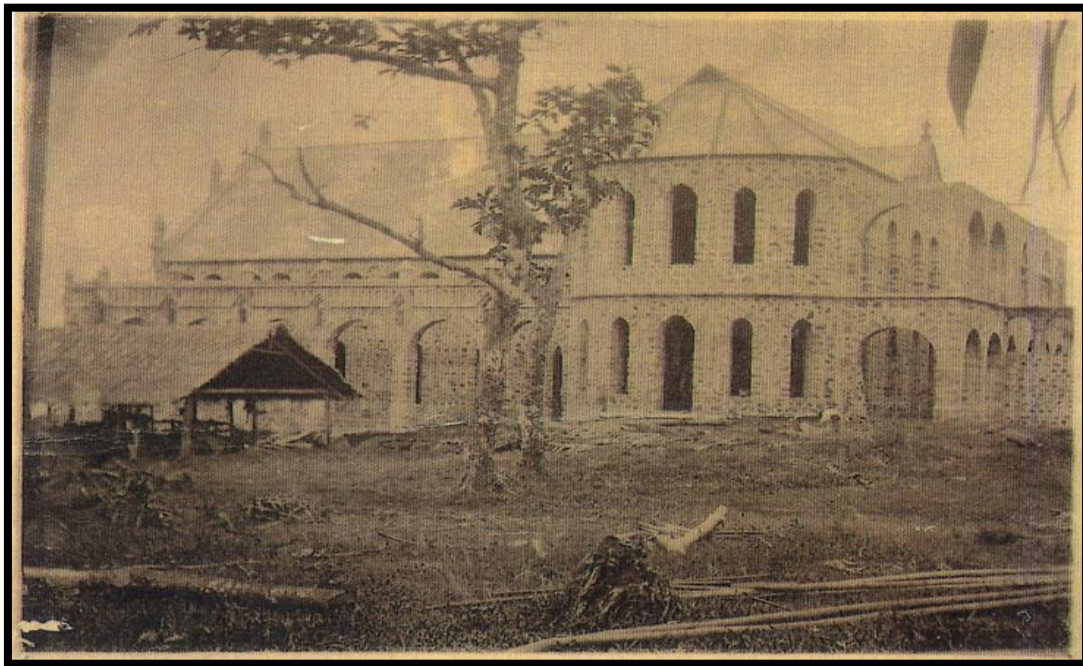


Figure 5. Western side elevation during construction. Courtesy of Jan Cook and the Neil Family in Australia, 16 May 2019

⁹ Numia Tauauve'a; a designer, architect and builder who is also a student at Piula Theological College at the time of this research.



O le tulāgāfale ia tūmātila: The location.

The location of a building is as important as the building itself according to the Samoan philosophy of a *tulāgāfale*. The Bible also indicates that a wise man builds on the rock. The chapel is situated on a rocky outcrop overlooking a lagoon and facing the Ocean. Beneath the rocky cliff is a freshwater pool with two caves that channel the water from under the Chapel. It wasn't unnoticed by the Revd. Neil that he decided to build the worship place on such a source of fresh water. Neil also noticed the "commanding position of the College on a cliff top and is visible from many miles out to sea, ensuring that it will remain a significant landmark for as long as it stands."¹⁰ A landmark of what? While the Ocean was the highway for travelling European ships in those days, the Chapel was supposed to be a landmark



Figure 6. Piula Chapel and the cave pool. Piula Library

of established Christianity on this part of the island. John Garrett claims that the building of the Piula chapel was a durable symbol of Methodist presence in the Samoa islands,¹¹ with indirect reference to the rivalry between the Methodists and LMS missions. Whatever; this symbolic rocky location certified the Piula Chapel to stand the test of times. It survived the destructive force of various tropical cyclones, earthquakes, and climate change faculties that affected the Samoa islands for 100 years. For all the students who came and gone through this Church building, it's a spiritual home that has a special commanding place in their hearts.



Figure 7. A drone shot that captures the location of the Piula Chapel with the Ocean and Faleapuna village at the backdrop

¹⁰ Leanne Weber 2002, p. 13

¹¹ John Garrett, *Footsteps in the Sea: Christianity in Oceania to World War II*. Suva and Geneva: Institute of Pacific Studies and WCC, 1992. 206



Faaulufalega: Completion of the project



Figure 8. Completion of the construction work in 1919. British flag on top of Church

The construction work was completed in 1919, but some sources state that it was dedicated later in 1921. The delay of the Opening and Dedication of the Building to 1921 was due to the availability of the President of the Methodist Conference of Australia, Revd. J.E. Carruthers. He has postponed his visit due to various reasons. It was later decided to invite the New Zealand Governor, Colonel Tait to open the Church. The construction work started during the German colonial rule, but was completed during the New Zealand administration.

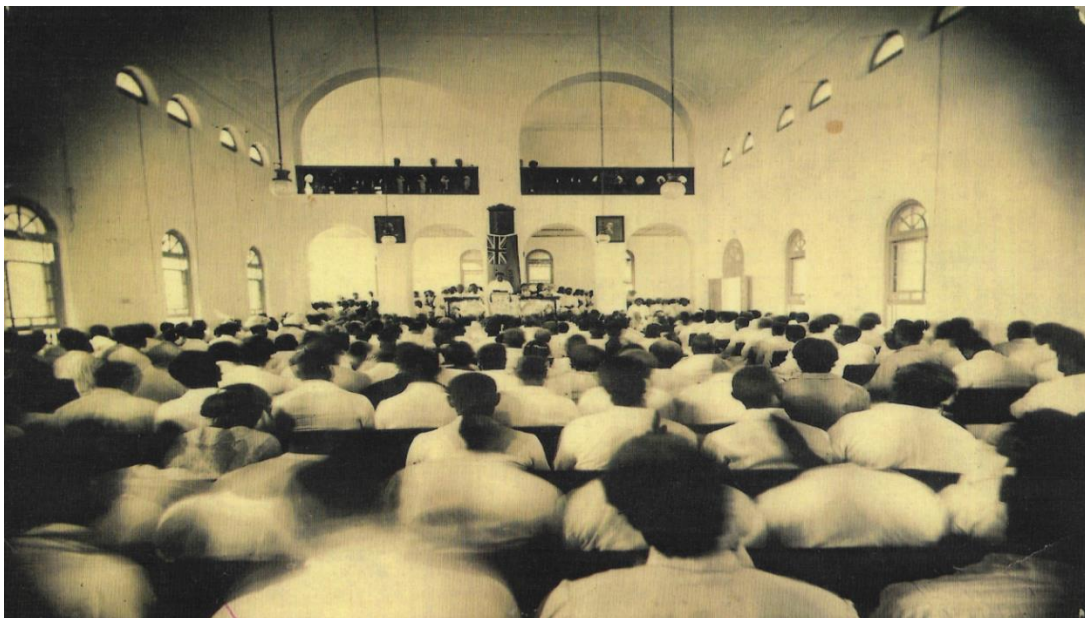


Figure 9. The opening of the Piula Chapel in 1921. Courtesy of Jan Cook and the Neil Family in Australia 16 May 2019. Note the native preacher in the pulpit and the British flag.



Galuega Toe Faufau: Maintenance.

Maintenance work was carried out from time to time. I remember as a student that the roofing was changed in 1992-1993 after the two tropical cyclones of 1990 and 1991. A maintenance of the whole building was carried out in 2007. The building was repainted, the *tauaga* ceiling and the roofing were also replaced. The *Auuso Fealofani* funded another full renovation for the celebration of the College's 150th Anniversary in 2018. We also give credit to all those Principals, Lectures, Students, Wives and children in the past 100 years, who contributed in one way or another in the maintaining of the cleanliness and decoration of the Chapel. Now, this historical building looks set to stand for another 50 years or more.

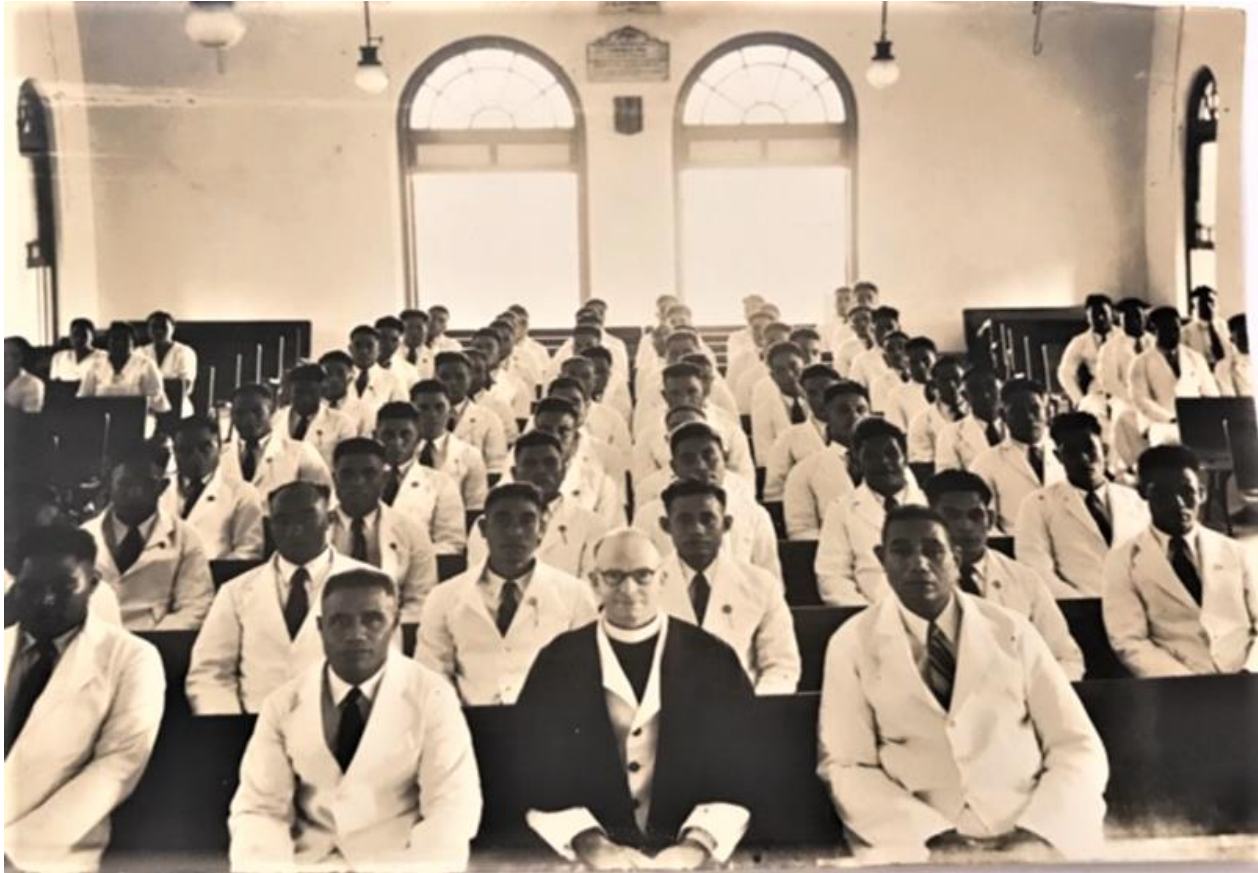


Figure 10. Revd. Norman Pardey and Students in the mid-1930s, Courtesy of the Pardey Family in Australia, July 2019

Toe upu: Final remarks

Like the picture above, I'm pretty sure all the Principals, lecturers, students, wives, children who came and left Piula would have a long lasting memory or impression of this historical building in their lives. Some left to become Church leaders, ministers, missionaries, village chiefs, and government officials and so on. I only pray and hope that current and future generations would continue to love this building and keep it alive, for *love never faileth*.

Soifua