



**CATHOLIC  
HOME  
MISSIONS**

## Small Islands, Big Faith



Children from St. Francis Elementary School participate in Mass at Immaculate Conception Parish in Lepua. Photo © USCCB.

By Beth Griffin

**T**he tiny Diocese of Samoa–Pago Pago is arguably the smallest, most remote and exotically located grantee of Catholic

Home Missions. It covers five islands and two coral atolls in American Samoa, an unincorporated territory of the United States in the South Pacific Ocean.

There are seventeen parishes on Tutuila, a narrow, tropical island that is the population center of the territory. The diocese also has a small mission on the island of Manu'a, which is reached by a five-hour boat ride from Tutuila. American Samoa covers 197 square miles, about the area of Washington, DC.

Bishop Peter Brown, a Redemptorist from New Zealand, was installed as the second bishop of the diocese in August 2013. He says Catholics comprise about one-quarter of the total population of 66,000 people. They are served by 17 priests, 27 deacons, and 32 catechists, most of whom were born in American Samoa or the neighboring independent country of Samoa.

Parishes vary in size and accessibility, Bishop Brown says. Tutuila's main road does not provide access to the entire volcanic island and parishes off the main road are hard to reach without a good SUV. The parish on Manu'a is composed of only four families led by a catechist. "It's a real mission of witness in that sense," he says.

There is very little arable land on American Samoa, so agriculture is not a viable occupation. The largest employers are the US government and two tuna fish canneries. The unemployment rate on the islands reaches 35 percent and minimum wage ranges from \$4.18 to \$5.59 per hour, depending on the industry. Catholic school teachers earn \$4.89 an hour.

Educational opportunities are also limited. The only college in the territory is the American Samoa Community College, an open-admissions, US-accredited institution which awards associates degrees and certificates in academic and technical areas. Not surprisingly, many young adults leave American

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# Neighbors

FALL 2014

A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER FROM MISSION AMERICA

# FROM THE CHAIRMAN



Dear Friends,

The Diocese of Samoa–Pago Pago might look like an island paradise from the outside, but life on the islands is hard.

Unemployment rates are high and wages are low. Faced with many difficulties, the people of this beautiful place stand in great need of spiritual nourishment.

In this issue, read about what life is like in this home mission diocese. Bishop Peter Brown shares some beautiful stories about the system for teaching catechism on the islands, the challenge of funding Catholic schools, and a residence that cares for the disabled.

Funds from a CHM grant are also used to help seminarians like Pio Afu, who is currently on the US mainland, studying at Mount Angel Seminary in Oregon. These seminarians wouldn't receive the education they need without help from CHM.

**We are able to continue helping needy dioceses because of your generosity.** During this upcoming holiday season, please continue to remember your brothers and sisters in faith who have fewer resources. Your donation, no matter how small, truly makes a difference.

With your assistance, Catholic Home Missions will continue to support basic ministries in home mission dioceses and provide an opportunity for each person to live out his or her faith. Let us help one another with open hearts, strengthening the Church at home.

Yours in Christ,

Bishop Peter F. Christensen  
Diocese of Superior

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Samoa for school and job opportunities on the US mainland, including military service.

## THE CHURCH IN AMERICAN SAMOA

The Catholic faith on the islands is robust and enthusiastic, despite financial and geographical challenges, Bishop Brown says. During his first year, he made weekend visits to almost all of the parishes and also engaged people in preparations for the October 2014 Vatican synod on the family.

Bishop Brown describes these preparations, saying, "There is a marvelous sense of loving support the people give you. We are making a pastoral plan for the next five years and having local synods. Everyone just turns up! They're all keen and they love the process."

"There's tremendous cooperation with pastoral ideas and a willingness of the priests to coordinate, and the people to run the synods," he says.

The Church in American Samoa relies on a unique system of lifelong catechists who are identified and supported by the parishes they serve. Bishop Brown describes the position as a full-time job for a married couple who are recognized as responsible leaders in the local community. "It has both church and cultural aspects I have not seen anywhere else," he says.

Catechist candidates are nominated by the church community and reviewed in a cooperative process that includes



A new worship space, Divine Mercy Mission, for people in Fagali'i, who do not have a means of transportation. Photo © USCCB.

the bishop, priests, and current catechists. Those accepted complete a four-year program of theology and Scripture before they are commissioned. Each year, they attend in-service training and support one another through formal and informal groups. They are entirely dependent on the local church community for financial support.

Catechists who have long been the daily face of the Church in Samoa–Pago Pago are adapting to new roles as more priests are available to minister to the people, Bishop Brown says. Vocations to the priesthood in American Samoa are growing. A recent "Come and See" information program drew 25 young men. Bishop Brown says the priesthood is held in high regard and it is therefore important to help men discern their motivation and vocation. The diocese currently has 17 priests and is preparing 7 seminarians with the help of Catholic Home Missions funds.

The diocese also uses CHM funds to train deacons, some of whom are also catechists. Bishop Brown says there are 12 deacon candidates in their second year of a five-year study program. Deacons typically have other full-time jobs and carry out their ministry in parishes, hospitals, and the port area. They also minister to workers in a local tuna cannery, which operates around the clock, he says.

Samoa–Pago Pago sends its candidates for the priesthood to Mount Angel Seminary, located just south of Portland, Oregon, and Redemptoris Mater Seminary on Guam. In addition to academic and living expenses, the diocese incurs a significant cost to fly the seminarians home during the summer break. "Education is the key to well-qualified future priests and without the CHM funds, we couldn't send students to Mount Angel," Bishop Brown says.

The diocese supports two early Montessori schools, two elementary schools, and a coeducational high school. The high school educates 280

students in a building designed for 150. CHM funds are used to subsidize the schools.

In the past, religious orders of men and women financed and ran Catholic schools in the diocese. As their numbers dwindled and the congregations recalled their sisters, brothers, and priests from the island to other ministries, the diocese struggled to keep the schools open. Bishop Brown says a recent agreement will enable the Marist brothers to return to the diocese in 2015 after a 20-year absence.

“When I arrived, people told me there was a hole in the educational system and suggested the esteem of the bishop would be greatly enhanced if he could get the beloved Marists back,” Bishop Brown smiles.

## CARE FOR THE DISABLED

The diocese operates Hope House, the only residential facility in the islands that cares for disabled young people and the elderly. Hope House also includes a pre-school daycare program. The 19 current residents pay what they can afford and Hope House receives government subsidies, but the program runs at an annual deficit. Bishop Brown uses CHM funds to help pay the modest wages of the 45 caring staff members.

“Hope House is the only place of its nature on the island and was run until 1989 by the Nazareth Sisters, whose congregation contributed significantly to the operation. Because of our limited finances, we can’t pay what locals might make elsewhere, yet we have a responsibility to care for the people and keep Hope House going,” Bishop Brown says.

## CRUCIAL SUPPORT FROM OUTSIDE

Finances are a huge challenge to the Diocese of Samoa–Pago Pago and its growing Catholic population.

For starters, churches and other buildings on the islands deteriorate rapidly because of their proximity to the ocean. Several earthquakes and

the devastating 2009 tsunami also took their toll. Some buildings were rendered unusable and others required substantial sums to restore them.

The cost of living in American Samoa is high because many products must be imported. Wages and personal income are modest, yet parishes contribute significantly to diocesan operations. This enables the diocese to operate the schools and Hope House and support the training of seminarians, deacons, and catechists.

“Support from Catholic bishops on the mainland is crucial. Our annual deficit of \$400,000 is met with local fundraising and grants from outside the diocese,” Bishop Brown says. “The funds are quite substantial and much appreciated.”

Looking back at his first year, Bishop Brown marvels at the enthusiasm of the Catholics and others throughout the island who welcomed him warmly to his new diocese. “It’s unique in its closeness, and the people are filled with the joy of faith and service,” he says.



Photo of Pio Afu, seminarian from the diocese of Samoa–Pago Pago. Photo © USCCB.



A parishioner’s house, where families in this remote area of Fagali’i held Mass until they could build Divine Mercy Mission. Photo © USCCB.

## DID YOU KNOW?

- The Diocese of Samoa–Pago Pago is part of the Bishops’ Conference of the Pacific. It was created in 1982 from the Samoa–Apia Archdiocese.
- Bishop Peter Brown was previously the regional superior of the Redemptorist Fathers in New Zealand. His service includes ministry in Samoa and to the Samoan community in New Zealand. He was named a bishop by Pope Francis on May 31, 2013, and ordained on August 22, 2013.
- The island population is mostly Christian. Catholicism is the largest denomination and was introduced by French missionaries in 1863. Other prominent groups are Methodists, Presbyterians, and Mormons.
- Mass is offered on Manu’a approximately once a month, depending on the availability of transport to the small island.
- Diocesan priests receive a \$200 monthly stipend and do not have health insurance. Catholic school teachers make \$4.89 an hour, compared to \$7.50 for public school teachers.

## MEET A SEMINARIAN

Pio Afu, 28, is a seminarian from the diocese of Samoa–Pago Pago. With help from Catholic Home Missions, he is studying at Mount Angel Seminary in Oregon, where he is the president of the student body.

Pio’s parents are enthusiastic converts to Catholicism who encourage their children to participate in all aspects of parish life, including daily Mass. Pio credits leadership positions in his parish and diocesan youth programs with preparing him for pastoral work. Pio says his mother cried tears of joy when he was accepted to the seminary.

Pio will be ordained a deacon in the fall of 2014 and anticipates that he will be ordained to the priesthood by Bishop Brown in May 2015. His initial assignment will be serving with Bishop Brown at the diocesan cathedral. He also hopes to work with youth.



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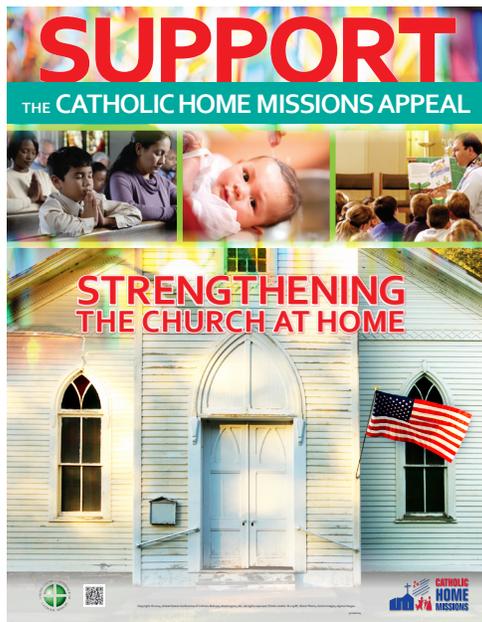
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READ ABOUT THE BEAUTY and challenges of living the faith on a group of remote islands in the South Pacific and how a grant from CHM makes a difference.



**Your generosity to the Catholic Home Missions Appeal supports essential ministries in poor dioceses across the United States and its territories.**

**THANK YOU** for being part of our efforts to strengthen the Church at home.

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