



ACROSS ISLANDS AND CULTURES

HAWAII PACIFIC BAPTIST CONVENTION
MINISTERS IN MANY LANGUAGES
TO ITS PART OF THE WORLD.

By Leigh Pritchett

The word *aloha*—meaning “hello”—is synonymous with Hawaii. The welcoming atmosphere of this tropical paradise is why Hawaii is called the Aloha State.

Aloha also means “love,” and on islands near and far, the Hawaii Pacific Baptist Convention (HPBC) is spreading love—specifically the love of Jesus Christ.

“HPBC is unique in that we serve all the Hawaiian Islands, [as well as] Micronesia, Samoa, and Asia,” said Diana Ventura, director of women’s ministries with HPBC and executive director of Hawaii WMU. “We are crossing international borders as a convention.”

HPBC, according to its website (hpbaptist.net), consists of more than 150 churches and missions worshipping in Cambodian, Cantonese, Chuukese, English, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, Laotian, Mandarin, Russian, Samoan, Spanish, Thai, Tongan, and Vietnamese. Of those churches, 121 are on the Hawaiian Islands of Hawai’i, Kaua’i, Lana’i,

Maui, Moloka’i, and O’ahu; 13 are in the South Pacific Baptist Association on Samoa and American Samoa; 10 are in the Baptist Association of Micronesia on Guam and Saipan; and 10 are in the Asia Baptist Network on Okinawa, mainland Japan, South Korea, Thailand, and the Philippines.

“We are spread out geographically,” Diana said, “but the goal is to bring unity among the churches as we work together to build God’s kingdom.”

HPBC’s ministries are varied and far-reaching:

- Hamama Community Church, a church plant on the windward side (the eastern coast) of O’ahu, ministers to locals using native Hawaiian culture and language.
- Calvary International Church in Bangkok, Thailand, reaches out to refugees.
- Himeji Baptist Church in Japan presents the gospel of Jesus Christ to Japanese nationals. “Many Hawaii churches have

gone to Japan on mission trips, as the percentage of believers in Japan is low,” Diana said.

- International Ministries Hawaii addresses needs specific to international students attending the University of Hawaii in Honolulu. The group hosts lunches, weekly events, and English classes.

Strengthening churches, their leaders, and their ministries is the mission of HPBC. Encouraging each pastor and his wife and helping churches reach and instruct all age groups are the heart of the convention’s work. HPBC provides resources and trains in many areas, such as church plants, outreach, evangelism, finance, disaster relief, and women’s ministry.

“Geographically, we may be separated, but HPBC stays connected regularly with pastors and church leaders,” Diana said. “We stay updated on the outreach events and programs churches are holding. This gives the staff an opportunity to come alongside churches whenever possible.”

Opportunities to join in ministry may be, for instance, the community food distributions of LIFE Christian Church in Honolulu or the educational endeavors of Hawaii Baptist Academy, HPBC’s college-preparatory school. Diana said the academy—with two campuses for kindergarten through 12th grade—“reaches students with the gospel while reaching the parents too.”

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented significant ministry challenges for HPBC and its churches.

“It is fair to say that 2020 was the year of doubt and uncertainty,” Diana said.

Pastors and convention leaders had to make rapid adjustments and find innovative ways to stay connected with church members and address needs within communities.

“The HPBC leadership began hosting a Wednesday forum that brought together pastors and church leaders,” Diana said. “This was a time to support one another, pray together, and receive training. . . . They poured into each other; they connected and had a sense of unity.”

Each week, the forum ended with Chris Martin, HPBC’s executive director, praying Numbers 6:24–26 over the attendees: “The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace.”

That one act, Diana said, made a significant impact. “Hearing these verses each week resonated with everyone. It was easy to walk away and continue to hear these verses in our minds.”

JOURNEY TO JESUS

Hawaii is a melting pot of many nationalities and cultures, and nearly 38 percent of Hawaii’s estimated 1.4 million residents are of Asian descent. Diana said, “The people,

the languages, the food, the traditions are all part of everyday life.”

“Because Hawaii is a mixture of Japanese, Portuguese, Puerto Rican, Filipino, etc., many foods are a combination of one culture to another,” Diana explained. “Food is not just an essential here in Hawaii; it’s a culture.”

Rice is a mealtime staple; favorite foods include kalua pig (pulled pork), lomi-lomi salmon, potato or macaroni salad, and Spam. In fact, Hawaii is considered the greatest consumer of Spam per capita in the US.

“A Spam musubi [grilled Spam on a block of rice, wrapped with dried seaweed] is a favorite field trip food for schoolchildren,” Diana said.

The Hawaiian Islands are mountains of volcanic lava deposits that grew from the ocean’s floor until the peaks rose above water. The state is the northernmost of the Polynesian islands, and is 2,390 miles from California, 2,600 from Alaska, and 3,850 from Japan.

In 1778, James Cook, a British sea captain, accidentally found the Hawaiian Islands. He called them the Sandwich Islands in honor of the Earl of Sandwich, who funded Cook’s voyage.

The islanders practiced animism and superstition and believed in thousands of gods.

Christian missionaries arrived on the islands in 1820. The gospel of Jesus Christ was eagerly received and, by 1845, Hawaii was considered a Christian nation.

The rise of agricultural plantations sparked immigration from China, Japan, the Philippines, and other countries, introducing Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, and Shintoism to Hawaii.

In 1898, the US Congress annexed the islands to the United States. Great Britain, however, was ceded a portion of Kealakekua Bay on Hawai’i (or Big Island) in 1877.

Southern Baptist work officially began in Hawaii in 1926 with a Sunday School class in the town of Wahiawa. Ultimately, that class grew to be First Baptist Church of Wahiawa.

In 1940, a survey conducted by the Southern Baptist Convention’s (SBC) Foreign Mission Board (now called International Mission Board) found only about 6 percent of the inhabitants were Christians. Groups began to form to study the Bible. As people came to know Jesus Christ as Savior, Baptist churches were established on all six islands. Money given through the SBC’s Lottie Moon Christmas Offering helped provide permanent meeting places.

HPBC was established in 1943.

After Hawaii gained US statehood in 1959, the Foreign Mission Board phased out its role on the islands, and the SBC’s Home Mission Board (now North American Mission Board) partnered with the churches.

Today, HPBC churches give through and receive from the SBC’s Cooperative Program. HPBC churches benefit from

funds other churches give to the Cooperative Program and, at the same time, HPBC churches contribute money to help sister churches across the globe.

“It unifies the body of Christ,” Diana said. “In addition, our convention plays a part in building the kingdom of God around the world.”

HPBC’s state offering—the Sue Nishikawa Offering for Hawaii Pacific Missions—undergirds the community evangelism efforts of churches and funds scholarships to Hawaii Baptist Academy and SBC seminaries. Also, “the state offering plays a part in assisting new kingdom work in church planting,” Diana said.

“Telling people about Jesus and meeting needs within communities are always priorities,” Diana continued. “Opportunities come up to share the gospel through outreach events that include parades, park ministry, sports camp, Vacation Bible School, and others. Because Hawaii is very much a family-oriented community, outreach events stretch not only to children but to the entire family.”

Such events “bring awareness to the neighborhoods about the local church, with the hope that many will experience God’s love and the gospel will be shared,” Diana said.

Because relationships are so important in Hawaii, developing personal connections with children, teenagers, college students, and adults has to be the first step in introducing them to Jesus Christ. “If churches reach the children, most likely they will reach the parents,” Diana said.

MESSAGE OF HOPE

The mere mention of Hawaii brings to mind luaus, hula dances, ukuleles, vibrant flowers, white beaches, and waves that challenge expert surfers. A rainforest, waterfalls, active volcanoes, snow-covered mountain peaks, and the world’s highest sea cliffs all add to the wonderment of Hawaii.

In this casual island atmosphere, one may find pastors wearing colorful aloha (or Hawaiian) shirts at worship services and churches meeting outdoors. The beach sometimes is the first location for churches just forming.

The exotic appeal of the Hawaiian archipelago draws millions to it each year. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, nearly 150,000 tourists would visit Hawaii on any given day. Yet the beauty and excitement tend to overshadow the brokenness in the lives, hearts, and families of the locals.

“Hawaii is a vacation destination spot, so it’s easy for many to not realize the spiritual oppression that is on the islands,”

Diana said. She said the COVID-19 pandemic has been a time when the people of Hawaii and the Pacific islands have needed the message of hope and salvation in Jesus Christ.

“God’s Word holds all truths,” Diana said. “When we place our heart and mind on things above, it protects us from fear, anxiety, and doubt. When we fix our eyes on Jesus, we are reminded of His faithfulness, His goodness, and that He has gone before us, regardless of what we are facing.”

Each age group, each island, and each culture within HPBC is unique, and the gospel of Jesus Christ has to be presented in ways that are effective in that particular setting.

“The key is providing individuals with the Word of God, helping them see that God has a plan for their life, that Christ is the one true God,” Diana said. “It is then that lives will be transformed.”

The approach may differ across islands and latitudes, but the message of Jesus Christ stays constant, Diana said. “The truth of the gospel does not change.”

HPBC PRAYER REQUESTS AND PRAISE REPORTS

The leadership of HPBC asks for prayer in the following areas:

- Wisdom, discernment, courage, and strength for HPBC pastors and church leaders
- A oneness among churches and HPBC as they work for the kingdom of God
- A heart to reach neighborhoods and communities
- Creative ways to present the gospel of Jesus Christ in each region and on each island

HPBC’s staff offers praise to the Lord for the following:

- The way church leaders gathered weekly throughout 2020 to pray, train, and encourage one another
- The movement of God’s hand that brought people together and allowed gospel conversations despite pandemic restrictions
- The salvations and baptisms that happened during the pandemic
- God’s faithfulness to work in the hearts of men, women, boys, and girls
- Churches and leaders who found innovative ways to meet needs in congregations and to provide online services during the lockdown

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Hawaii: Across Islands and Cultures

By Sheila Gosney



FOR GROUP OR CHURCHWIDE STUDY:

1. Decorate the room with Hawaiian party goods, wear a Hawaiian shirt, or serve a Hawaiian dish.
2. Display a world map on the wall and circle the Hawaiian Islands. Ask a volunteer to pray for that area. Begin group discussion by asking: *What is Hawaii known for?* (friendliness, beauty, tourists).
3. Say: *Aloha is a common greeting that connects people on the Hawaiian Islands. God uses friendliness! Does anyone know people who are lonely, depressed, or needing love?* Challenge your group to be intentional and reach out to someone this week.
4. Read Mark 2:17. Discuss the importance of being friendly with the lost.
5. Ask a volunteer to read the “Journey to Jesus” section of the article.
6. Research and define the following words: *animism, superstition, false gods*. Ask: *What seeds are we sowing now that could reap a harvest in 25 years? What false beliefs or strongholds exist in our area?*
7. Share ways your group can do or support local missions. Include discussion of how the Cooperative Program supports missions. For more information and resources, visit sbc.net/cp.



FOR INDIVIDUAL STUDY:

1. Read the article.
2. Take time to pray for the Hawaii Pacific Baptist Convention and its churches and missions.
3. Consider how you can make connections with people from different faiths, cultures, or ethnic backgrounds in your city, neighborhood, or workplace.
4. Read Acts 13:47.
5. Pray for the people you are aware of who might need Christ. Ask the Lord for opportunities to encounter them with gospel conversations and the love of Christ. Be watchful for the needs of even one person and be sensitive to the Holy Spirit, ready to extend yourself.
6. Read 1 Thessalonians 2:8 and think about those who have invested spiritually in your life. Take time to thank God for them. If possible, send them a card or message of blessing and thanks.



FOR FAMILY STUDY:

1. Show your family a map of the Hawaiian Islands. Discuss how God uses prayer, the obedience of missionaries, and financial support to further the gospel.
2. In the “Journey to Jesus” section of the article, notice how Diana says food is part of the culture.
3. Say: *God has always used the physical needs of our bodies to create opportunities to glorify Himself as needs are met.*
4. Think about ways your family can help others with food. Discuss ideas such as helping an elderly neighbor shop for groceries, inviting a single mother and her kids over for a BBQ, etc.
5. Find out what needs your local food bank has and discuss how your family can serve or give. Encourage your kids to buy items for donation with their money.
6. Pray together for those who will receive your food gifts and encourage your family to continue praying for those who are lost and in need.

Visit wmu.com/blogs for an update on the Hawaii Pacific Baptist Convention’s work and current praises and prayer requests.