

# Women in the *feagaiga* of the Congregational Christian Church in Samoa

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## Abstract

*This paper discusses the religious transformation of the Samoan concept of feagaiga which has led to the indeterminate role and status of women in the Congregational Christian Church Samoa (CCCS). In pre-Christian Samoa the sacredness and honour of Samoan women was safeguarded by their status as the feagaiga, a Samoan concept which literally means 'covenant' and initially referred to the covenantal bond in a sister-brother relationship. It was a feagaiga that not only ensured Samoan women were protected from birth by their brothers, but it also guaranteed their place as decision-makers in the family. The arrival of missionaries from the London Missionary Society (LMS) in the nineteenth century, led to the appropriation and religious transformation of the concept of feagaiga. Today, according to the contemporary concept of feagaiga in the established structures of the church in Samoa, only ordained men or pastors are attributed the metaphorically sacred qualities of feagaiga and are honorifically referred to as Fa'afeagaiga. Women on the other hand are no longer considered or treated as sacred unless they are married to a Fa'afeagaiga.*

**Keywords:** CCCS, Gender, Feagaiga, Faletua

## Introduction

In 2011, the Congregational Christian Church Samoa stripped an ordained minister (*faifeau*) of his religious status in the church because his wife (*faletua*) (an ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand) accepted a calling from a Presbyterian parish in Auckland (Apisaloma 2013). The decision by the *faletua* to accept the calling was a clear indication that religious denomination and the *faletua* status in the CCCS were insignificant factors of consideration. According to members of the CCCS parish where the *faifeau* served, their *faletua* was doing God's work, and this is why they supported her decision (Frost 2012). When the *faifeau* and *faletua* were asked to leave their parish by the CCCS Elders, intense debate flared on social media and in Samoan newspapers; many people began to question if the *faletua* had any rights outside her role as the wife of a *faifeau*. It is generally accepted for a *faletua* to work for an income while serving alongside her husband in a CCCS parish outside Samoa, However in the conventions of the CCCS in Samoa, a *faletua* is a role model for Christian women, and does not work outside the home due to her husband's status as clergy. Beside her role as wife and mother, and before formal education that became widespread in the 1950s, a *faletua* along with the *faifeau* was a teacher, not only of religion but for imparting basic literacy and numeracy to children in the communities she served with her husband (Tanielu 2004). Today, aside from Sunday school, the joint role of a *faifeau* and *faletua* as educators takes up less time, and the impacts of formal education and social change have made the role of the *faletua* in the community more indeterminate. This is a far cry from the sacred status women once had before the arrival of Christianity to Samoa. As sacred covenant (*feagaiga*) women were revered and were not dependent on their husbands to assist or uphold her status.

Samoan women, especially the elder daughter were referred to as the *feagaiga* or sacred sister and they were revered and treated with the utmost respect (Grattan 1948; Schoeffel 1995; Tcherkézoff 2000). The place of every other family member was determined by their relationship to

the 'sacred' member(s) of the family. The relationship between these members and the sacred members was based on the concept of *feagaiga* (Gilson 1970; Meleisea 1995). Today, the *feagaiga* now refers to the sacred *faiifeau* or the *Fa'afeagaiga* in the church; women in the CCCS have no rights to this title, and instead serve in a domestic capacity to the sacred party now in the new religious context of the *feagaiga* (Latai 2015). This article will explore how the transposition of the sacred status of the *feagaiga* from Samoan women to the *faiifeau* relegated women to a secular and secondary status in the church.

### Pre-Christian Feagaiga

Rev. George Pratt of the London Missionary Society (LMS) compiled a Samoan Dictionary which he began not long after his arrival in Samoa in 1839. He reports the following definition of '*feagaiga*' (p118):

*FEAGAIGA, s. 1. an established relationship between different parties, as between brothers and sisters and their children. Lota tuafafine le feagaiga. Also between chiefs and their tulāfale. 2. An agreement, a covenant. A lately adopted meaning. 'O la lā feagaiga*

Pratt notes the primary meaning in Samoa at the time was the *feagaiga* relationship between two people or two groups of people. Pratt's secondary definition notes '*feagaiga*' as an 'adopted' term to refer to 'an agreement or covenant'; the implication here is that *feagaiga* as an agreement or covenant is just emerging in Samoa at the time of Pratt's compilation of Samoan terms and their meanings. In other words, the term *feagaiga* was perhaps not prominently used to refer to an 'agreement' or covenant prior to the arrival of Christianity; instead its prominent use refers to the *feagaiga* relationship between brothers and sisters.

The root word of *feagaiga* is *feagai* which is defined as,

*v. 1. to be opposite to each other. 2. to correspond. 3. to dwell together cordially, to be on good terms; as a chief with his people, or a minister to his flock (Pratt 1862, p139).*

This meaning refers to a duality involving two parties where one is opposite to another or facing the other. The examples of 'chief and his people' and 'minister and his flock', refers to two groups with participants who have distinctly different statuses but are nonetheless interdependent upon each other. For example, a chief looks after his people just as a pastor must look after his flock, and in return, they too are well cared for with reverence, respect and deference by their people or flock. Pratt's definition illustrates who the most prominent groups in Samoan society were at the time of the Christian missions, they were the 'chiefs and villagers' and the 'pastors and congregations'.

The following story of Fatu and Eleele and their children from the village of Ta'u in the group of Manu'a Islands illustrates the *feagaiga* between brothers and sisters,

*The first human being on earth were Fatu and Eleele. They were created by Tagaloa Lagi. This man and woman had ten boys and one girl. When the father, Fatu, grew very old and was about to die, his last wish (mavaega) was that the oldest boy would be the head of the family. Upon the death of this eldest son, his place should be taken by the next oldest brother and so*

*on down the line until there were no more brothers, whereupon the eldest son of the eldest brother should succeed to the position. The girl was made tamasa [sacred child] and the brothers were told “burn your faces (e mu iai o outou mata), meaning that each day they should make the oven for the girl and that she should only eat hot food rather than the food cooked the day before, lest their children get sick if they did not. This was a way of saying that they must always pay special attention to their sister (Holmes 1957, Faatauva’a 1992; Ete-Limā 2003).*

According to Llowell Holmes, this particular story refers to the sister as the ‘sacred’ one and to the brother it attributes physical (secular) tasks; it “explains the balance of power within the Samoan family whereby only the males of the family are eligible for titles, but must pay special attention and respect to the females and their descendants” (1957: 320). The sacred power that is passed down from Fatu to his daughter and the expectations upon the brother toward his sister identifies the two opposite groups in this relationship. This relationship is based upon the *mavaega* or death wish of the father.

Michiko Ete-Limā sites a *fagogo* or myth from Manono, which tells of Tafitofau and Ogafau’s two daughters Sinaleuuna, Sinaeteva and son Maluafiti. When they tried to find a suitable match for their brother, the sisters came across a beautiful lady named Sina in Fiji. Although Sina mistreated the two sisters, they were determined to have Sina fall in love with their brother. When Maluafiti eventually found out about Sina’s ill treatment of his sisters, he refused to court the Fijian beauty. Ete-Limā writes, “The brother’s desire for a beautiful woman was comparatively less than his anger at his sisters’ ill-treatment” (Ete-Limā 2003: 29; Turner 1884: 98-101).

These stories provide an understanding of the ancient Samoan concept of *feagaiga* in the brother-sister relationship implied by Pratt. The sister epitomized sacredness, she represented the ideals of honour, dignity and grace. As the sacred one in the relationship with her brother, the term of reference given to the sister was *feagaiga*. To her brother(s) in particular, ensuring her safety was a primary duty in life. It was a *feagaiga* that bespoke a bond that was etched upon the hearts of the Samoan people in pre-Christian Samoan society, and this is evident in the fact that even when the sister passed away, her brother and his children continued their role in the *feagaiga* with her descendants (Kramer 1902: 63). This is best explained by Schoeffel who at the same time claimed how other social structures in Samoa can be seen as ‘metaphorical extensions’ of the ‘brother-sister’ relationship:

*As a sister is to her brother, so is a female descent line to a male descent line when their respective lineages originated from a sister and brother pair. As a sister is to her brother, so is a minister to his congregation or an ali’i to a tulafale (Schoeffel 1979: 296; see also Grattan 1948: 127).*

### **Mana – Sacred Power of the Feagaiga**

The sister’s sacred status was a result of her possession of mana or sacred power from her ancestral gods (Pratt 1862, p204). This mana was also linked to the sacred death wish (*mavaega*) passed down from a father to his children, to protect the sister/daughter who possessed the ancestral gods mana

(*tamasa*). So, a brother was drawn to his duties by his sister's sacredness, and at the same time he was pulled into it by his father's *mavaega* (dying will). The mana that pulled a brother to his sister was instilled in all brothers in pre-Christian Samoa. This is illustrated in more detail by a Samoan creation myth, where the Samoa creator god Tagaloalagi gave mana or divine power to the descendants of human women; women whom he had taken as his wives and whose demi-god offspring became the ancestors of the paramount chiefly lineages of Samoa (Schoeffel 1979: 282). The mana flowed from Samoa's creator god through Samoan people via women, and as the descent lines expanded the mana spread amongst a greater population. A graded hierarchy of chiefs developed from this expansion and according to Schoeffel, their chiefly rank was "dependent upon matrilineally inherited *mana*" (Schoeffel 1979: 282). In other words, in order for the sacred chiefs (*ali'i paia*) to maintain their high status, it was important that they marry high ranking women, as this ensured a descent line with less diluted ancestral mana (Meleisea 1987: 68). Therefore, mana was power and in pre-Christian Samoa this was strongly linked to Samoan women.

### **The New Feagaiga**

#### ***Transformation of the pre-Christian Samoan feagaiga***

When the LMS arrived in 1830, the British missionaries and the Pacific Island teachers they came with began to teach the Samoan people about a new sacred mana bestowed by the Christian God. The missionaries, although some were female, taught that only men could be carriers of the new sacred mana as *faiifeau*, and women were their helpers. The conversion work carried out by the missionaries and island teachers from Rarotonga and Tahiti was extensive. To cover as much of Samoa as they could, they started to train locals to help them in their work to convert more Samoans. In letters sent by the missionaries to the LMS office in London, the missionaries explained their classes and their training of locals to help them teach about the Bible.

*In Falealupo, Savai'i: We have school for adults four nights a week. Most of our scholars make slow progress but some of them give us encouragement. We have also a bible class 2 nights in the week, and on Saturday a prayer meeting of the church... I have spent five mornings in the week at the children's school. This school was managed by the natives themselves and most of the teachers needed to be taught (Drummond 1842).*

*In Sapapali'i, Savai'i: The schools, however, are well attended and some progress is being made in reading, writing, Arithmetic + useful knowledge (Hardie 1842).*

Prior to the first education institutions being established in Samoa, the wives of the missionaries taught groups of women in the villages how to be good mothers and good wives in European standards. In his report on mission in Savai'i, Rev. Charles Hardie included the following account of his wife's work with the women in the village,

*Mrs Hardie's female school continues to be well attended – many of the scholars have made respectable progress in reading and writing + have also done a little in Arithmetic. About 18 months ago Mrs Hardie formed the female church members into a Maternal Association, which has done much towards correcting many evils connected with the disposal + training of native children, and from which we expect increasing + happy results (Hardie 1842).*

Given the situation in Samoa where more teachers were in demand, Rev. George Turner and Rev. Charles Hardie were given charge by the London office of the LMS to set up an educational institution to build a greater 'native agency' to cater for the demands in Samoa (Turner 1861: 124). In 1844, the Samoa Mission Seminary (later the Malua Theological College) was established and gradually developed to become the main centre for training future LMS pastors in most parts of the Pacific. From the time of its establishment it only admitted men. However, in 1851 the number of married couples in the Seminary was thirty-four and this meant, thirty-four women required education just as much as their husbands. As the years passed, the demand from villages for educated women to serve alongside their husbands was considered. Thus, in 1864 a condition for Samoan students' entry into the Mission Seminary was for the preference of married students. According to Rev. George Turner it was important to educate women so that they too could go out into the villages and educate the women and children (Turner 1861: 126).

While in the Mission Seminary men were trained to be competent in theological studies and their wives were trained to be competent in domestic duties. The wives of the LMS missionaries at Malua taught the women domestic work such as sewing, embroidery and cooking and how to take care of children (Hills 1912). In 1892 the Papauta School for Girls was established by the LMS Church. Papauta was considered a critical institution in the Pacific because of its training of Samoan girls to be appropriate wives of *faifeau*. The two female missionaries in charge of the establishment were the German, Valesca Schultze, and Elizabeth Moore from Ireland (Small 1967). The first girls to attend Papauta were the daughters of matai. Upon their graduation, most girls either became the wives of pastors or the wives of prominent matai (Garret 1982; Tuiai 2012). Papauta girls who married Seminary students, entered the Seminary and received more education, specifically focused on her future role as a *faletua* (Turner 1861).

The new *feagaiga* established between the Samoan people and the missionaries reversed the roles of the two parties (men were now carriers of sacred mana while women were their helpers), and also reversed the status of the two parties, men were now referred to as the *feagaiga* and women as *faletua*. This changed because the new *feagaiga* was not compatible with the expectation placed on women; that the natural vocation of women was as domestic housewives or as helpers to their husbands. The missionaries and their wives had firmly placed women in the secular structure of the *feagaiga* and thus effectively kept them away from the sacred structure which they once occupied.

### ***Faletua***

Before the arrival of Christianity, only the wife of the sacred chief (*ali'i paia*) was referred to as a *faletua* (Latai 2016). It is the highest title for a married woman and was thus adopted by members of the church to refer to the wife of a *faifeau*. The word *faletua* derives from the two words house (*fale*) and back (*tua*); literally it means 'house at the back'. Although the literal meaning presupposes a sense of inferiority, in relation to the setup of the Samoa household, the 'house at the back' can be compared to the engine room of a train, without which nothing moves. Another definition of the *faletua* which highlights her role in the background is *fautua*. According to Pratt, *fautua* means 'advocate' (p25) or 'plead' (p52); thus, a *fautua* is someone who pleads or advocates for someone or something. However, the term *fautua* was later commonly used to refer to someone who was an 'advisor'. In 1900 under the German Administration of Samoa (1900-1914), the Germans established

the office of High Advisers (*Fautua*) for the Paramount Chiefs (*tama-a-aiga*). The role of the *fautua* was to advise the German administrators on island matters (Keesing & Keesing 1956: 24). Today, the term is commonly used to refer to someone in the role of advisor. The *faletua* in her supporting role is often defined as a *fautua* to her husband, the *faifeau*.

### ***Faifeau***

As mentioned above the pastor is referred to as a *faifeau*, *fai* meaning “to do; to say, to speak; to get, to obtain, to possess; to become, ...” (Pratt 1862: 113), and *feau* meaning “a message... to send for” (Pratt 1862: 118). A more contemporary meaning for *feau* is also ‘work’ or ‘chores’ (these are used commonly today). Based on Pratt’s definition, a *faifeau* would be a ‘messenger’ or in today’s context it would mean someone who does chores or a servant for the Christian God. Both *faifeau* and *faletua* are referred to as ‘covenant keepers’ by Latai because they are the sacred party in the new church *feagaiga* relationship (2016).

### ***Fa’afeagaiga***

The official term given to a *faifeau* who has entered into a *feagaiga* relationship with a village church is *Fa’afeagaiga*. The *Fa’afeagaiga*, (*fa’a* [to be] + *feagaiga* [covenant]), literally means ‘to be covenant’; or because he has entered into a relationship with a village church in a ceremony referred to as the *Osiga Feagaiga* (*osiga* [maker] + *feagaiga* [covenant]), which literally means ‘covenant maker’. So the pastor alone is referred to as the *Fa’afeagaiga*, his wife who stands beside him during the ceremony is simply referred to as the wife of the *Fa’afeagaiga* (*faletua o le Fa’afeagaiga*).

### ***Feagaiga in the village church***

The transformation of the titles and roles given to the carriers of sacred mana over the years (especially with *faifeau* and *Fa’afeagaiga*) reveals how much the church has become a part of the Samoan way of life or Samoan culture. The Samoan word associated with culture is *aganu’u*; which is made up of two words *aga* and *nu’u*. The word *aga* is defined as ‘to do, to act, to go’ and ‘*nu’u*’ usually refers to ‘village’ (Pratt 1862: 236; Freeman 1983: 120-122). Therefore culture (*aganu’u*) could be defined as the ‘way of the village’ and refers to the importance of the village in the identity of a person and thus their role in the church *feagaiga*.

### ***Matai***

Essential to village control are the chiefs (*matai*, holders of *ali’i* and *tulāfale* titles) who are responsible for extended families based on various kinship relationships. A *matai* is chosen based on their demonstrated service to the family; they are also subject to a meeting of the extended family for a bestowal of a *matai* title. The *matai* title gives the *matai* authority over the lands connected to the *matai* title. The *matai* is also responsible for maintaining the prestige of the extended family in the effective use and administration of their lands and resources (Holmes 1987: 39-41).

Living in a village context where there are other extended families that also have *matai*, compels the need to have a Village Council (*Fono*). The *fono* is of utmost importance to village dynamics, just as family *matai* are concerned with family prestige, so too is the village *fono* concerned with the prestige of the village (Gilson 1970: 17-19). The *fono* consists of two types of *matai*, the high chief

(*ali'i*) and the orator chief (*tulafale*). The difference is a matter of function, the *tulafale* speaks on behalf of the *ali'i*, but the *ali'i* makes the final decision on matters with families and village. *Ali'i* titles are known to have sacred mana (power) based on ancient lineages and sacred ancestors. The *tulafale* titles, on the other hand, are more 'executive' titles that carry special duties. These duties are often related to 'service' to an *ali'i*, but this may differ from village to village (Meleisea et al. 1987: 27). According to Serge Tcherkezoff (2000), in Samoa today, the distinction of the two *matai* – *ali'i* and *tulafale* has diminished due to the singularity of the term *matai*. The use of the term 'matai' in pre[1]Christian Samoa encompassed all family leaders, including family members who were the best in a particular trade (for example, master carpenter). With examples of compound words based on *matai* (from Pratt and Milner), Tcherkezoff says that it is "evident that the base has indeed the meaning of 'the best, the first'" (2000: 174). So, the singularity of the term *matai* now embraces both the *ali'i* and *tulafale*, and is an historical transformation (Tcherkezoff 2000).

In the church *feagaiga* the *matai* hold the main positions in the church which are open to the laity. These positions include: Lay Preacher, Elder Deacon, Deacon, Church Secretary, and Church Treasurer. These leaders in the church monitor and ensure that the *fa'afeagaiga* and his family are provided for. Of all these positions, women have only been able to secure places as a Deacon, all other positions are held predominantly by men who are also the prominent *matai* in the village.

### **Oratory**

Another significant aspect of *aganu'u* which has made its influence in the church is the medium of oratory. The oratory of chiefs institutionalized the rank of the *matai*, primarily through the address (*fa'alupega*) of the villages. A *fa'alupega* is an honorific address of a village that refers to descent groups, titles, place names, famous events, traditional privileges and relationships (Gilson 1970: p28). According to Derek Freeman, a *fa'alupega* served as the main mode of conveying rank and order;

*"an institution of quite fundamental importance, for, with the formal reiteration of the relative rank of titles on every significant social occasion, a chiefly hierarchy becomes so firmly established as to make it exceedingly difficult to effect any fundamental change..." (Freeman 1983: 123).*

Oratory undoubtedly played a significant role in Samoan culture and further heightened with the development of two levels of the Samoan language, the chiefly language and the common or colloquial language. The chiefly language is one which Milner states as having a lexicon or vocabulary of respect; Pratt also calls the chiefly language one of 'politeness' (Milner 1966: 296-317; Pratt 1862: 85). Combined with the mana of the *matai* title, the 'chiefly language' added another level of respect by which the decisions of the *matai* were respected and carried out.

Formal ceremonies that involved the exchanging of gifts (especially fine mats or *ie toga*) is a platform for Samoan oratory. The exchange of Samoan gifts often required the collective and productive efforts of everyone in the village for the visiting parties (*malaga*). Anything remaining was often distributed to the *malaga* group to maintain family alliances and create new alliances with other villages. For these purposes, it was therefore very important that the villages in Samoa maintained high levels of self-sufficiency.

### ***Self-Sufficiency***

Samoaan villages were very self-sufficient and the three factors which contributed to this were:

1. Samoa's natural environment which yielded an abundance of natural resources – especially with agriculture and fishing.
2. Samoans were raised on the notion that each member had a place in the social order of the village; that each person was required to give their time and support for the benefit of the village – through village projects etc.
3. The competitive nature and pride of the Samoan people – especially prevalent between families and between villages.

The Samoan people have always had the means to support their *matai* and their families by utilizing their natural resources. When it came to supporting the *faiifeau* and his family, as well as the mission in Samoa and in the Pacific, these were the same means used to accumulate funds for church contributions (Board of Missions & Education 1861: 190). The competitive and proud nature of the Samoan people in their contributions is still evident in the church today where family contributions are announced (Gershon 2012; Va'a 2001; Janes 1990).

The church adapted to the social order within the village. The above elements of *aganu'u* were utilized by the church to establish its place at the centre of the village. According to Tuiai, an important element which elevated the status of the pastor in the village owed much to the significance of Samoan oratory. "Since oratory is important in the culture, the pastor's sermons assume cultural significance. The pastor's sermon espouses the will of God and thus the words are more sacrosanct than the *tulafale*" (Tuiai 2012: 16).

### ***Va Tapuia – Sacred Space***

The *va tapuia* is a sacred space that exists in the relationships of people and between people and the environment; it is a space that guides the interaction between the two parties on opposite sides (Vaai 1999: 46-47; Hau'ofa 2000: 465). The idea that the *va tapuia* in a relationship is sacred and 'cannot be trespassed' denotes a relationship where interaction is carried out in a sacred manner, where there is one party which is taken care of and not ill-treated, respected and not ignored, loved and not abused. This is exactly how Samoan women were treated in their status as *feagaiga* in pre-Christian Samoa and now, this is how the *faiifeau* is treated by the village and the church. This is the *feagaiga* covenant relationship between the *faiifeau* and the congregation in the village church.

### **Responsibility of the *faiifeau* and *faletua* in the village church**

According to Garrett, the *Fa'afeagaiga* and his family possess a privileged courtesy of both culture and church (1985: 124). Samoans consider them as the gate-keepers to blessings from God; which could possibly explain why Samoans are so generous in their donations to the church. In the early years of the church in Samoa, the missionaries realized that the church had become more and more a part of the social structure of Samoan life, "the authority of the *faiifeau* over his congregation as of the *matai* over his household, became central to the Samoan conception of religion" (Davidson 1967: 37). The



expectation on the *faiifeau* to lead the village church as a family continues to influence his ministry today. Not only does the *faiifeau* work 'physically' and 'mentally' towards the development of life in the village, he also works to spiritually nurture life in the church.

The *faiifeau* and the men of the church, who are usually the lay preachers and deacons, work on development plans for the church. Often these plans include building or renovating church buildings such as the church, the hall, and the *faiifeau's* house. Other projects looked to develop plantations that yielded crops and generated an income to help families as well as to raise funds for other church projects.

The *faiifeau* also conducts weekly Sunday services. Many CCCS churches in Samoa still offer two services on Sunday. Sunday school is often left to the *faletua* and lay preachers or *a'oa'o fesoasoani* and their wives. However, any decision making is finalized by the *faiifeau*, especially when it concerns the spiritual development of the church. Many *faiifeau* have stated that their ministry is twenty-four hours a day and for seven days a week; when there is a death in the church, the *faiifeau* is called in as soon as possible. For birthdays and weddings, the *faiifeau* is expected to attend and conduct the service. When there are major events in the village, such as the bestowal of *matai* titles, the *faiifeau* is on hand to bless the new titleholders. The *faiifeau* does not take part in the bestowal ceremony but he is called upon after the cultural ceremony to bless the new *matai*.

Accompanying the *faiifeau* into the village church is his wife and children. It is important to state here that although the choice men make to be an *a'oa'o* is a choice of vocation, for the *faletua*, her choice is usually not for the same reason, but because they have a strong personal relationship which developed outside the church. The *faletua's* conformity to the role of the wife of a *faiifeau* is therefore assumed and is an unspoken and uniformed expectation. The following stories of the women below illustrate the role and responsibilities of the *faletua* in this church *feagaiga* clearly. Both women were interviewed after they signed a deidentification form. They did not want to reveal their real identities.

### **Alofa's Story**

At the age of twenty-four, Alofa had served in their current village church for three years. She married her husband while he was still a student at Malua Theological College (MTC). She spent two years at the college with her husband and remembers learning handicrafts (crochet, weaving, and printing (*elei*)). She also recalls learning very little about the Bible, except for two classes a week with the lecturers and the daily worship services. Her days were spent mostly doing chores at home and around the college. In their final year at MTC, while they were preparing for their graduation, a group of village *matai* visited their home on the College compound:

*We were surprised because most people have an idea when they will get a calling, but this was out of the blue. I remember how we were discussing our invites for our graduation when these matai walked up to our house and proudly told us that we had been selected to be their faiifeau. My husband asked for time to consider it because our minds were still on graduation. After they left, we prayed and prayed; we also spoke with our families and our friends in Malua and then we made our decision the week before*

*graduation to accept the calling.*

The *osiga-feagaiga* for Alofa and her husband took place two months after their graduation from MTC. Alofa remembers how their families all came to the village to see them settled into their new home. Immediately following the *osiga-feagaiga*, their families left and the villagers also left for their own homes; “and that’s when it all sunk in, my husband and I just looked at each other and a feeling of loneliness set in; we held hands and sat down on the floor and just prayed our hearts out.” After the first few weeks Alofa finally got into a routine; she was the leader of the Women’s Fellowship and looked after the Sunday School.

The Women’s Fellowship is her greatest challenge. When she arrived to the village church, the wife of the *a’oa’o fesoasoani* (lay preacher) was the Chairperson for the fellowship and she still is today.

*It’s ok for me because I don’t know much about what these ladies are going through because they are so much older than myself. So many things I’d say and share with the ladies were based on my own experiences throughout the ‘short years’ of my life. Like with newborn babies, I couldn’t say anything to comfort women from my own heart because I hadn’t experienced it yet.*

However, just recently her confidence has been secured in the constant reminders the women give her, that she was called to be their spiritual mother (*tina fa’aleagaga*) with her husband. To Alofa it means, “They chose us, so as their ‘spiritual mother’ I know I didn’t put myself here, they put me here.” On matters where Alofa knows her experience is lacking, she delegates responsibilities to reliable women in the fellowship. This has often led to authority challenges, because she has allowed the women to make a number of decisions for the Fellowship. This perfectly describes the situation when she tried to introduce the idea of having a reading program for the children. Alofa felt that the women drew an assumption based on their experience with her, that the reading program would be too much for her to handle.

*They don’t really prepare us for leadership roles in Malua, only the President’s wife gets that experience because she leads the Women’s Fellowship. For me, what I learned in the two years I was at Malua, did not prepare me for life in a village church.*

### **Teuila’s Story**

Teuila is thirty-six years of age; she married her husband when she was twenty-four years of age, and he was thirty-four years old. Teuila did not spend any time at Malua and married her husband after he graduated. Teuila’s marriage was arranged by their families but it has since developed into a mutually respectful and warm relationship where they now have four children.

When Teuila and her husband received a calling from a village church they accepted the calling and moved to the village almost immediately. She recalls the excitement on the day of their *Osiga Feagaiga* and how, “the people... gave us so many gifts, but it was also a time for our families to give them gifts.”

After a few weeks, they settled into a routine. Sundays are her busy days with Sunday school starting at 7.30 am, followed by the morning service at 8.30am. After Sunday *toanai* (lunch) there is choir practice at 11 am for an hour and then at 3pm, they have afternoon church service. Teuila looks after the Sunday school and is one of the leaders of the Women's Fellowship group (full responsibility of this group was with the wife of the highest chief in the village). Due to a large number of youth in the village church, Teuila started up a Junior Youth group because she felt, "This is what ministry is all about, but without my husband's support I wouldn't be able to carry any of this out. He's here for me just as I am for him."

It is an ongoing joke with Teuila and her husband that Teuila does more work than he does, but then Teuila continues to say, "he goes on his visitations on his own, he prefers it that way, and he has the final say on a lot of the things I prepare for the Sunday school and Youth." Teuila's husband says that he prefers to go alone because if they both went, the family they visited would go out of their way to serve two people tea or even a meal. He stresses that his visitations are where he likes to be the one giving, not receiving.

Teuila tries to maintain her visitations of women and their children, but due to her busy schedule with her programmes as a *faletua* and with her own family, she only manages to visit the women when one has given birth to a new-born baby, or when the women or children are ill. Upon further sharing with Teuila, she confided that her greatest challenge at the moment is with her Women's Fellowship. Due to her age, compared to the older women she works with (most of whom are much older), she is not taken as seriously as she would like to be. When she gives ideas for the women's group, one of the older ladies would say, "leave the decisions to us, you just go sit next to your husband."

*It gets really frustrating at times, especially when they try and prevent an activity with my youth, they know they have the power so they always exercise it when they know I need to be punished for not doing as they say.*

One such case occurred when she was told not to involve herself in any of the decision making for some guests who arrived from New Zealand. Teuila went out and bought Samoan baskets for the female guests as gifts from her Sunday school. Even with this, the women were against it and made their disapproval known to her.

*It's really hard working with women my mother's age. Sometimes I forget I'm supposed to be a leader for these women and not their daughter. But then I guess with more experience and I guess 'more' aging, I'll be taken more seriously.*

Teuila was raised in the CCCS church and was actively involved as a Sunday school teacher, a youth leader and a member of the church choir. However, because she was too young to join the Women's Fellowship, she had no experience with the dynamics of such a group.

### ***Role of the faletua in the church feagaiga***

The stories of Alofa and Teuila shed light on the role of the *faletua* as the wife of the *fa'afeagaiga*. As part of the sacred side of the church *feagaiga*, both *faletua* are expected to carry out duties in the

church as well as in the community with the women's fellowship group. Teuila's visitations are restricted due to her responsibilities to her own nuclear family. On the other hand, Alofa, with no children, commits her time and efforts to the Sunday school which she struggles with due to her inexperience.

Neither woman is the main leaders of the Women's Fellowship of the church; the power women have in the traditional social setting of the village carries over into the Fellowship, especially in Teuila's case where the *faletua* of the main *matai* is the chairperson. The villages are very different as well, the village where Teuila and her husband are settled in have *matai* titles from a *tama-a-aiga* or Paramount chiefly lineage. It is not difficult to assume that the confidence of the women in this village could stem from the prestige of being connected to one of the oldest and most sacred titles in Samoa. When Teuila shared that she was practically told 'to be quiet' and to 'just sit next to your husband' by one of the ladies in the Fellowship, she felt insignificant and disrespected. However, looking at this scenario in the context of the old *feagaiga*, what Teuila felt is perhaps what many wives felt in pre-Christian Samoa in the presence of the *feagaiga* sister. This was a clear indication that remnants of the old *feagaiga* continue to emerge, especially in the villages of the *tama-a-aiga* titles.

Although both women have a leadership role in their respective Sunday school, Youth and Women's Fellowship, their knowledge and experience determine the actual degree of their involvement in each of these groups. This could explain Alofa's quiet involvement with her Women's Fellowship and her inexperience in the Sunday school; also, Teuila's more active involvement with the children of the congregation and her efforts to have a voice in her Fellowship.

One area of women's work which they have great pride in is the decoration of the church, especially the pulpit linen and floral decor. Every *faletua* has a Christian Calendar with the Liturgical colours that represent the different seasons in the Christian year. Most women in the CCCS are familiar with the colours of these seasons because they are scheduled on a roster to decorate the church some time during the year. Decorations typically include flowers and pulpit linen (coordinated to the colour of the season). This is considered by many mothers and daughters as an important duty to the church, one which they take seriously and with a lot of pride.

The work of the *faletua* in the village is important, because the women make up a significant percentage of the membership in the village churches. The *faletua* of *faiifeau* are members and some are leaders of a group of women who have a great say in the social development of the families in the church village. However, there is a concern that the *faletua*'s experience and knowledge could put them at a disadvantage in the village church, especially in the village church where the *faletua* is expected to carry out full responsibilities in the church Sunday school and leadership in the Women's Fellowship.

### **Women in the Village Church**

Despite the earlier religious beliefs which honoured the sacredness of women in their aspect of sister, the influence of the church has focused on the complementary status of women to men. With regard to the male clergy, women were, and still are, viewed as wives and mothers, or 'helpmeets' (Garrett 1997, p97). In its teachings and structure the CCCS still advocates a conservative approach to gender,

linked to the gender-norms of nineteenth century England that it introduced to Samoa. With progress, development and global expansion of the church in Samoa, the ideal status of women in the church remains that of 'wives' and continues to be reinforced by the church's teachings and structures. In the CCCS, the maximum leadership position permitted to women is the role and status of deacon, and most women who achieve this status are widowed or unmarried, in other words women who are no longer or were never wives; in comparison, men have access to all leadership positions in the church, as Deacons, Elder Deacons, Lay Preachers, MTC students, and as Ordained Pastors (Autagavaia 2020).

In Samoa, a *faletua* who is currently serving alongside her husband in a CCCS village church is not permitted to take on any paid employment. In fact, the *faletua* is bound by the same church policies which bind her husband to the church; that is, she is not allowed to "deal in domestic commodities with the intention of creating personal wealth" (EFKS 2013: 75). Nor are they permitted to work for the government or receive tattoos (EFKS 2013). On the other hand, she has no entitlements from the church, receives no pension if widowed and has no defined responsibilities of service. In short, when a *faifeau* dies, his *faletua* returns to her family or village and is expected to support herself and her family using her own means, for many *faletua*, they pick up where they left and return to work as a public servant. However, when a *faletua* dies, her husband is expected to re-marry within a short timeframe if he wishes to continue in the ministry, which often the case.

### **Transforming Vision for Women in the *Feagaiga***

Feminist Theologian, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza's idea of discipleship of equals where both men and women empower each other is focused on women recovering their voices from the past and being fully embraced by the church today (Schussler Fiorenza 1998). This links to the ministry of the CCCS in Samoa and the place of women in the *feagaiga*. Women in Samoa are reclaiming their *feagaiga* unconsciously through their natural ability to work hard and with pride in their sacred status, even if only their husbands are referred to as the *Fa'afeagaiga*.

Another work by Schussler Fiorenza (1984) explores the historical origins of the discipleship of equals. She argues that the exclusion of women's history in the Bible is the result of a male bias in reading and interpreting the scriptures. She re-examines the history of the early church and draws readers to see women who worked hard, who preached, who hosted Christians in their homes, and women who were leaders in the early church. These women's stories show up in the history of the early church like tips of an iceberg with no disclosure of the iceberg's origins. Schussler Fiorenza's "efforts to reconstruct the Christian origins are thus an attempt to uncover the remainder of the iceberg that is submerged" (Stephenson 2011: 144). To uncover the full 'iceberg', Schussler Fiorenza encourages us to read the stories with an understanding of their context, especially the androcentric context of the Jewish culture at the time, and then to see the tips as signifiers of a democratic religious vision where men and women worked together as 'equals'. "In using this word [equal], she means to underscore that this group of people is characterized by the equality of rights and privileges of all its members" (Stephenson 2011).

Schussler Fiorenza's notion of ministry provides a point of dialogue with the theological concerns of women in Samoa. Like Schussler Fiorenza, the emphasis in this article is to show how important Samoan women have been and continue to be in the development of the church. It is important to

note here that most women in Samoa are not as liberal as international feminist theologians. Perhaps this would have been a different story if women in Samoa were still in possession of their sacred pre-Christian status as *feagaiga*, but alas, the identity of a Samoan women today is very much conditioned by a culture which is heavily influenced by the patriarchal text and androcentric context of the Bible (since the arrival of Christianity in 1830). The notion of a discipleship of equals is a vision which can be pursued by the clergy couple of the CCCS in its current context of ministry, only if women and men are given equal access to theological education. This may not be what feminist Schussler Fiorenza had in mind, especially with the patriarchal development of the church structures in Samoa; however, the notion of a clergy couple in the CCCS working as equal disciples would be the only likely step forward at this point in the church. Especially, with the CCCS emphasizing that only a married pastor can be ordained, and that only a clergy couple can take up a calling from a village parish.

The ordination of women in the CCCS has been raised in general discussions at a few General Assembly gatherings of the CCCS. However, most CCCS women have shown their support of the current ministry of the clergy couple. In 2009 a survey was carried out with women of the CCCS in one district (or *matagaluega*) in Auckland, New Zealand, regarding the ordination of women; over 80 percent of the women did not support the ordination of women (Tanielu 2010). Dr. Lonise Tanielu who presented a paper to the General Assembly of the CCCS in Samoa reported that the survey was a clear indication that the church was not yet ready for a female *faifeau*.

Schussler Fiorenza's *Transforming Vision* refers to a vision of a world of justice and love where women and men are equal disciples; "The vision that compelled Jesus as one among many in the discipleship community of equals was the vision of the *basileia tou theou*, of God's different world of justice and love" (2011). She claims that Jesus Christ was compelled by this vision of God's Kingdom (*basileia tou theou*) to serve alongside both men and women as equal disciples towards a world of 'justice and love'. This notion disregarded the gender of the disciple because the more important aspect of discipleship was ensuring the vision of God's Kingdom. The idea of focusing on one's ministry in the mission field rather than the gender of the missionary, enacts the vision of justice and love.

## Conclusion

The new *feagaiga* in the church today has the same structures of 'sacred' and 'secular', and ultimately in this duality, secular power resides with the male leaders of congregations and districts, the same sacred power compared to secular executive authority that existed in the *feagaiga* of pre-Christian Samoa. A woman can only have an identity in the sacred structure of the *feagaiga* if she is connected to the church as the *faletua* of a *faifeau*, or an *a'oa'o fesoasoani* or *tiakono*. As a pastor's wife, her situation is different to that of other wives of male leaders in modern society. The church requires the serving clergy to be married and regards them as teams, the wife in the 'secular' supportive but never the less essential role. An executive in business or government is not required to be married, and if he is, his wife is not seen as connected to his duties. The issue of whether in a Christian setting and in the structure of the CCCS, women may be granted the sacred roles of the church, is more than a feminist issue; it has deep and ancient structural roots in the hermeneutics of Samoan culture.

The struggles of women in the church in Samoa means that what they must contend with not only introduced gendered notions within the CCCS organization and principles, but also the deep

structures that shape cultural notions of gender inherited from Samoa's past. It remains to be seen whether the CCCS will come around to the modern notion that a wife may have an identity and role that is separate from that of her husband. Unless women in the church (especially *faletua*) come to be seen as individuals (separate but still married to her husband), they will never be free from the mentality that a *faletua* is part of her husband's ministry, albeit in a subservient capacity.

The norms of Samoan villages and in the majority of Samoa's CCCS congregations, especially those in rural areas, the people adhere to the gender norms introduced by the church, that a woman's role and status is primarily socially defined by that of her husband. If the couple lives in the wife's village, she is simultaneously defined by marriage as well as by the rank and role of her own family, but in the church context, she is still defined as a wife. Perhaps a way forward for *faletua* can be found in two directions. First, for the church leading laity to specifically define the role expected of the wife of a *faifeau* (and guarantee her a pension should her husband predecease her), and second for training for this role to be provided by MTC. There has never been an education programme which caters to women of different backgrounds specifically for the ministry in Samoa today. Those who are married to an *a'oa'o* at Malua follow a loose curriculum emphasizing domestic skills which has changed little since the early nineteenth century. The lack of importance placed on a proper education of the *faletua* in Malua, that reflects the needs of today's changing society, is clearly indicative of a church that wants, overtly or covertly, to maintain sacred roles and their associated authority as the exclusive prerogative of men, as is the case in most religious systems worldwide, because that is seen as normal and morally correct.

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