Society: The Kingdom of Tonga is tiny, with fewer than 100,000 inhabitants, of whom well over half live on the main island of Tongatapu, which is only around 20 miles long. The pace of life is extremely gentle - in towns and villages the speed limit is 25 miles per hour and just over 40 miles per hour elsewhere. Only younger women ever wear trousers - most feel more comfortable in an ankle length skirt and a top which covers their shoulders and upper arms. Likewise, men generally prefer to wear the traditional wrap (like a plain sarong) and will rarely appear without a shirt. In anything other than informal surroundings, they will in addition wear a wrap made from woven leaves tied at the waist, while women use a kind of belt with long fringes all around. Enormous feasts, which always include roast-suckling pig, are an essential and regular feature of Tongan life. The Royal Family and the 33 Nobles are held in high esteem. The King appoints 12 government ministers from among the Nobles and they hold their offices for life unless they choose to take voluntary retirement. The Nobles also elect nine representatives of their own, and the people a further nine. Thus, the House of Representatives has 33 members, including the Speaker, the Prime Minister appointed by the King, and the King himself.

When he comes of age, every Tongan boy is allocated a plot of land - sometimes this is used for subsistence, or those who are employed may sell their produce. It is forbidden for any foreigner to own land in Tonga, though it may be leased. The extended family has huge importance, and anybody who has anything will almost invariably share it. This makes Tongans poor shopkeepers because so much will be given rather than sold. Most food outlets are therefore run by Chinese people, but locals often accuse them of being greedy.

Church is an extremely important part of life for the great majority of Tongans. Rules about Sunday observance are extremely strict - only essential work is permitted, nothing except bread may be sold, and even swimming is frowned upon. Many people attend church twice or three times. Most churches have at least nine services per week and the first bells for early services can be heard at 4.30 on most mornings. More than half of the population is Methodist, and of these around 38% belong to the Free Wesleyan Church. A recent phenomenon is the rapid growth of the Mormon faith, which probably now accounts for at least 10% of the population. This is perhaps because in Tonga Mormons call themselves Christians. Interestingly, the Seventh Day Adventists worship on Sunday in Tonga, saying that since the international dateline has a kink in order to include Tonga on its western side, Sunday in Tonga is actually Saturday.

Free Wesleyan Church: There are five Methodist Churches in Tonga, but of these the Free Wesleyan Church is the oldest and much the largest. It is organised into five Districts - the largest two each have a Chairman and the others are overseen by Superintendent Ministers. At present there are around 200 ordained ministers, most of whom are in charge of a circuit, some with assistant ministers. There are also some 6,000 'lay speakers' who actually do the majority of midweek preaching. Some circuits also have a Conference Steward, which is a salaried position. Both the President and
the General Secretary are elected annually and may be re-elected until they reach the retirement age of 70.

The Head Office of the Church employs 66 people, all working in an extremely impressive complex of buildings opened in 2000. A bank loan was obtained to fund the building and I was informed that thanks to the generosity of church members in Tonga and those living overseas, it is being repaid faster than anticipated.

Sunday morning services all begin promptly at 10am and are frequently followed by a feast - if there is not one, the preacher will normally be given a fairly generous monetary donation. Singing is usually unaccompanied and, with choir practices held several times a week, the quality is wonderful. However, as in so many places, I was told that many young people are not attending church nearly as regularly as their parents and grandparents.

I was able to have brief meetings with the Heads of several Church departments. The Revd Makisi Finau is Director of the Evangelism Department. Though he is responsible for street evangelism and open air preaching, quite a lot of the Department's work is concerned with social action with regular camps to educate people about the dangers of drugs, alcohol, AIDS etc. They operate a 'lifeline' phone counselling service using volunteers (for which the Queen chairs the Board), a prison ministry and a fund to help needy cases with money for school fees, clothes etc.

For some years the Department has been training people for mission work in Tonga. Recently, however, some young Methodists have been attracted to YWAM's 'University of the Nations', set up in Tonga to train people from the Pacific and south east Asia to go as faith missionaries to Africa and other parts of the world. In 2002 therefore the Department began its own programme to train 'missionary workers'. In the first year 12 single people aged 20 to 35 were given two months' training and did six-month placements in Tonga. These people are now on placements in countries such as Fiji and New Zealand and their training should be completed with a one-month course in Australia in January 2004. Another 18 people are about to begin training, and a similar number should begin in the second half of this year. Following training, those found suitable will be sent to work in various parts of South East Asia and possibly beyond, with support from the Tongan Church and probably from Singapore as well. There is some land available where it is hoped eventually to build a mission training centre.

The 'President of Education' is the Revd Dr Kalapoli Paongo and, with 20 members of staff, his is the biggest department. As far as secondary education is concerned, the FWC is a bigger player than even the Government. In all, the Church runs seven primary schools, three middle schools, three 'District' schools, five large secondary schools, and an agricultural school up to diploma level. It is just beginning to move into post-secondary education through a link with a polytechnic in New Zealand which could offer courses up to the BA level. There is also a plan to begin teacher training. (Papers on these plans are available). Plans have already been drawn up to establish a polytechnic college, but as yet there are no funds to start building.

All schools get a grant of 100 Tongan dollars (about £30) per annum for each student from the Government. However, salaries in government schools are much higher than those paid by the Church. Clearly, education is a very high priority in Tonga, and I was told that because the Islands have very few natural resources, they have decided to
invest in development of their people. Many educated people then leave Tonga to work, but this is not a concern since, because of the strength of the extended family system, they virtually always send money home, which helps the local economy.

The Director of Christian Education is the Revd Dr Tevita Puloka. The work of his department includes Sunday schools catering for around 8,000 children and training for their 800 teachers, as well as work with a similar number of youth and young adults up to the age of around 30. Everyone in the Church belongs to a class meeting and the department produces training manuals both for class leaders and for confirmation candidates. Ministers are responsible for training lay speakers and training manuals are produced for this, also, as well as workshops around the Islands. Similarly, there are opportunities for continuing education both for ministers and Conference Stewards. The Department produces a daily devotional booklet which includes commentaries on the lectionary, and so doubles as a preaching aid. There is a weekly radio broadcast commenting on the Sunday readings and a weekly TV programme. A minister from Sweden is helping to run the ‘Youth and Young Adults Crisis Ministry’.

The Communications Department has its own recording studio where it can produce CDs of school brass bands etc. It produces a monthly newspaper in Tongan and prints nearly 10,000 copies for sale both in Tonga and to Tongans overseas. The cover price is 50 cents (about 15p), and with a few advertisements the newspaper is self-funding. The front page always carries an article by the President and another by the General Secretary. The FWC archives are also within this department, and the most valuable early documents are slowly being put onto CD-ROM using a scanner. A grant from the WCO was much appreciated, but further funds would be useful to purchase a camera in order to be able to scan old books and registers.

The Church holds its annual Conference in June, and I was particularly asked to convey an invitation to the World Church Office for a representative to attend this year.

**Sia’atoutai Theological College:** The name of the college, given by the late Queen Salote, can be translated as ‘making fishers’. It was started in 1948 on the very attractive campus where it still stands and the large chapel, which is more than 100 years old, was moved there from an earlier site. A brand new community hall is under construction. The college is affiliated to SPATS and the Principal, the Rev Ahio Finau Pila, is very appreciative of the work done by Tevita. In 2004 the SPATS Conference will be held at Sia’atoutai. Most of the students are members of the Free Wesleyan Church, though some come from other Churches in the Methodist tradition or from the Anglican Church, and there are occasional students from overseas, some of whom are Tongan. There are currently 18 full-time tutors and four part-time. Ahio is very much hoping for a mission partner tutor from the UK to replace Adrian Burdon, who should be a biblical scholar, if possible specialising in the Old Testament.

The College offers four main courses: a three year B.D conducted in English, a three year diploma in theology, also in English, a three year certificate in theology and pastoral ministry conducted in Tongan, and a women’s programme also in Tongan. There are normally around 220 students, including about 50 married couples, taking these courses. Interestingly, most of the students pay their own fees with about a quarter of them being subsidised by the congregations from which they come. On completion of their course, most will return to their home churches to continue with lay ministry, pastoral concerns and midweek preaching. Just a few may, on completion of their courses, be selected by
their Synod and ultimately the Conference, for ordination. Most of these then return to the college for a further year of ordination preparation paid for by the Church Headquarters.

**Tupou College:** Founded in 1866, this is the oldest school in the South Pacific. Today it caters for some 600 boys, all of whom are boarders. The fees are quite modest at $180 (around £60) per annum for forms 1 to 4 and $260 (about £85) for forms 5 and 6. In addition to the usual curriculum, the school also teaches Japanese up to form 4 using a language laboratory which was funded by a Japanese organisation. The Headmaster, the Revd Malakai Pomana, would appreciate a man on the Experience Exchange Programme to help with remedial English and other activities. The school has its own farm of around 700 acres, and all the boys are required to do agricultural work - the produce is used in the school kitchens, and some is sold to provide income for the school. The school also owns a 46-acre area of indigenous rainforest, the largest such remnant on the island of Tongatapu.

**Ruth Watt:** Ruth is a mission partner who has been teaching industrial art at Tupou High School since April 2002. She was my host in Tonga and it was delightful to see how quickly and thoroughly she has settled into life there. The school has four campuses and she teaches at Vailoloa, the largest, with about 600 pupils from forms 1 to 5. The Fasi Campus is now only for form 6 and above and can take students up to diploma level in business studies and computing. I was able to meet both with the Headmaster and with the Head of Vailoloa campus, and both praised her very openly and genuinely for the remarkable improvement in results even in so short a time. This is despite the fact that some of the topics she is teaching, such as surveying and navigating, she has never taught before. The campus is hoping to acquire some computers this year, and if this happens she will be teaching computing, also. Revd Paongo in the Education Department would like Ruth to do some work there, helping to design curriculums, but she would much rather teach full-time.

**Friendly Islands Bookshop:** The bookshop was begun by the FWC in 1967, and now has branches in three of Tonga’s other islands. As well as books, a large amount of stationery is also sold as well as some other items such as CDs and even sunglasses. The turnover is over two million Tongan dollars (about £70,000), of which around 100,000 Tongan dollars (£33,000) is profit. Of this, around 35% is taken by the Church and around 65% ploughed back into the shop. Marketing is a problem and the Manager is hoping that John Connan from Australia, who began the bookshop, might return to help for a while.