

**Close up and personal: A Case Study of an ITEP Missionary Couple in the  
International Teacher Education Program of the Church Education System (CES)**

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**Abstract**

The International Teacher Education Program (ITEP) is a coordinated effort by the BYU Hawaii College of Education, the Church Missionary Department, and the Church Education System to provide training to certify teachers in the Church-sponsored schools in the South Pacific (in Samoa, Tonga, Fiji, and Kiribati). ITEP relies upon senior missionary couples to provide courses to upgrade the skills of these teachers. At least one of member of the couple must have taught in higher education or worked in public school administration. This article provides a case study of one of those couples, Elder and Sister Gordon (a pseudonym). The issues of personal motivation, division of responsibility, housing, health, and reflections on teaching in this context are explored. While the ITEP couples may be somewhat unique in their preparation, having been selected based upon completion of a career in education, the challenges they face and the solutions they find are probably quite similar to those encountered by senior missionary couples anywhere in the world.

**Introduction**

The International Teacher Education Program (ITEP) offers a unique way to build teaching skills in the Pacific region. Instead of trying to send teachers in the LDS Church-sponsored schools from the islands back to BYU Hawaii or BYU Provo to get their teacher certification, for the past 12 years or so, the Church Education System has been sending senior couple missionaries to the islands to teach classes and to help certify teachers. At least one of the couple must have taught at the university level or been a high school principal or

superintendent. If possible, the other spouse should have had some background in teaching and education. The couples spend 18 or 24 months on their particular island, working with the school faculty. The school principal decides how much to involve the couple in the school's inservice training. The courses taught by the couple carry academic credit from BYU Hawaii. Teachers receive salary increments for completion of ITEP courses – each 15 credit hour increment results in a salary increase. Thus, the ITEP program represents a tangible way for these teachers to increase their salaries. In addition, when teachers have completed 3 years of undergraduate work toward a B.A. degree, those selected through scholarship competition go to BYU Hawaii for a final year to complete the degree.

This article draws from an evaluation of ITEP conducted by Nick and Irene Eastmond. This evaluation combines findings from a stay at BYU Hawaii, from October to June, and a visit of schools in Samoa, Tonga, New Zealand, Fiji and Kiribati by Nick and Irene Eastmond, during the six-week period from February 12 to March 24, 2006. Visits to each island lasted roughly one week, plus a one-week break midway. Nick went as a program evaluator and qualitative researcher, and Irene went as researcher and video ethnographer.

The couple spotlighted in this article worked on the island of Kiribati. Bro. and Sis. Gordon are pseudonyms (i.e. made-up names designed to maintain anonymity). At the time of this visit, they had been out in the mission field just over 6 months.

The intent of this case study is to help understand what the life of an ITEP missionary couple is like. We selected the Gordons in Kiribati to highlight, because while they have a unique set of challenges in living on a fairly remote island, they also have the benefit of a tight-knit community, with close connection to the school and country director, and a supportive family back in the USA.

As a background to understanding in their situation, it helps to know about their setting. The island they live on, Tarawa, is the location of the national capitol of the nation of Kiribati. Formerly known as the Gilbert Islands, Kiribati received its independence in 1978 [1979] and has its own government and relations with the world. The island is an atoll, and it is one of many in the country. We were told that the highest point on the island is 12 feet, and there is an ongoing concern that if global warming causes the seas to rise, much of Kiribati would be inundated [The concern about a tsunami, which often occurs to outsiders, is unfounded, because these large waves require a sloping beach to build up the wave height, a condition missing from these atolls. Similarly, being right at the equator, these islands do not experience hurricanes or cyclones, since these storms originate at the equator and travel outward building up strength to threaten islands like Tonga and Hawaii that are nearer the temperate zones]. Getting to and from Kiribati is a challenge, as the regularly scheduled flights through Air Nauru, the national airline, have been temporarily suspended, due to the airline recently going bankrupt. Before, there were weekly flights that were regularly scheduled. Flights in from Fiji and Brisbane, Australia are now irregular and apparently occur only when a chartered flight comes in (and they are fairly expensive, at about \$850 US per person round trip from Fiji). The country's economy is based mainly on fishing and on the sale of fishing rights, as Kiribati has the world's largest amount of ocean claimed as territorial waters. The country has telephone service, with rather slow Internet access. Much of the food and consumer products are shipped in. Fresh fruit and vegetables are becoming more available as a result of a gardening project sponsored by the Taiwanese government, but still much of the diet for most people is fish and coconuts.

For outsiders, like these missionaries, even basic things like safe drinking water are not easily obtained. The Gordons use a three-stage filter recommended by the Church, while other families simply bring the water to a boil and let it cool. The water filter, if replaced at the intervals suggested on the directions, is an expensive apparatus, costing about \$1500 US yearly to maintain properly. The Gordons supplied water for us during our stay and provided water for another couple as well.

One of the joys of being in Kiribati is the association with the local people. These people are genuine in their dealings with others and extremely generous toward others. They may not have much in terms of material goods, but what they have they will share. We were struck with the beautiful smiles of the people we met. A visiting missionary dentist told us that thanks to candy and soft drinks from Australia and New Zealand, there are more dental problems now than at an earlier time; however, he also said that the level of dental care evident by the students at the high school had increased in a major way. On an earlier visit he had determined that people were using a common toothbrush in the dormitories (so a shipment of toothbrushes and dental floss was arranged and delivered).

Indicative of the strength of the local culture is the finding that, unlike many of the islands that worry about “returnability”, students from Kiribati who study abroad invariably want very much to return to their home island.

Meeting these people and experiencing their island was one of the unexpected highlights of our trip.

### **Qualifications and initial impressions:**

When I look at my notes about the Gordons, Phil and Elizabeth, and think what we knew before arriving, I have to smile, because the facts gleaned from files are so paltry by

comparison to interacting with the actual people. Beforehand we knew a few details: Bro. Gordon had been a school superintendent in Arizona prior to his retirement. He is now 66 years old. His wife's application had even fewer facts listed. The Bishop had only written: "Sister Gordon is the mother of ten children. She can do anything." I knew that Bro. Gordon had taught as a facilitator for the Covey Leadership Group, having taught a course on "Seven Habits of Highly Effective People." We knew that Sis. Gordon had lived in multiple countries while growing up: Columbia (6 years), Peru (1 year), Brazil (7 years) and that she had been an aerobics trainer and substitute teacher in the public schools. And we knew that they had served in a variety of Church callings: He as Bishop, Scoutmaster, High Councilor, and Young Men's President. She had served as an early morning seminary teacher for 9 years, Young Women's President, and as a counselor in Relief Society and Primary Presidencies. Both have served as the Gospel Doctrine teacher for their ward, and both speak Spanish (Sis. Gordon speaks Portuguese as well). From their resume documents, they come across as capable and experienced. The Bishop recommending them had noted: "Humble, high ability."

That statement proved to be accurate, but, of course, an understatement. This couple is so capable! In many ways they epitomize the kind of couple that works well as ITEP volunteers.

They met us at the airport, as we cleared customs and looked bewildered coming for the first time into Tarawa, the major population center for this island country. We had viewed the atoll from the air: 45 miles of a narrow white sand strip, dotted with coconut palm trees, lagoon on one side and open sea on the other, shaped in a long "L" shape.

We had been told that conditions were “a bit primitive,” in comparison to Hawaii or the other islands we had visited. That observation proved true: the island is one long strip with one road, with houses and people on either side. Occasionally, our vehicle passed a Church meeting house or a large communal dwelling called a “Maneaba,” something like the Samoan “fale,” but for group meetings rather than as an individual family dwelling.

The major problems of the island, like adequate trash disposal, sewage treatment, and public health have been exacerbated by the huge increases in population, from a reported 1,750 people in 1947 to some 45,000 in 2002, a forty-fold increase. Folkways that worked 50 years ago, like cleaning fish or people eliminating in the lagoon, are problematic in the current age. Getting clean water is a major challenge, for the locals and for visitors alike.

#### **Some history: A previous couple that encountered troubles**

To understand the challenge that the Gordons faced upon arrival, it is necessary to understand the difficulties brought on by the previous ITEP couple. There were concerns about the activities of this couple regarding their interpretation of their role, which caused the school and its administrators serious concerns. We heard mixed opinions about the contribution of this couple. During our focus group in Kiribati, one of the teachers made a point of stating that he had received some expert advice from this previous ITEP couple and that the husband had been very helpful to him in resolving a problem with teaching. We also heard that one member of the couple was in high demand as a teacher.

The important thing to note was that the previous couple was seen by administrators as ineffective in their ITEP role, and the program had nearly stopped as they finished out their time as missionaries.

#### **Enter the Gordons:**

Bro. Gordon, having worked in education for many years, and Sister Gordon with her extensive work in the classroom, must have known that their success in the new ITEP calling would depend in large measure on their ability to provide a worthwhile initial experience to the teachers. [Certainly, the ITEP program's new direction was being carefully watched by the local teachers and administrators]. The Gordons arrived in Kiribati just about Thanksgiving time in November. In our interview, he related:

Prior to my coming to work in Kiribati, I was a Covey facilitator for 7 Habits of highly successful people for inservice for our Arizona teachers. Once in Kiribati, I proposed a class called "Personal Principles of Highly Effective Teachers." I wrote up a course description and sent it to the Dean of BYUH College of Education [to offer for BYUH credit, and subsequently received approval]. I taught the course as a workshop during the interim before classes began. I did the class to get an idea to see how much these teachers could handle and see what their English skills were. We tried to adapt to the culture, not use jargon. Some of the older teachers were in the interim class. It was three hours a day for 12 days. The younger teachers were busy getting ready for their classes. But now we have a mix of the ages of teachers. Tuesday and Thursday works best [for ITEP classes].

This beginning workshop was a crucial test for Bro. Gordon, and he knew it. If this first course had failed, enlisting participants for future ITEP courses could have been a struggle. The evidence was that the course was well received and that the community good will was captured.

The Gordons felt that coming at Thanksgiving time was a good idea. They expressed the feeling that "this time could be shortened a bit, maybe by 2-3 weeks, as they were there a full two months before the beginning of the first term. However, being there

early gave them time to learn the “lay of the land,” to get familiar with the project records, and to run the workshop, thereby assessing their students, prior to the beginning of the school term in early February.

This initial time also gave Elder Gordon a chance to get involved with the humanitarian project, installing large water tanks. Since they were arriving at the end of the school year [before the beginning of the next one], the ITEP Coordinator in Hawaii asked them if they could assist with the Humanitarian Project, if they had the time; recognizing that their first priority was the ITEP Program. The water tanks are to be placed in locations where rainwater can be collected and used for communal drinking water. The funding (\$75 K. US) comes through the LDS Church Humanitarian Fund. It uses local contractors to install the tanks, and installation involves the community, to put in rain gutters and to set in place a concrete base. Each durable plastic tank costs \$2,000 US, holds 1,250 gallons, and is stamped with a message identifying the tank as a donation of the LDS Church. As was evident on our arrival, having clean water to drink is a major challenge when the underground water is so close to the sea and can be brackish or polluted. Bro. Gordon’s role is to chair the Humanitarian Project Committee in the Kiribati Stake, to help in coordinating the decisions and approving all expenditures, and to help make decisions about where the tanks should be installed, and finally to supervise the installation to make sure that it is done correctly.

Sis. Gordon leads an aerobic dance group, and that started during the Christmas holidays, running Monday, Wednesday, and Friday after school. She began with each person taking personal measurements and, after following the program for a couple of weeks, taking the measurements once again. “These people were astounded that their measurements had changed, making them more trim. And it worked for every one of them.” That aerobics

dance group has been an interesting contribution from Sis. Gordon, reportedly involving virtually all of the female leaders at the high school. It is an example of how having a strong personal interest can work into a contribution to the ITEP.

**The current program:**

The Gordons are involved with teaching one class each on Tuesday and Thursday of each week. Bro. Gordon was teaching a Foundations of Education class, and Sis. Gordon a class on “reading in the content areas.” We were the second set of visitors they had hosted in two weeks, the Coordinator couple in Hawaii having visited them the week before, and so their lives had been a bit disrupted by outside events. The role of an ITEP missionary involves many of the duties of the other full-time missionaries, but with some additions and subtractions of efforts. [No one ever mentioned a lack of things to do].

During the weekend we were there, Sis. Gordon helped the young women in her ward, teaching them a song and dance routine (to the song, “Oh Johnny Oh”) for the Stake Relief Society program on Saturday. On Saturday it was the mission zone conference, with both morning and afternoon sessions under the direction of the Mission President. We also attended these sessions and found them quite applicable to the ITEP work, partly because the current Mission President had been a former CES administrator and was committed to helping each of his missionaries become “master teachers.” The use of role-playing in the afternoon portion of the conference would have been a fine demonstration in any setting. As conference ended, Bro. Gordon turned to me and said: “That gives me a good idea. Just as the missionaries can draw on the church members to host a discussion with nonmembers, I could draw upon the former ITEP teachers (the veterans) to help make the point with new teachers. I’m going to do that.”

I asked what a typical day for the Gordons would be like. Here is the shortened version of Bro. Gordon's reply: “

To start out the day, I go walking early, shower, read scriptures, eat breakfast, and then we do companion study. We look at our schedule for the day. In the morning we make lesson plans and preparations. We will often have meetings with the principal or school committee. We then have lunch, and that is usually a sandwich that we bring, mostly because we can't take time for a long lunch. After lunch we go shopping sometimes. We both teach classes in the afternoon two days a week. We sometimes get home before dinner, but not always, because there is a lot to do.

Brother Gordon irons his own clothes, just because there is a lot going on, and that is how they have divided the work. Sis. Gordon makes bread and does all the cooking. Doing the dishes often becomes his task. On Sunday, they are both in key positions in the English speaking ward with students from Moroni High School: Elizabeth is in Young Women Presidency; Phil is a quorum leader in the combined Elders and High Priests.

We attended the Sunday meeting, and Bro. Gordon taught a lesson about priesthood responsibilities, the kind of lesson that members need to hear annually as a reminder of basic information needed in their callings. Hearing this material in English from a native speaker seemed to be valuable for these young people, as they try to build their English language competence.

### **Getting started in ITEP:**

We asked them: “How did you hear about ITEP?” This was Bro. Gordon's response:

We had been thinking about going on a mission, and so we had been looking through church bulletins. I called about one of the possible assignments, and they asked us to send them a resume. It got forwarded to the Coordinator couple in Hawaii. They got back to us, saying “We could really use a couple in Kiribati.” We said we could be available the first of November. So we submitted our papers...The Elder we report to in Hawaii said to say that we have been accepted as adjunct faculty. I retired [as school superintendent] in 2003. We thought we’d go to South America [since they both speak Spanish]. But when we heard about this assignment, we thought we’d love the South Pacific.

“What are you giving up to be here?” we asked. Their reply: “Our grandkids and our brand new home. And with 10 children, all grown now but with families of their own, you miss out on lots of family events. But when would you [be able to be gone and] not have those things happening? “

We were rather astounded to hear that their family saved for a mission fund for them secretly and gave them \$6,000 to go on their mission when they left. They were astounded as well, having had no hint that the next generation was up to this.

How was your orientation? “ Before we even came on our mission, the Coordinator couple in Hawaii put us in touch with the couples here so we could e-mail another couple there in Kiribati, [with husband serving as the counselor to the Mission President and wife serving as mission nurse], and some couples when we were in the Missionary Training Center (MTC). They organized a dinner for us so we could meet them and talk to them about Kiribati. We really enjoyed the MTC. The other CES missionaries stayed in Salt Lake City [for the rest of their training], but our training went on the Hawaii. While in Hawaii, we

spent a lot of time at the Polynesian Cultural Center (PCC). We visited many classes to see how the students were handling their subjects, especially those who need lots of help with English. We met with some students from Kiribati and had lunch with them. The ITEP manual helped us. I have referred to it a number of times since we got here.”

### **Housing and sense of community**

One obvious element of the setting in Kiribati was the location of the housing. It is all provided by the Church and is located on the same compound as the high school and student dormitories. The deputy school principal and her family live on the grounds of the school as well. The ITEP couples, as well as other missionary couples, pay a monthly fee to the church to cover their rent and utilities.

At the time of our visit, the available housing was full (we felt lucky to be housed there, rather than in a hotel, as two CES people were doing for that week). The homes are built right up to a sea wall with a fence at the top that drops down to the open ocean. When the tide is high, the waves pound against the sea wall. When it is low, there is a fifty-yard stretch of rock beach to where the waves break.

It was clear from the beginning of our stay that the LDS couples work together to get things done. Shopping is usually a group event, with several people going in the church-owned Toyota van to the market or “into town in Betio.” More than once, after attending a church function (like the baseball game of the Taiwanese team versus the LDS missionaries -- missionaries won), we stopped to eat at a nearby Chinese restaurant. Each time it occurred as a group. Much of the conversation served to orient the newcomer (like us) or to give information on people or events. People were free to express their opinions, but I would not

call it “gossip,” since the sharing would be mainly positive and avoided the mention of personalities.

It was clear that much activity was done communally. The group of expatriates included the Counselor in the Mission Presidency and his wife, the Mission Nurse. Also, there was a medical doctor and his wife assigned there as a missionary couple on a Humanitarian Mission, providing eye examinations and doing cataract surgery for those church members and members of the local community. Also, there was a dentist, his wife, and a dental technician from Tonga who came as volunteers, working exclusively the students and staff of the school. These people, each with a specific assignment and responsibilities, worked together to handle tasks as needed. For example, to have enough food for all the missionaries at their zone conference, all the ovens [in each separate house] were set to cook chicken or other food. People passed the keys to their house around freely for that kind of communal activity. We had the feeling that this kind of sharing (of food, recipes, opportunities to entertain guests) occurred frequently. The people seemed to get along very well and to embody the Gospel ideals of positive regard for others, sharing, and general helpfulness.

For members of the Church, this kind of community connectedness would be a must for expatriates to feel at home in a distant land. [(Nick:) I have personally experienced this kind of community in many lands, and I know that it is an important feature of life abroad for members of the Church].

### **Health Concerns:**

The Gordons are basically in good health. Sis. Gordon’s conducting the aerobic fitness program would be an indication of how she maintains that health. Her husband’s

description of the daily routine included going walking early. Maintaining good health on an ITEP assignment is all-important; if health is lacking for either member of the couple, the assignment will likely be ended or shortened substantially. One other ITEP couple, just completing their assignment, noted: “only couples with excellent health can do the ITEP work. “ One couple they had known with health problems tried it, and it didn’t work out. This couple had to go home.

Having both a mission nurse assigned permanently and a medical doctor there on temporary assignment at Moroni High School would certainly be comforting. However, the kind and quality of medical care that many older Americans count on would be simply unavailable on the local economy in Kiribati.

#### **Impact of the ITEP experience on their own relationship:**

When living with a person twenty-four hours per day and working side-by-side, there is a tendency to either stay very close as a couple, or to push back to maintain some emotional distance in at least some areas of life. During our visits to the 5 island groups we visited, we had a chance to witness the day-to-day interaction of these couples first hand. All do an admirable job of living Christ-like lives in their dealings with others and in their dealings with each other. We were particularly impressed with the Gordons, particularly because it seemed that the experience of working as an ITEP couple was bringing them closer together as a true partnership in the work. [It is pretty much a given that these will be people married for 40 years or more. One couple we know in Hawaii celebrated their 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary while on a mission].

Elder Gordon mentioned that prior to their leaving on this mission, he and Elizabeth were spending two days per week working in the Temple near their home. He noted that there

are a variety of kinds of missions now available to older couples, to include being a temple worker, working at a family history center or visitors center, etc. He saw that each of them would provide an opportunity to learn much.

Here I quote from notes taken while waiting for our plane flight out of the country.

I had a chance to visit a bit longer at the airport with Elder Gordon about the relationship that he and his wife have. (Irene and I had commented the night before that we felt that they were one of the strongest couples in terms of being united in their efforts and in touch with each other). He noted my compliment and was quite candid in his sharing of perspective.

He mentioned his wife's having felt some insecurities in stepping into the ITEP role, having not completed the bachelor's degree [in her college days] [partly as a result of having raised their 10 children]. He shared his feelings that this experience in ITEP had been good for her, in having her demonstrate her considerable skills.

He noted that she is outgoing, and that her personality is a good balance for him, because he is more reserved. "I sometimes ask myself 'Do I really like people?' And the answer is "Yes, I really do enjoy them. But I gain in my appreciation for people from Elizabeth. She helps me understand their worth and how important each and every one of us is to God. I want to take these feelings home with me (after we've finished with ITEP)."

One of the most impressive things about Elder Gordon is his sincere willingness to learn from other people. He was fascinated with Irene's work with Movement Education, and he is considering the Family Fund idea that we discussed on the Living Essentials DVD. He

and Elizabeth were curious to discuss the island of Mauritius with us, where we had been living 3 months before our coming to Hawaii. This openness to new ideas, for both members of the couple was most admirable.

**Attitudes toward the work: About the sacrifice of coming**

One of our observations about these couples is that they seldom feel that their work on the mission is a sacrifice. I asked Bro. Gordon why he thought that many of these couples had large families. [As mentioned above he Gordons are the parents of 10 children, for example. Similarly, another couple, living as our neighbors to the other side with him working as an ophthalmologist dealing with eye problems, has a family with 10 children]. He said that these families might see the mission as not being a sacrifice, but (said jokingly) as a chance to get away. He told of a friend of his in their local area, a man who had served with his wife as a missionary couple to Peru, who commented on how difficult their lives had become since returning to the States. Speaking of their family members, he said, “They expect us to be at every family function, like baptisms, confirmations, baby blessings and the like. This is more difficult than when we were in Peru.” The man and his wife had recently been called to serve as the temple president and matron in another country, and Elder Gordon felt that they were happier doing that [than trying to meet the myriad family expectations of life at home].

**Bro. Gordon’s reflections on teaching:**

Bro. Gordon’s experience in teaching, both in his career and in a gospel context, is extensive. Here are a few reflections:

Most teachers teach like they were taught. Sometimes our efforts in the classroom make a change in what people do and sometimes they do not. Slipping back into old ways happens in the U.S. too. I have seen some really good lesson plans, shown to me after I asked

to see them. I haven't been around to a lot of the classrooms yet. But from walking around and from what I can see, I think there is a lot of student involvement. The teachers I have [as students in ITEP classes] are very perceptive and catch on quickly. For example, I hear people talking about "what are your objectives and how am I going to be able to tell if they have learned it, [using] the assessments?" I like those comments, but I don't know how long it will last.

[Speaking of teaching these teachers in Kiribati], I see the light go on in their eyes. They catch on. They are very knowledgeable about the gospel. They are very thankful to be here. They have a vision of themselves of helping their children grow in the gospel and learn. They are very receptive to change, and are growing in their awareness of learning principles.

### **Conclusion:**

The mission for the Gordons was just getting under way at the time of our visit, with at least another year to go before completion. It seems likely that their perspective on this assignment will change over time. They are part of a small group of expatriates working in the church-based community at the Moroni High School, and they seem to be well connected with other missionary couples, with school administrators, with the teachers who attend their classes, and with the Coordinator couple back in Hawaii. The richness and complexity of their lives in this seemingly remote outpost is rather remarkable. They seem well suited to succeed in the assignment and appear strongly committed to making it all work. We believe that they will continue to make a valuable contribution in that setting, God willing!