10. The Funding of Adventist Schools in the Solomon Islands

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In this chapter we shall explore the history of schooling in the Solomon Islands, the current state of education in the Solomon Islands, the place of Adventist education in the history and current practice of schooling in the Solomon Islands, the introduction of Adventist schools' use of government funding in the Solomon Islands' education system, and the impact of government funding on Adventist schools and the Adventist community in general. [1]

1 I have written this chapter with my colleague Joseph Pitakia, the former Education Director for Adventist schools in the Solomon Islands (2011–2015). Obtaining accurate data from a country made up of more than 1000 islands with limited communication and transport options has been a challenge and Joseph, who has an academic as well as a servant- leadership approach to his work, has made a most valuable contribution. My personal interest in this diverse and beautiful country and its education system stems from my time as an expatriate teacher at Betikama Adventist College in the 1980s. At that time the life a fully trained overseas teacher in one of the leading secondary colleges in that country included not only teaching during school hours and supervision of an industry after classes, but curriculum-writing for the government education department and serving on a curriculum and assessment panel for the senior secondary education sector of the country. As a relatively young and inexperienced teacher, the fact that so few of the young people in the Solomon Islands progressed into secondary school and so many fewer proceeded past Form 3 (third year of secondary education) was disappointing to me. I lived in the knowledge that more than half of the children across the islands were not getting any primary education at all.

The History of Schooling in the Solomon Islands

The history of schooling in the Solomon Islands is relatively recent and very much connected to Christianity, with all early schools established by a denomination. Before Christianity came to the Solomon Islands, all children learned the necessary skills of subsistence from their families and other more senior people in their villages. These skills revolved around fishing and agriculture. Traditionally other custom- and culture-related activities such as fighting "or the intricacies of behaviour, custom, ancestor worship or gender categories" were also learnt from the village people. Apart from the skills the children learnt in order to survive and to replicate the culture of their predecessors, they were also taught social skills and respect:

> Education still includes learning proper behaviours, mutual help, maintaining harmony and avoiding inappropriate displays of anger. Learning is gendered with quite clear male and female roles. Beyond the hamlet, village or island are strangers, enemies and sorcery, to be negotiated with care. (Solomon Islands Historical Encyclopaedia 1893–1978, 2013, para. 1)

In the second half of the nineteenth century, schooling began to be seen as important. In particular, the skills of writing and mathematics were emphasised. Coinciding with the introduction of Christian missionaries into the country, everything to be taught was in the context of the message being delivered by Christianity and was more often delivered off-shore in such places as Queensland (Australia), Fiji and Norfolk Island (*ibid*., para. 3).

The next era of schooling in the Solomon Islands involved the start of organised denominational missions that developed schools as a vehicle to spread their particular brand of Christianity. The first church to do this was the Melanesian Mission of the Anglican Church who established their first school in 1893. This was quickly followed by the South Seas Evangelical Mission in 1895 and then the Catholic Church in 1899. The new century saw the first Methodist school in 1902. The Seventh-day Adventist mission began their education

More challenges were presented by the heat and humidity, the lack of teaching resources and the occasional natural phenomena such as earthquakes and cyclones. Despite all of this, students and national staff-members were happy, friendly and very committed to learning and improvement. Their level of spiritual maturity and simple faith was an inspiration to those of us from overseas. Students recognised how blessed they were to have the opportunity to study at the secondary level and never took for granted the learning in which they were immersed. PWK

work in 1914 but the government did not have any schools until 1949, after the Second World War. Although the colonial government did not have any schools of their own before1949, it was very supportive in helping the churches to provide education.

Many stories are told of the work of the early missionaries to the Solomon Islands and how they were evacuated when news of the Japanese invasion came to the church in the Western Solomon Islands. After the Japanese surrender, however, and before the end of 1945, the missionaries returned from Australia on mission ships. As recorded by Eager (2007), those involved in medical work were advantaged by the stockpile of medical supplies donated by the exiting American army. However in the post-war era, for education in many ways it was a matter of starting over again because more was being expected of the schooling system: "The needs of the education program were very high with teachers requiring a higher standard of education" (Eager, 2007, p. 17)

Reye (2007) emphasised the position at the Solomon Islands mission soon after the missionaries returned to the islands. He records the report given by Pastor Herbert White to year-end meetings:

> He warned that "if our rehabilitation programme takes us no farther than the mere replacing of planks and partitions destroyed by white ants and Japanese and the replacement of boats lost through war, then we shall have failed in our task." The challenge, therefore, was to completely rethink and reshape the mission program. He proceeded to identify four key areas: the educational program, the medical program, the location of buildings and workers, and the effective use of materials and goods received from the Americans (p. 10).

With the priority thus placed on the commencement of a quality education program, the way was paved for three schools to be established and that each would have an expatriate teacher. These were to become the training school at Batuna and the school at Kukudu, both in the Western Provence, and a school on Guadalcanal that would be developed as Betikama Missionary School in 1948 and would later become a full secondary school called Betikama Adventist College.

It has been a rewarding experience to read through journal articles and memoirs that document the total dedication of the Adventist missionaries of the era. These includes not only the expatriate missionaries from Australia, but also the local missionaries who kept the church operating under the most extreme conditions of Japanese occupation (Eager, 2007; Reye, 2007). The discouragement of having facilities destroyed and of having their country and the mission pillaged

made the post-war faith shown by people such as Pastor Kata Ragaso and Pastor Herbert White and family an inspirational example not only to people in the Solomon Islands but also to others in Australia who heard the reports. These men showed a godly determination to see the Adventist mission to the Solomon Islands grow.

Lyndon Thrift was the first expatriate educator to return to the Solomon Islands after the war. He was to become the headmaster of Batuna Training School and was the only one of the returning missionaries who did not return with his wife and family. "Although recently married, Lyn Thrift travelled alone as there was no building at Batuna in which the Thrifts might set up home. Grace Thrift was not able to join her husband until a year later." (Reye, 2007, p. 8). Such was the commitment of the Adventist missionaries to the work of the church and to their commitment to the place of education, not only in the spreading of the gospel message but also as a means to develop post-war Solomon Islands.

The current state of education in the Solomon Islands.

Figure 1 illustrates the growth of schools from 1956 to 2017 (Solomon Islands Historical Encyclopaedia 1893–1978, 2013). This post-war period saw various trends in the different education authorities and the paths taken in their education programs. With regard to Adventist education, it is very clear from the figure that it had the most consistent growth pattern and in 2017 the Adventist church operated the largest number of schools of any denomination. In addition, Adventist education is delivered with a consistent spread across the educational sectors. Its 121 educational institutions consist of 15 early childhood centres, 89 primary schools, 13 secondary schools, 2 registered vocational training colleges, 1 Bible school and 1 nursing school (Solomon Islands Government, 2016). These data are shown in Figure 2. It should be noted that the bible school and the nursing school are not registered under the government's Establishment Register. Therefore teachers at those institutions are not paid by the government presently, although it would appear that very soon the nursing school will be included in this register.

While denominational schools pioneered the work of Christian education in the Solomon Islands, the government sector slowly came of age and started allocating a portion of their budget to education. The first government-run school was established in 1949 and by 1960 there were 10 government schools. As the government of the Solomon Islands continues to struggle with its economic position and its diverse geographic and demographic spread, it attempted originally to make education a priority by devoting about 10% of its

annual budget to education. In 2017, 3% of the national budget was allocated for education and of that 11% goes directly to schools. Their expenditure on education currently includes the payment of teachers in registered non-government schools. Today there are 986 government educational institutions in the Solomon Islands, far surpassing the total number of denominational schools. The government has pushed ahead with 251 early childhood centres, and unlike the denominations, has established more secondary schools than primary schools, giving students the chance for secondary education in places where there may have only been a denominational primary school. Government secondary schools now number 538 and primary schools 197 (Solomon Islands Government, 2016).

Figure 10.1. The growth of denominational schools from 1956 to 2017

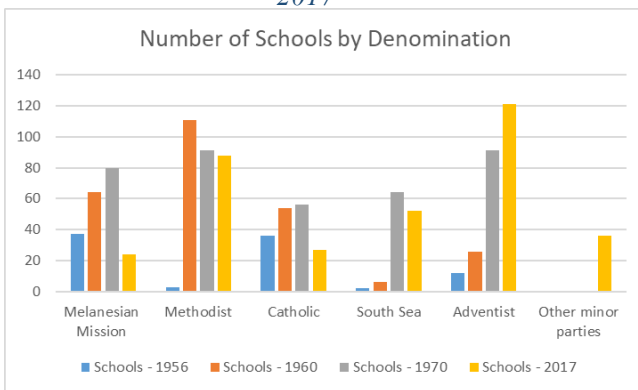
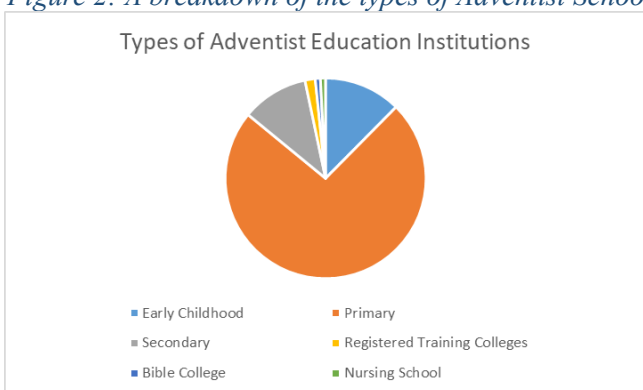


Figure 2: A breakdown of the types of Adventist Schools



Another trend of note is that while the number of Adventist schools has continued to grow from 1970 to 2017 alongside the growth of the government school sector, every other denominational authority that has had a historical interest in education in the Solomon Islands has decreased its number of schools. The total number of schools in the Solomon Islands has been supplemented since 1970 by some new entrants into the sector. The Christian Fellowship Church has established 17 schools, the Christian Outreach Church has established 12 schools, the Church of the Nazarene has contributed 3 schools and the Church of the Living God has opened 4 schools (Solomon Islands Government, 2016).

The overall impact of Adventist education in the Solomon Islands can be assessed by the fact that of the nine different denominations that provided educational centres of some kind in 2017, Adventist schools made up 35% of that total number.

A particular contribution that Adventist schools have made to education in the Solomon Islands over the years has been the school-based work programs. The industries developed by Adventist schools served the purpose of providing funds to help the schools grow into prominence. This also added to the national income of the country and, in the case of Betikama, provided entertainment and souvenirs for tourists. Schools in other systems copied this blueprint.

How the funding of Adventist teachers' salaries by the government came about

This section is written as reported to me by Pastor Titus Rore, the education director of Adventist Schools in the Solomon Islands at the time government-funding of teachers' wages was negotiated.

The Adventist system secured government payment of teachers after other church systems were already receiving it. This was because the Adventist mission wished to maintain central control of the schools. When Dr. Ray Wilkinson became the education director for the Western Pacific Union Mission (WPUM), he made several attempts to secure funding from the government for Adventist teachers in the Solomon Islands. His request was for the government to provide bulk funding in the form of an annual grant to the church to pay for its teachers, rather than paying them in the same way as the other churches' school-teachers. This would help the church to maintain its authority over the schools.

While there was agreement in the negotiation, things moved very slowly. According to Titus there were individuals who did not agree

because it would be unfair to the other denominations. Thus funding was not initiated at that point in time. When Titus was appointed to be the associate education director of WPUM, the president at the time, Pr. Townend, tasked and encouraged Titus to work on a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the government for teachers to be paid by them. According to Titus, he wrote several MOUs because there were frequent changes in the permanent secretaries in the Ministry of Education in the years from 1996 to 1999. He recalled with a smile that more than once he had written two MOUs in one year.

While the dialogue was progressing slowly, there were also changes in the mentality of and working relationships between the government and all education stakeholders. Adventist work on education was often commended in meetings. The contribution of the church in the education sector and the medical sector were highly valued and appreciated.

In 1999, Naeri Alumu was appointed as the permanent secretary of the Ministry of Education. She saw the MOU on paying Adventist teachers, called Titus and told him, "You are educating Solomon Islanders and you should get it". It was through her leadership that the MOU was finally accepted and the church could be given annual bulk grants to pay for its teachers.

This was a very big relief for the three local missions and the union who were struggling to pay their teachers. Meetings were held around the missions to inform teachers about the content of the MOU and the decision of the government to pay for teachers' salaries, starting in the year 2000. According to Titus there was some resistance especially from the more senior and conservative church employees but otherwise all agreed, knowing that the church would retain authority and control over its teachers and its schools.

In the year 2000, when the country was in turmoil because of the ethnic crisis, there was a cash-flow problem for the government to pay for the teachers' salaries. For the church this was very nearly a disaster. Pr. Bruce Robertson, the president of the Trans Pacific Union Mission (TPUM) at the time, threatened to close all the primary schools in the Solomon Islands because the schools owed the church a lot of money. However Titus, with the support of the union education director, Dr Ian Whitson, decided not to close the schools, but rather to present to the government the struggle of the church in supporting its schools. In Titus' view it was the education work that

opened and drove the work of the Adventist church in the country and to close it was unthinkable. Instead he worked tirelessly with Naeri and her team in the Ministry of Education on what to do in order for the schools to avoid closure.

Finally a decision was reached to leave the MOU for the time being and get the names of all the church teachers and submit them to the government to be paid like everybody else. That was followed through and in the month of August, 2000, all the mission-teachers were entered in the government payroll and that is where they are now.

An interesting postlude to this historical account is that when the other church education authorities realised that the Adventist church still maintained their authority over their schools, they went back to the government and pulled back some of their schools from government control.

Adventist schools' use of government funding

The contents of this section are based on verbal correspondence with Joseph Pitakia, former Education Director for the schools in the Solomon Islands.

Joseph began the conversation by dispelling the myth that teachers were doing very poorly financially in being paid by the church and that the impact of this was that teachers were leaving the Adventist system and moving across to the government sector. The government pay may have looked more attractive on paper, but when the other benefits of a church salary were taken into account, there was not a significant difference. These benefits included such things as a medical subsidy along with housing and school-fee assistance that made up a total package. Joseph added that no matter how the remuneration was packaged and compared at that time, Adventist education in the Solomon Islands did not experience significantly the issue of having teachers leave the system because of wages or for any other reason. There has always been some attrition of teachers from the Adventist system but there has also been recruitment of Adventist teachers into the Adventist system from the government sector. Neither movement has been extreme or unusual.

The population explosion in the Solomon Islands in the 1980s and 1990s meant that the government encouraged denominations to expand their systems and promised support for this to happen. The

result was that communities were pushing to have schools for their children established despite the fact that the mission was asking them to wait because they did not have adequate Adventist teachers or resources to respond to the requests they were getting to establish Adventist schools. In this void Adventist children began to attend government schools, despite the lifestyle and other issues the mission and communities realized they would have. As a result, certain communities went directly to the government and built schools that had not been approved by the mission. This period of history exhausted the church system both in resources and finances.

Another issue developed in the 1990s. There was significant ethnic tension between the people of the islands of Guadalcanal and Malaita. Part of the government's plan to bring about peace was to establish schools quickly and provide equal opportunities for as many young people as possible. Schools had been closed during the disturbances, and in order for the government to get them all operating as part of the peace process they decided to pay for all teachers' salaries. This included SDA teachers who at this time were still being paid by the church.

As previously mentioned, in 2000 the Adventist church's education department under Titus Rore, the education director at that time, negotiated the payment of teachers from the government budget. In August of that year the teachers began to be paid by the government. Soon after the church suspended the sustentation provisions for Adventist teachers because the government was not only paying the teachers but was providing an allowance to be paid into a type of superannuation called the National Provident Fund. At that time the church teachers accepted this decision of the wider church but were naturally worried about the demise of the sustentation fund that had been such a security for them when thinking about their future retirement. In 2017 the same procedure was continuing whereby the government pays all teachers in Adventist schools who fall within the number of teachers prescribed for each school by government. The number of teachers to be paid is determined on the basis of school population. Any teachers employed by Adventist schools over and above the number of places allocated for that school by the government are to be paid by the by the individual schools and communities who engaged them. This includes their contributions to the National Provident Fund.

As previously mentioned, there was mixed feelings about changing over from church salaries to government salaries. It is understandable that some teachers who supported a family and who benefited from the inclusion of a school house, a medical subsidy and school-fee assistance in their church-paid package were concerned about the change and the elimination of such benefits. Others who were not eligible for such benefits were more positive about the change.

There are some schools who still help staff families with their school fees on a needs basis if the school budget allows for this. It is a natural outcome of this inconsistency that some teachers question why Adventist teachers are not helped out a little more by the church given that they are contributing their tithes and offerings.

Another perceived inconsistency is that when a retired teacher who is already on sustentation is called back into service because of a desperate need in the school system, he or she then receives a salary from the government as any other teacher would while continuing to receiving sustentation from the church. The government has no issue with this but the mission calls it 'double-dipping' and it finds this difficult to accept.

Impact on the Adventist community of government funding of Adventist teachers' salaries

Given the negative reactions of some of the more conservative church-members in Australia and New Zealand when Adventist schools started receiving government funds for their operational costs, including teacher-salaries, I asked Joseph if there was any such concern or dissent when this was done in the Solomon Islands. Joseph was in the school system at the time this was put into operation. In fact, he was in transition from being the Deputy Principal of Betikama Adventist College to being the Principal at Kukudu Adventist College in the Western Province. He had some interesting comments to make. It is not a characteristic of people in the Pacific Islands to question the decisions of their mission-leaders in any significant way. When these transitions were taking place there were naturally some reservations from some long-serving and retired church workers who were concerned that licence was being given to the government to dictate the curriculum of the schools or the enrolment and employment policies of the schools. Joseph was emphatic however that he had not heard of a case where a mission or a principal or a school board had been confronted by anybody with these concerns. Most church-members heard about the changes but were happy for the government

to be involved so that the school fees would be reduced to the amount that they, as subsistence-dwellers, could afford. Hence it was an advantage for them.

Church-committees in the Solomon Islands have on occasions been reminded that teachers who are paid by the government are contributing significantly to the work of the church. In the first instance, their salaries are not depleting church funds and, second, the church is benefiting from the tithe these teachers are contributing to the church. The argument from Adventist education in the mission that more grants to schools from the church should therefore be forthcoming has not been received well by the church. This is one small tension or hurdle that church and education administrators have had to surmount.

There are of course other disadvantages of the teachers' salaries being paid by the government. Some teachers and church treasurers have noted that a significant number of teachers are now not paying tithe. Also it has been noticed that while it is true that teachers are very much committed to upholding and teaching Adventist distinctiveness, signs have surfaced that suggest that the kind of commitment anticipated previously may be changing. This is why the mission prefers the government to provide the teachers' salaries in the form of a bulk grant to the church authority rather than into the bank accounts of individual schools. In this way the church can facilitate the removal of expenses such as tithes, rentals and medicals before paying the teachers.

Conclusion

From an historical viewpoint education and Christianity go hand-in-glove. Of the denominations providing education, the Seventh-day Adventist Church's education system has had the most consistent growth and has an excellent reputation in the Solomon Islands for providing high-quality education that is community-minded and values-laden. Today it is the largest private education system in the Solomon Islands and while its teachers are paid by the government, it continues to deliver that special-character education that is replicated worldwide and valued by the community.

Concerns have been voiced about the impact of having Adventist teachers paid by the government but these have not been significant complaints and are typical of the issues that have been raised when the same process was followed in Australia and New Zealand. Rather than push schools away from their mission of bringing Christ to their students, it has made Adventist schools more conscious of working hard to maintain their special character.

If Adventist schools can take advantage of government funds which include taxpayers' money and overseas aid contributions, then as mentioned in the chapter on government funding of Australian schools, Ellen White's statement is appropriate: "We need not sacrifice one principle of truth while taking advantage of every opportunity to advance the cause of God" (White, 1895, p. 198).

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