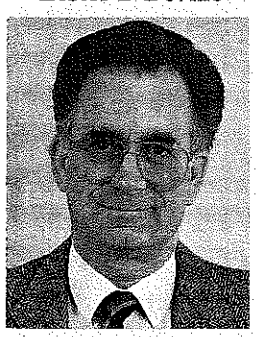
Steps Toward a Unified University System for the Seventh Day Adventist Church in the South Pacific

Lester D Devine



Lester D Devine, EdD is a graduate from the Australasian Missionary College, Pacific Union College and Loma Linda University. Following 4 years of teaching at Sydney Adventist High School he moved to USA. From 1967 he served in a number of positions, including principal of 3 academies, (1969-1979) & Associate Superintendent of Education for the Oregon Conference (1979-1982). On returning to Australia he served as Director of Education for the Trans-Tasman U C (1982-87), as Associate Director of Education for the SPD & as its Education Director from 1991-2000. At present he is the director of the EG White SDA Research Centre at Avondale College.

Lester has also been an adjunct professor at La Sierra University, an adjunct lecturer at Avondale College. He received the Presidential Citation for excellence in Adventist Higher Education from La Sierra University in 2000.

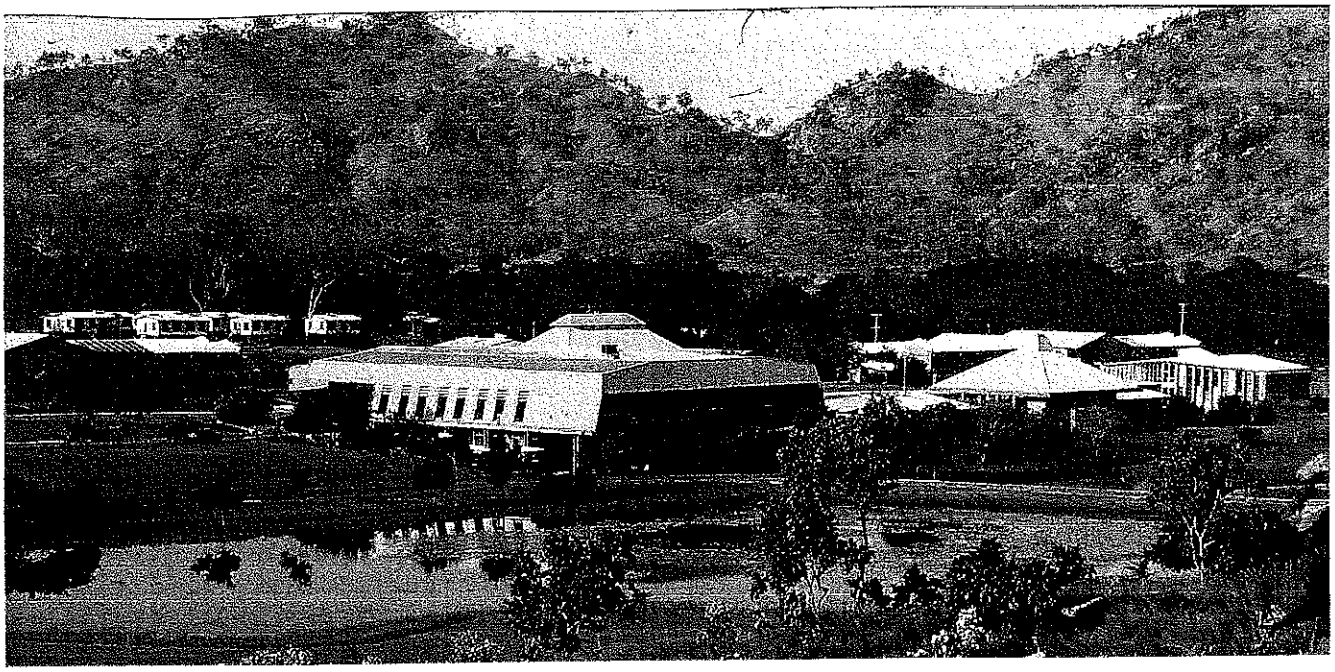
He has conducted professional seminars & has written articles on education for magazines & journals. He was ordained to the gospel ministry in 1978.
Lester & his wife Noreen have two daughters, Narelle & Neroli.

FROM its establishment in the 1980s Dr Ray Wilkinson, the founding father of Pacific Adventist College (PAC) envisioned an institution which would meet the needs of its proprietor Church in a variety of ways in addition to the traditional on-campus instruction modality. Right from the start, budgets were provided for extension services so that potential students could, from a distance, prepare themselves for entry either through the mature age examination or by upgrading subject areas previously studied at a post-secondary but sub-tertiary level. Kuresa Taga'i focused on the pre-entry program and Laurie Meintjes did sterling work converting many of the subjects taught on campus into distance education mode.

With time and experience it became clear that something more was needed. People such as Dr. Allen Sonter saw something useful in the University of the South Pacific (USP) model which provides satellite campuses around the Pacific as a cheaper alternative to bringing every student all the way to the main campus in Fiji. Could the Church afford to do something similar with PAC—as it then was?

By the mid-1990s other issues were also emerging which needed to be addressed. There was a move in Papua New Guinea (PNG) to upgrade the training of nurses from certificate to diploma level. There was concern as to how this would impact the nursing education program at Sopas—especially when the proposed clinical experience requirements might exceed the capability of the hospital. Also in the mid-1990s the Papua New Guinea Government passed new legislation intended to bring consistency to the tertiary academic offerings mounted by a wide range of institutions and organisations, the outcome of which was there would ultimately be six universities in the country—with PAC being one of them. This legislation required all organisations offering tertiary academic awards to form a relationship with one of the universities—or go out of business. This not only impacted the Sopas nursing program but Sonoma College as well. Concurrent with these events in PNG, Fulton College was experiencing spectacular success with its teacher education program. Upgraded from a two year certificate level course to a three year diploma during the tenure of Cecily Leach-Hay, enrolment climbed rapidly with the program highly regarded across Polynesia generally and Fiji particularly. Inevitably the question arose as to how long it would be before this program would be upgraded once again to a four year degree level, and what would be the most appropriate way to do that—through a relationship with USP, the empowering of Fulton itself to run such a program in its own right, or through the education students going on to Pacific Adventist University (PAU) for the degree module year as the Fulton Theology majors already did.

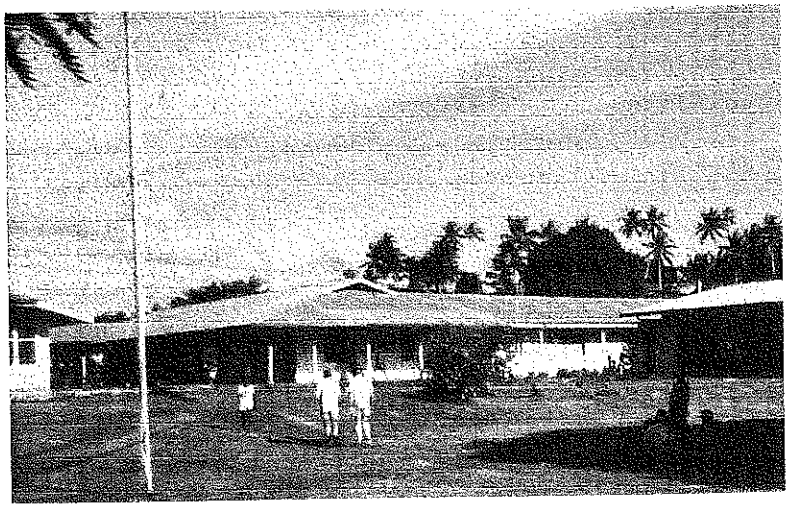
Whatever the decision, the consequences would be significant. Going back a few years to the late 1970s, it needs to be noted that PAU was established to be the one tertiary training institution for the Church in the South Pacific basin. In 1980 Dr. Gerald Clifford, the South Pacific Division (SPD) Director of Educa-



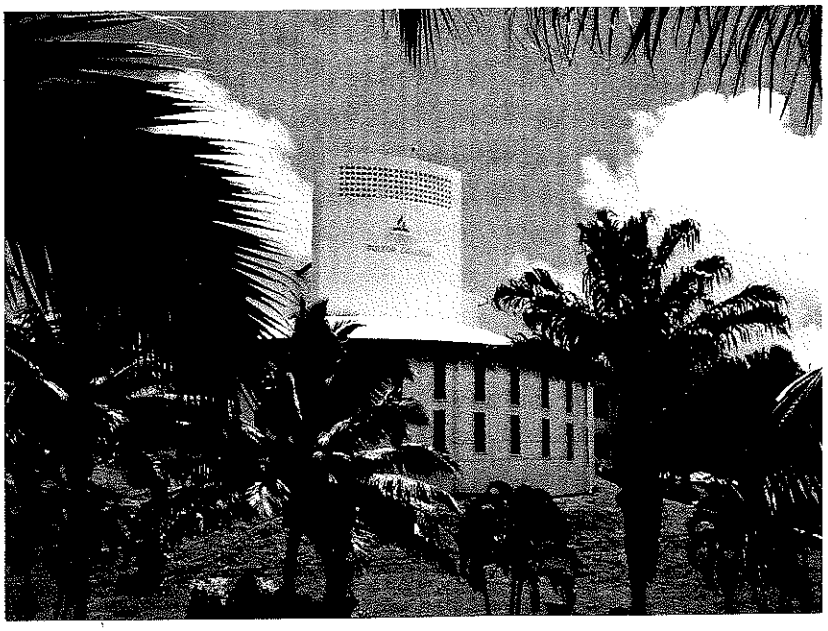
Pacific Adventist University near Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea

tion, drafted a set of protocols which categorised the several colleges and their training programs across the Pacific with levels of institutions defined. This worked well for a decade, though to be fair, it should be noted that Fulton College did struggle with the transition to junior college status from being the senior training institution. At times its relationship with the younger but new senior brother (PAU) was uneven. The Church, however, was fortunate in that the two senior administrators at PAU, Drs Wilkinson and Sonter, had spent their careers in island mission education ministry and as part of that experience had both worked at Fulton. Their graciousness made what could have been a very difficult situation manageable and they went out of their way to work with Fulton in the establishment of the third (diploma) year module for ministerial training at Fulton. Recognising that Fulton graduates would subsequently be going on to PAU for just one year instead of two would impact the enrolment there, the Central Pacific Union Mission (CPUM) President, Pr Colin Winch, committed the CPUM to sponsoring twice the number of theology students to PAU for their degree module year to solve that problem, though in reality that never eventuated.

This new inter-institutional arrangement was endorsed by the Ministerial Training Advisory Council (MTAC) for the Union Missions and subsequently approved by the SPD Tertiary Education Board (TEB). The consequences of that decision however, along with a proposed government requirement in PNG for primary teacher education to have a year 12 entry qualification, meant the earlier Clifford protocols governing the relationship between the various island training colleges were outdated. The difficulty in revising them was that with the rising entry level qualifications at Fulton and those announced as future requirements of government for Sonoma meant that the original concept of levels of institution could no longer be maintained. Accordingly, in 1993 the SPD Director of Education proposed a revised set of protocols which addressed levels of courses rather than levels of institution. An institution, under the new protocols, could offer a variety of levels of courses, subsequent to SPD



Sonoma Adventist College on the Island of New Britain, Papua New Guinea



Fulton College, Viti Levu, Fiji Islands

Tertiary Education Board approval. There were two governing philosophical principles in the new protocols. Firstly, courses would be offered wherever they could be most efficiently delivered taking the needs and programs of all the island training institutions into account. This collaboration was considered essential if the Church in the South Pacific was to avoid the experience in North America where a dozen or so small colleges and universities offer similar programs and compete very strongly for enrolments. Secondly, the revised protocols clearly stated that only PAU would offer degree level programs. These new arrangements were accepted by the parties involved but in an era of rapid change several issues soon arose which presented new challenges which needed to be addressed well before proposed legislative requirements became operative.

Pr David Hay, President of the CPUM, was concerned that the results of the World Survey conducted in the early 1990s indicated the church members in his field gave the education program of the Church there a poor rating, lower in fact than in any other Union in the SPD. Accordingly, he asked the SPD Department of Education to establish a Commission to look into the issue. Hearings were held in each of the CPUM countries which operated church schools and also at Fulton College. The significant outcome of the Commission for the College was that parents across Polynesia clearly indicated a preference for senior secondary education in their own countries over the traditional senior secondary experience at Fulton. Complicating the issue, in Fiji the community supporting the boarding school at Navesau preferred to see that institution upgraded to offer secondary levels over attending Fulton. Additionally, to survive, the newly established high school at Isa Lei in Suva would have to offer, in time, a full secondary program. Clearly the message received was that the Church in Fiji was moving to adding two senior secondary programs to that already offered by Fulton—with only an hour's drive between any two. As half Fulton's enrolment was at the secondary level it was clear to the Commission that for the College to survive it had to, well in advance of need, establish new training level programs to replace the anticipated erosion of the secondary program. While the Commission believed this was a 15 year time-frame, the Fulton Principal, Dr. Nemani Tausere felt it would be prudent to work toward a shorter schedule, one closer to five years, and the Commission members endorsed that mindset. Thus the dilemma for the local and wider Church was how to accommodate the survival of Fulton (which the Commission established still had a valued role) without, by default or design, establishing a competitor institution to PAU. This concern was heightened by the expressed preference of Fulton to offer tertiary awards in its own right, or alternatively in some sort of relationship with another institution such as USP in preference to one with PAU. The SPD administration and education director were concerned that there be an Adventist solution to these needs and strongly urged the CPUM and Fulton to look only toward PAU.

Developments in the Western Pacific led to a series of events which had remarkable consequences for the Church. The Sopas Hospital School of Nursing, with its continued existence under serious challenge appealed to PAU and the SPD for help. The two senior leaders from PAU, Dr Owen Hughes, the founding Vice-Chancellor, and Dr Ian Whitson, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, joined by the SPD Health Director, Dr Percy Harrold and the SPD Education Director, visited Sopas. Over two days they put together a plan where Sopas would, in time, upgrade its certificate level nursing education program to diploma level, a program which would lead to validated award at graduation from PAU. Two major obstacles impeded the plan. No one

knew how to get approval for the program, the first in nursing at the diploma level in PNG. At least five competing government and non-government bureaucracies were involved. The second was that the entry and other standards at Sopas were far below those of PAU. Full credit should go to the two men at PAU who, unsolicited, offered to work with Sopas to solve its problems and to make such a validation program successful over time. Without that open-minded flexibility by the PAU leadership the nursing education program at Sopas would have collapsed. After much discussion of the challenges of dealing with the competing interests of the several bodies involved nationally in nursing education, it was suggested that rather than try and get criteria/standards/content/requirements from each, it would be better to design a diploma level nursing education curriculum as a model and lobby for its endorsement with each of the several groups. This is what happened though it took several years to effect and that achievement is to the considerable credit of Leon Powrie who was the Director of the Sopas Hospital School of Nursing at the time.

The Sopas experience, the legal requirement for Sonoma College to develop a relationship with PAU in order to continue to offer diploma level programs, coupled with the need for Fulton College to re-invent itself solely as a training institution all suggested that there was an opportunity for a coordinated approach to the several challenges. It could also include Atoifi Hospital School of Nursing.



Atoifi Hospital on the Island of Malaita, Solomon Islands

Accordingly, and noting Fulton was already well on the way to establishing the fourth year of a primary education degree under PAU auspices, with the support of the SPD administration a "Unified University System Advisory Committee (Ad Hoc)" was established. It met on May 24 and 25, 1999 under the chairmanship of Dr. Barry Oliver, the Division Secretary, with all six training institutions (including Avondale) within the SPD represented.

The meeting was remarkable for its harmony and accord and when it concluded, a Pacific Adventist University Consortium was established in principle. Sopas Hospital School of Nursing and Fulton College were the first to formally join the Consortium upon signing the Memorandum of Understanding. (It should be noted that the Sopas nursing program, with the subsequent closure of the hospital, moved to PAU in 2001.) Sonoma College has taken longer to get to the place where it is able to sign the Memorandum, largely because it has had a high turnover of Principals over the last several years. It's target date for becoming a Consortium member is 2002. Atoifi Hospital School of Nursing is anxious to join the Consortium and is held up only by the need to get its academic curriculum, entrance levels and facilities up to the required standard—something it will take a little time to achieve and will probably not be ready for another year or two. At this point, because the Consortium addresses the needs of the Pacific basin, rather than those in Australia and New Zealand, it is not anticipated that Avondale College will be joining.

During this writer's last trip to Fiji he drove onto the campus at Fulton College. At the front gate was a new concrete sign, "Fulton College, owned and operated by the Seventh-day Adventist Church. A member of the Pacific Adventist University Consortium." Hopefully, before too long, similar signs will be erected at the entry of the other training institutions of the Church. The Consortium has enormous potential to bring collaboration, consistency, order, and economy to the several training programs of the Church in the South Pacific. In addition to the first tentative steps taken by the PAU leadership team of Drs Hughes and Whitson, it should also be noted that the inherited and further developed vision of the current Vice-Chancellor, Dr. Harold Peters and his deputy Dr. Ross Cole, is significant. These two men very much deserve the credit for bringing forward a pregnant notion to delivery with the hope that the young child does not squall too much and grows straight and tall!

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