# MORE THAN WIVES AND MOTHERS: Contributions Made by Avondale College Ex-students Who Were Wives and Mothers

Gwen M. Wilkinson

## Introduction

Throughout its history Avondale College has been committed to Christian education. A significant aspect of this commitment has been the provision of an environment in which students can both value and seek opportunities to share the gospel in tangible, practical ways. The motto "A Greater Vision of World Needs", which first appeared in the College Calendar in 1924, has continuously reminded students and staff that this is an institution which exists to prepare people for service. It is no coincidence, therefore, that hundreds of students and staff have gone from the College with a personal commitment to just such a vision. Many have found the opportunity to realise their goals through participation in mission in the South Pacific.

It was in 1900 that an Avondale graduate first entered mission service in the South Pacific.[19] In that year Pr and Mrs

---

[19] For the sake of brevity the name Avondale will now be used throughout this chapter when referring to the institution irrespective of whether it was known as "The Avondale School for Christian Workers" (1897-1911), "Australasian Missionary College" (1911-1964), or "Avondale College" at the time.

A. H. Piper were appointed to the Cook Islands.[20] They were soon followed by others as the Seventh-day Adventist Church gradually spread through the many islands of the Pacific. Although in that era most of those who accepted positions as paid missionaries were men, there were a few women who had studied at the College who were also appointed.[21]. Ella Boyd and Eva Edwards who each worked in the Pacific during the very early years of this century come to mind. [22] Most single women were employed as teachers or secretaries

While the contribution of women such as these was valuable to the mission work of the Church, it is the purpose of this chapter to consider the contribution made to the South Pacific by another, often-neglected group of unique Avondale women. They are the wives and mothers who, while willingly enduring considerable hardship have made amazing personal sacrifices in order to assure the growth of the church and the development of the islands of the South Pacific. This group comprises women who studied at Avondale and subsequently went to the mission field because they were married to expatriate missionaries, but who were themselves not appointed to paid positions. Within this group are many

---

[20] Robert Dixon, "The Pacific Islands," in *Seventh-day Adventists in the South Pacific: 1885-1985*, ed. Noel Clapham (Warburton: Signs, 1985), 201.

[21] See a chapter by Glynn Lister in this monograph.

[22] Ella Boyd who graduated from Avondale in 1902 went to Tonga in 1904 where she taught for several years. Eva Edwards graduated in 1909 and worked in varying capacities in Tonga and Fiji, as well as Australia and New Zealand. In all, Eva Edwards gave 25 years of service in Fiji, mostly in school work. Further information is available in Avondale College Alumni records; Robert Dixon, "The Pacific Islands," 204; A. Dyason and W. G. Ferris, "Life Sketch of Miss Eva Edwards," *Australasian Record*, 17 August 1981, 12; and Eric B. Hare, *Fulton's Footprints in Fiji* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1985), 217.

women who made exceptional contributions to the mission work of the Church in a voluntary capacity.[23]

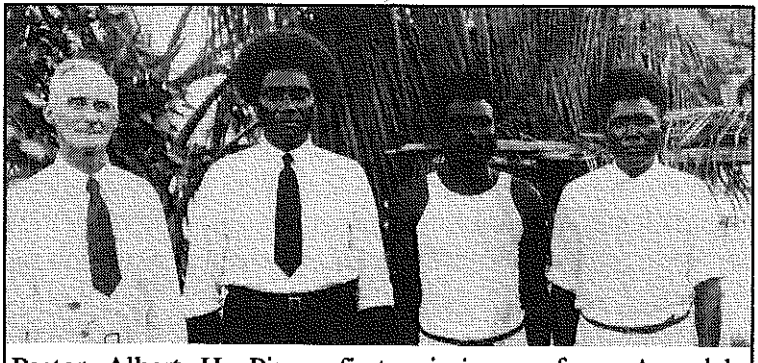
Some women deserve acknowledgment because they accompanied their husbands in mission service and in so doing made the supreme sacrifice. An ex-student of Avondale who died under such circumstances was Pearl Tolhurst (nee Philps), wife of Pastor Hubert Tolhurst. Pearl Tolhurst died in Tonga in 1919.[24] Her contribution was cut short by the tragedy of death but her willingness to serve God typifies a spirit which is inspirational. Betty Larwood (nee Tinworth) is an example of another category of women who contributed in an extraordinary way: those who continued in mission service following the death of their husband. After attending Avondale in 1960, she completed her nurse training at the Sydney Sanitarium and Hospital and additionally completed a midwifery certificate. She was therefore able to contribute at Atoifi Adventist Hospital in the Solomon Islands between 1966 and 1979. She had a paid position for the four years previous to the tragic death of her husband in a tractor accident.

---

[23]It is important to point out that there have been several women who would fit into this group according to the above criteria except that they held paid positions or did not attend Avondale as students. Many, for example, completed their nurse training at the Sydney Adventist Hospital before Avondale became responsible for the course in 1980. In fact, in the early era of the Adventist Church in the Pacific it was commonly understood that those appointed to mission service should have some type of medical or nurse training. This was frequently catered for by appointing men who were married to trained nurses. Thus the wife was able to support her husband's mission endeavours, in an unpaid capacity, by operating a health clinic. It is emphatically acknowledged that such women also made outstanding contributions. However, in acknowledging Avondale's centenary, this chapter will purposely focus on those who undertook study at the College.

[24] See a chapter by Leonard Tolhurst in this monograph. See also Arthur Patrick, "The Founding Mothers," in Clapham, 123.

Following his death she stayed on at the hospital with her children for a further 10 years receiving only a part-time wage. During her so called 'part-time' hours she was on call to deliver babies, conducted an antenatal clinic once a week, administered anaesthetics in theatre most afternoons, travelled on boat clinics, helped in the teaching of nurse-aide students, and sewed and repaired nurses' uniforms.[25] It is obvious that she donated her time voluntarily far beyond expectations, and is applauded for her willingness to continue in mission service despite the loss of her husband.



Pastor Albert H. Piper, first missionary from Avondale College stands with three unidentified Solomon Islanders. The date is unknown

Information relating to the topic of this chapter was not readily found in existing literature, therefore eight women who met the identified criteria were approached and asked to participate in interviews. To have limited the shared experiences to only eight women runs two major risks. First, the range of experiences of the many women who, over the years, have made various contributions may not be fully

[25] Interview with Betty Larwood by Ruth Wilkinson at Nambour, Australia, 8 February 1997.

acknowledged. Second, there are many women who equally, or perhaps more so, deserve inclusion. However, the scope of this chapter is such that those mentioned must be limited in number. They provide examples of the notable contributions made by many.

The women selected all spent five years or more in the mission field. One of them spent thirty-seven years in the Pacific.[26] They were located in various geographical areas within the three Union Missions.[27] All were mothers, often of young, dependent children. The most senior woman interviewed served from 1931 to 1945[28], while the youngest accompanied her husband to their appointment in 1992 and returned to Australia at the end of 1996.[29] The recorded experiences span some 65 years of service. The educational background of the women varied. Some completed only one or two years of general subjects at Avondale. Others graduated from certificate and diploma programs in teaching. The women were variously equipped for the challenges which they faced.

An analysis of the experiences shared by these eight women identified at least six major types of voluntary activity which contributed to the work of the Church. Some were involved in all of the activities. Others concentrated in one or two depending on their circumstances. In each case the major

---

[26] Interview with Ruth Wilkinson at Nambour, Australia, 10 February 1997. Ruth spent 37 years in service with her husband Ray in various locations throughout all three Union Missions between 1956 and 1994.

[27] Presently known as "Central Pacific Union Mission", "Papua New Guinea Mission", and "Western Pacific Union Mission".

[28] Phone interview with Enid Wilkinson at Auckland, New Zealand, 31 January 1997.

[29] Interview with Gaye Ellison at Cooranbong, Australia, 25 February 1997.

types of activity are briefly described, and examples of individual contributions are discussed.

## Provision of Health Care

As previously mentioned, it was considered desirable for appointed missionaries to have some form of medical or nurse training. Alternatively, a spouse who had the necessary medical credentials was considered a decided advantage. None of the eight women interviewed for this chapter had such a background. When Enid Wilkinson (nee Hare) went to Fiji with her husband Len in 1931, the only medical knowledge they had was what they found for themselves in books. Their first appointment was to Navuso which was very isolated at the time. Medical help was available in the area from a Fijian doctor but when he was absent it was left to them to provide medical treatment for the people in the area.

Enid recalls a situation in which a baby with a serious case of pneumonia had to be diagnosed and treated by consulting available medical texts. Such experiences she describes as frustrating but necessary. Later when the family was relocated to Vatuvono, she conducted a clinic from her home for people who lived in the surrounding villages. Most of the cases she treated were people with infected sores which had to be cleaned and dressed daily. She became an expert in rolling bandages! On another occasion in another location she was requested to go and look at a young child who was acting strangely. His family were not sure if the bizarre faces he was making were because he was ill or just being provocative. After observing his facial contortions, she became highly suspicious that he could have tetanus, organised immediate hospitalisation, and is credited with saving the boy's life

because of her quick diagnosis. The child was Aisake Kabu who later became an evangelist and Church administrator.[30]

Betty Chapman (nee Easterbrook) attended Avondale in 1945 studying Bible and Home Economics while she worked part-time as a secretary. She and her husband Alf arrived in Papua New Guinea (PNG) in 1949 where they served for a total of twenty years. Although she had no formal training in health work she was very quickly initiated when called to help deliver a baby just three weeks after arriving in PNG. This was just the start of her remarkable contribution. In total she delivered one-hundred-and-eighty-five babies. The only formal medical training she received occurred two years after her arrival when the PNG Government, recognising the significant health work she was doing, sent her to Port Moresby Hospital to undertake a three month course in basic health care. After 10 days in the course she was told to go home because she already knew all that was necessary!

Much of the health work she did was in the Gulf of Papua. The nearest doctor was 290 kilometres away, so the outpatient clinic which she conducted was well attended. With modesty she admits that she would see an average of forty patients each day. She treated people with leprosy and tuberculosis; she sutured lacerations and set fractured limbs. On one occasion she had to suture a major injury which required numerous internal stitches, not to mention the additional external ones.

Her own children also depended on her for medical treatment--she once had to set her son's fractured arm and, after another incident, had to stitch his cut eye lid. The Chapman's home at times became a temporary hospital ward. When an epidemic of whooping cough occurred, Betty cared

---

[30] Phone interview with Enid Wilkinson at Auckland, New Zealand, 31 January 1997.

for twenty-seven babies in her lounge room. At other times she cared for babies whose mothers had died or were having feeding difficulties. She recalls her own twelve-year-old daughter helping out by making sixty-seven bottles of formula each morning for several days during one of their particularly busy times.

With all this activity keeping her more than busy, Betty Chapman was also responsible for overseeing the care of forty-seven female students in the dormitory while she supervised the home-schooling of her own children. All this without any opportunity to see another Caucasian woman for 18 months, or visit shops for two years.[31]

It was common practice to have a 'dispensary' on campus at Adventist schools in the South Pacific. Basic medical treatments not requiring a qualified doctor would be carried out and, although primarily available to cater to the needs of students and staff, it was not uncommon for people from local villages to seek help. The wife of an expatriate teacher would typically be responsible for running the dispensary and carrying out the treatments, often for at least one hour each day.

Margaret Sonter (nee McLennan) contributed in this capacity in a variety of locations. She was responsible for managing the dispensaries at schools such as Kauma Adventist School in Kiribati, Siufaga Adventist School in Samoa, Beulah College in Tonga, and Vatuvono Adventist School in Fiji.[32] She and her husband Allen began mission service in 1957. They spent a total of 29 years in various locations.

Ruth Wilkinson (nee Hill), who with her husband Ray served thirty-seven years in South Pacific mission service in

---

[31] Interview with Betty Chapman at Cooranbong, Australia, 24 February 1997.

[32] Phone interview with Margaret Sonter by Ruth Wilkinson at Toowoomba, Australia, 19 January 1997.

various locations, also contributed in a similar way by running dispensaries at the Cook Island Training School, Vatuvonu Adventist School and, when the medical officer was absent, at Kambubu Adventist High School.[33] She was also involved in running cooking demonstrations and health talks for the community both at Sonoma College and later at Pacific Adventist College.[34]

## Teaching

Some of the women interviewed earned formal teaching qualifications at Avondale. Others had the educational background or the skills necessary to make significant contributions in schools. These contributions were almost always in an unpaid capacity. Margaret Sonter, for example, taught sewing for two hours a week at Kauma Adventist School. She taught two grades full-time for a term when teachers were in short supply at Siufaga Adventist School; and Home Science from two to four hours per week for four years at Beulah College. An accomplished pianist, she taught music at Pacific Adventist College and provided gratuitous piano lessons to some national children.

At Fulton College Margaret taught Home Economics from 1975 to 1977. She was offered a wage at the rate paid to a Fijian teacher but on that occasion declined the offer. On other occasions when the work was particularly taxing she did accept the offer of a wage at the rate paid to national colleagues. During 1970 and 1971, for example she taught English and Home Economics for forms three and four at

---

[33] Ray Wilkinson is the son of Len and Enid Wilkinson previously mentioned.

[34] Interview with Ruth Wilkinson at Nambour, Australia, 10 February 1997. "Pacific Adventist College" became "Pacific Adventist University" in 1996.

Fulton. She taught various other subjects as well. For this work she received a national wage, which she accepted only at the insistence of the Fiji Mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.[35]

Margaret Sonter's experience illustrates another important type of contribution to teaching made by some women. Although this chapter particularly focuses on voluntary, unpaid positions there were some who made significant contributions to the education work but who received part-time wages at the rate paid to national workers. Such contributions should not go unacknowledged.

Lois Cernik (nee Giblett) and her husband John spent a total of 27 years in mission work in the South Pacific. From 1965 to 1971 Lois taught Home Economics part-time at Fulton College. This work involved a commitment of approximately 20 class sessions per week and was in addition to her other responsibilities associated with being the principal's wife. For her efforts she received a partial national wage which was used to help pay a student assisting her with housework. At Sonoma College she also taught Home Economics for comparable wages from 1972 to 1976.[36]

A similar contribution was made by Ruth Wilkinson over several years. She taught English and Sewing in a part-time unpaid capacity at the Cook Island Training School during 1956 and 1957. At Fulton College she taught Home Economics from 1960 to 1971, being responsible for between twenty and thirty-two class sessions weekly. For all but the last three years she received no wage, and was then paid a partial national wage to assist in covering the costs of student help with housework. Similar wages were paid for the

---

[35] Phone interview with Margaret Sonter by Ruth Wilkinson at Toowoomba, Australia, 19 January 1997.

[36] Interview with Lois Cernik by Ruth Wilkinson at Sydney, Australia, 4 January 1997.

teaching she did at Sonoma College from 1972 to 1976, and at Kambubu Adventist High School from 1979 to 1981. In addition, at Sonoma and Kambubu she had the extra responsibilities associated with being the wife of the Principal. For many of those years she also had her own children to care for. In fact she admits that at one stage the wage she received for her teaching was insufficient to fully pay for someone to care for their toddler! Ruth Wilkinson taught in Adventist institutions nearly every year from 1956 until 1981 for either no pay or a partial national wage. It was not until she started teaching at Pacific Adventist College in 1982 that she was finally paid under the Division wage schedule.[37]

The teaching work of Betty Chapman should also be acknowledged. Despite having no formal teaching qualifications, Betty Chapman was asked to teach Home Economics at Kabiufa Adventist High School. She underwent assessment by the government and was granted a certificate allowing her to teach. Although she taught for 22 periods a week, she was paid a weekly wage of just nine dollars.[38]

## Welfare and Outreach

Welfare and outreach have been grouped together as activities because to some extent they overlap. This was certainly the case with a project which Joy Draper (nee McGrath) initiated in 1986 in the "Nine-Mile Squatter Camp" near Port Moresby. Joy Draper was at the time living at Pacific Adventist College where her husband Laurie was a lecturer. The project developed when, as the appointed welfare leader at the Pacific Adventist College Church, she organised a

---

[37] Interview with Ruth Wilkinson at Nambour, Australia, 10 February 1997.

[38] Interview with Betty Chapman at Cooranbong, Australia, 24 February 1997.

program of cooking demonstrations and health talks at the camp. She was assisted by some of the married students' wives.

While the very first program was being presented she saw an opportunity to conduct a Sabbath School and Church program the next day! About 100 children attended the Sabbath School and Joy Draper discovered that only one of them was enrolled in school. Some of the children were so poor that they were dressed in plastic bags. With a talent for organising volunteer helpers and fund raising, Joy began developing welfare and literacy programs for the camp, and seeking financial support for ongoing programs. There is now an organised Seventh-day Adventist Church at the camp and the literacy program continues. Although living back in Australia, Joy Draper is still involved in raising funds for ongoing support of the welfare and outreach programs at the camp.[39]

Clarice Tindall (nee Watts) was involved in various welfare and outreach activities from the time she arrived in PNG with her husband Rex in 1959 until they left mission service in 1974. During the six and a half years (1959-1966) they were at Kainantu in the Eastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea, she organised a club for the women in the local village. She taught them child care and sewing. In addition she taught sewing skills to school girls.

Clarice was also responsible for making communion bread for approximately sixty churches in the Eastern Highland District. The bread was sent out every three months with the national workers who were also given tins of dried sultanas which were subsequently boiled in water and the juice used for communion wine.

---

[39] Interview with Joy Draper at Cooranbong, Australia, 5 February 1997.

Later, in 1968 and 1969, Clarice Tindall taught classes in welfare work and cooking for the female students at Sonoma College. Welfare work continued to be high on her agenda as they moved to various localities, taking on leadership roles which included being the Welfare Federation President in Honiara in 1973 and 1974.[40]

## Fund Raising

Many women have been involved in activities to help supplement the finances of the institutions and missions in which their husbands worked. For example, most of the boarding schools had a store on campus, the profits from which were used to supplement the budget of the school. Lois Cernik, Margaret Sonter, Ruth Wilkinson, and Joy Draper were all responsible for the operation of a store at various institutions at different times. The task was made more challenging at some schools when the store was conducted from their home. The significance of this type of work is illustrated by Joy Draper's experience. She admits that she was paid for this role, but the "wage" of thirty kina per week for the hours involved was not her motivation for the position! During the first year she managed the store at Kabiufa Adventist High School it made a profit of K9,000. The following year its profit was K20,000 and she also spent time training a Papua New Guinean to take over the responsibility.[41]

While at Kabiufa Adventist High School, Ruth Wilkinson was in charge of a sewing factory which sold garments and bed linen to help raise funds for the school. She was responsible for training the student workers and for the

---

[40] Interview with Clarice Tindall by Ruth Wilkinson at Nambour, Australia, 22 February 1997.

[41] Interview with Joy Draper at Cooranbong, Australia, 5 February 1997.

manufacture of all the goods sold. Each year approximately K2,500 profit was made from this activity to help supplement the school budget.[42]



Margaret Fraser, wife of the school principal, caring for small children at Bena Bena, PNG, in 1960.

## Hospitality

For all of these women, providing accommodation and meals for official guests (sometimes in a hurry when unexpected visitors arrived) and helping new expatriate families arriving to work at the institution settle in, became commonplace. The task was made even more demanding because supplies were often inaccessible or hard to obtain. Just two illustrations, many decades apart, will provide us an insight into the hospitality of these wives and mothers.

---

[42] Interview with Ruth Wilkinson at Nambour, Australia, 10 February 1997.

Enid Wilkinson recalls an occasion in the mid 1930s at Buresala when, because supplies were dwindling, she struggled to prepare an evening meal for the family. They were about to sit down to eat when they heard the sound of an approaching boat. Realising it could mean unexpected guests she called a quick halt to the meal in case she had to feed some extras. She did. Ten visitors arrived and she provided a meal for them with supplies so meagre that she went without food that evening.[43]

Gaye Ellison (nee Hawkes) and her husband Phil were stationed at Kambubu Adventist High School from 1992 to 1995, then at Pacific Adventist College in 1996. Even in the 1990s, Kambubu is relatively isolated. At one stage Gaye spent three months without having an opportunity to talk with another Caucasian woman.

The eruption of Tavurvur and Vulcan volcanoes in Rabaul in 1994 compounded the lack of available resources. Nevertheless, Gaye Ellison provided meals for official visitors, and became skilled at preparing appetising dishes from her three basic "food groups"--rice, sweet potato, and cabbage. She recalls one particular six-week period when she had visitors almost constantly, either for a day or for up to a week. With no separate facility for guests, the Ellisons accommodated them in their own home. This necessitated moving the children out of their own beds to provide suitable lodging for the guests.[44]

---

[43] Phone interview with Enid Wilkinson at Auckland, New Zealand, 31 January 1997.

[44] Interview with Gaye Ellison at Cooranbong, Australia, 25 February 1997.

## Home Schooling

Several of these women, in addition to the activities already described, were responsible for the education of their own children. If the family was located in an area where no suitable school was available, some form of home schooling was required.

Some of the women even took on extra responsibilities, teaching or supervising children from other families as well. For example, Enid Wilkinson ran a primary school for several months at Buresala and had 10 students--only two of whom were her own children--in various grades.[45] Gaye Ellison was responsible for the education of her children for two of their years at Kambubu, and for a year also supervised the education of the children of another staff family.[46]

## Conclusion

It is fitting, in Avondale's centennial year, that the impact of past students on the work of the Church in the South Pacific be acknowledged. A record of the significant contribution made by women is overdue. In this chapter we have focused on just eight women. The scope of the chapter has made it impossible to list hundreds of other women who are just as deserving of mention, if not more so. Not only did each of these women give their husbands the support normally expected of wives, they all went far and beyond the call of duty. In each case they shared in the contributions made by their husbands.

But more than this, they were prepared to go beyond the normal role of wife and mother and were able to make an

---

[45] Phone interview with Enid Wilkinson at Auckland, New Zealand, 31 January 1997.

[46] Interview with Gaye Ellison at Cooranbong, Australia, 25 February 1997.

immeasurable contribution to the development of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and the island nations of the South Pacific. They did not regret their contribution, despite the hard work and numerous challenges. They sensed a need and were prepared to do what they could. With humility and eloquence they have demonstrated "a greater vision of world needs."