# A Reflection in 2004

## —a diminishing financial support and a dearth of expatriates challenge the growth of the Adventist Church in the Pacific Islands


**BARRY OLIVER**



*Barry Oliver, PhD, comes from Goulburn, NSW. He completed a BTh at Avondale College, NSW, in 1972 & spent the next 5 years in ministry in Maryborough, Hervey Bay, & the Darling Downs, being ordained in 1976. He began mission service in1979 when he was appointed district director, evangelist and university chaplain at Port Moresby, PNG. A year later he became president of the New Britain New Ireland Mission, stationed at Rabaul, remaining there for 5 years. The next year he taught theology and evangelism at Avondale College. He spent the next 3 years at Andrews University in USA obtaining his doctorate in Christian Ministry and Mission. He returned to Avondale in 1989 and while there pioneered a comprehensive evangelistic training process, entitled: 'New Life Down Under'. In 1997 Barry was appointed the General Secretary of the church in the South Pacific, a position he still holds.*

*He is married to Julie from Brisbane, a teacher, and they have three grown sons, Clayton, Randall (married to Hayley), & Brendon.*

*Barry continues to contribute to cutting edge research and writing, and has now published almost 100 significant articles. Major research has been in the area of the administrative structures of the SDA Church primarily from a missiological viewpoint.*

*The Olivers reside at Cooranbong, NSW.*


[Author's note: In distinction from the purpose of the *Journal of Pacific Adventist History*, this article is not primarily historical in nature. Rather it is a reflection on how future writers of history may look back on this period in the development of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the Pacific. Call it contemporary history if you wish!]

AS I 'PEN' THESE WORDS I am at about 35,000 feet over the Pacific Ocean. I have just spent 6 days on the island of Tarawa, Kiribati, located approximately 2 degrees north of the equator in the central Pacific. There we worked with the leadership of the local mission and some colleagues from the Division and the Trans Pacific Union Mission to conduct a field school of ministry and evangelism. The final night of the program saw 6 people make a decision for baptism. We concluded the field school with a very special communion service and a 'graduation.' There was a strong sense of commitment and purpose among the people.



An attendee at Kavieng

Five weeks ago I was in Kavieng, provincial headquarters on the island of New Ireland, Papua New Guinea. There also we worked with the local mission administration for two weeks conducting a field school of ministry and evangelism from Wednesday, 21 July to Sunday, 1 August. Remarkably, on the last night of that evangelistic series, 1500 people came forward to the podium in a public demonstration of their desire to be baptised and join the remnant church. It was an incredibly moving experience to see the Spirit of God moving in that way. I will never forget it.



Pr Tony Kemo
Ministerial Association
Secretary, PNG Mission

The evangelistic program in Kavieng was one of a huge number of programs conducted in Papua New Guinea during this year, 2004. A number of local pastors and evangelists, together with colleagues from Australia and New Zealand have been sharing the good news of the gospel throughout the country. Some of the preachers were Pastors Tony Kemo, Justin Lawman, Murray Thackham, and Cranville Tooley They too have seen with their own eyes the amazing movement of the Spirit of God. Scenes just like the one in Kavieng have been witnessed in cities,



A couple on Kiribati



A young family from Kavieng PNG

towns, and villages throughout the country. And not only in Papua New Guinea. Pastors Laurie Evans and Anthony Kent ran an amazing program in the main market in Honiara, capital of the Solomon Islands. Pastor Geoff Youlden is presently preaching in the new stadium in Suva. And these programs are just the tip of the iceberg. Each of our unions has an intentional strategy for outreach. In addition, we have 'Go One Million' and 'Sow One Billion.' 2004 has been the year of evangelism.

I wish Pastor John Howse, who planted the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Kiribati could see the church there today. I wish he could see the bright faces of the young people, meet the leaders of the church, attend a service as I did last night where 15 men were dedicated to go on a shoe string as volunteers to the outer islands.

I wish that Pr Septimus Carr could see the church in Papua New Guinea today. Even with all the hopes and optimism born of his zeal for mission, how could he have foreseen the vitality and size of the church today, when he etched out that fledgling mission station at Bisiatabu located a little inland from Port Moresby. Government census statistics tell us that in 2002, one in nine people in Papua New Guinea was affiliated with the Church—probably the highest proportion of any country on the face of the planet. And they are still coming—thousands at a time as we have witnessed in the last few weeks.

I wish I could stop the story right there. But I cannot. At the present time we as a church are facing a number of critical issues in the Pacific that need to be shared. Each of these has the potential by itself to rewrite the history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the Pacific radically. Put together, they just may well be explosive. Permit me to list some of them for you.

**1. Changing leadership patterns.** The church is endeavouring to place the leadership of the church in the hands of the national people of each Pacific country. This has long been the intention of the church but it has not proven easy. The very organisational structure which has been our strength in accepting a global commission and facilitating a global mission has within itself many implicit and explicit barriers when it comes to its implementation in the cultural contexts of the Pacific. It takes considerable education and experience on the part of our national island leaders to think globally as well as locally, and to obtain the mind set and skills to be able to prioritise and strategise in that context. Many who have been placed in positions of leadership have come to realise that the church is indeed complex, that leadership is not as straight-forward as they assumed it to be and have either declined further leadership positions or in some cases



Pr Thomas Davai, President PNG Union Mission, & his wife Tioro



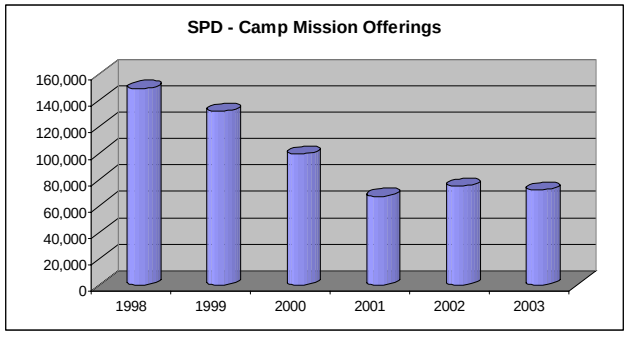
Pr Lawrence Tanabose, Secretary of theTrans Pacific Union

placed themselves in circumstances which have disqualified them from leadership.

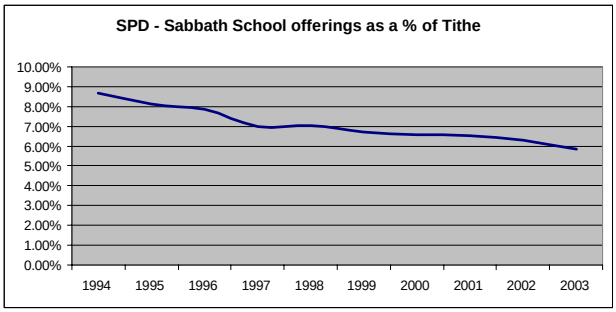
**2. The withdrawal of a vital support base**. With the reduction in the number of Australian or New Zealand based expatriates serving in the Island nations of the Pacific has come a considerable loss of what may be termed intangible support. When those expatriates served in the Pacific, a number of informal effects were generated. For example, on visits to their homes, missionaries would tell stories, share the needs, and raise the awareness of the churches in Australia and New Zealand about the needs of the Pacific. That is not happening now. There is a dearth of information at the grass roots and there is a rapidly declining awareness of the needs of the Pacific.

Along with this there is a concomitant decline in the number of volunteers and volunteer teams coming to the Pacific. And there is a dramatic decrease in the unofficial flow of funds that used to come direct to serving missionaries from family and friends who used to desire to support the work of the missionary by some direct giving as well as through the regular channels of the church. While the church has always officially discouraged this kind of giving on a large scale, and it still does, (and so it should if it results in decreased giving patterns through the regular channels), we who have served in the Pacific all know that our friends and families were generous in the past and know that many things were indeed accomplished through this means. With the withdrawal of expatriate budgets this source of support has gone, not to be replaced.

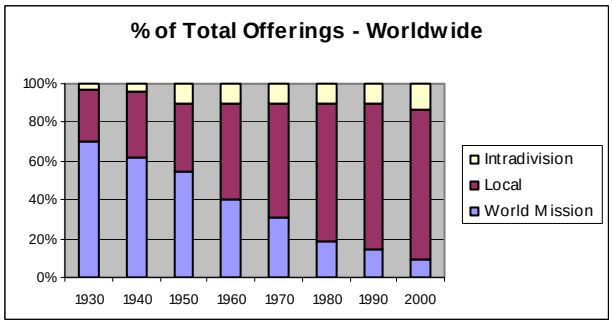
**3. A Continuing Decrease in Mission Offerings.** Our Division Treasurer, Rodney Brady, has recently drawn our attention to the alarming manner in which giving to mission has decreased in both real and proportional terms. The table below indicates that camp mission offerings which are used wholly to support our South Pacific mission territories have dropped dramatically in the last 6 years from over $160,000 in 1998 to $60,000 in 2003.



This next table shows how the regular Sabbath School offering has dropped as a percentage of tithe. Had Sabbath School offerings been maintained at 1994 levels as a percentage of tithe then in 2003 an additional A$1.85 million would have been given and available for the work of fulfilling the mission of the church.




This final table shows that while world mission offerings have been decreasing in proportion to overall giving, support for local needs has risen dramatically. This has particularly taken place in those areas of the world which are resource rich, including Australia and New Zealand.




**4. An Assumption by Many that the Pacific no longer needs Assistance.** Many church members seem to have the idea that the work is finished in the Pacific. They have heard the success stories and assume that their support is not needed any more. Nothing could be further from the truth. The fields are ripe for harvest in many areas. There has never been a time of greater opportunity. Yet vital resources which could be given are not being given because of a totally unwarranted assumption that they are no longer needed**,** or that most missions are now able to finance their own operating and capital requirements.

Further, the resource support that is needed is the support which will build up the long term viability and sustainability of the work. There is the desire by some to give to certain projects which are easily identifiable and the results measurable. That is good and is not in any way being discouraged by what is being said here. But the greatest need of the Pacific is the systematic giving which can be utilised for training, supporting and resourcing our full time ministers, teachers and administrators. They desperately need to be supported and resourced. They have families; they have school fees; they need to be supported and resourced in their responsibilities so they can do the work they are trained to do. They are committed and effective. But they continue to need our support. We have scores of trained ministers who at the present time are not employed and cannot be employed because of lack of funds. Volunteers can perform a limited function but they do not generally have the background, education or personal resources that are needed to provide the kind of sustainability that our church in the Pacific needs. If someone has some resources and were to ask me how they should direct them, I would counsel them to direct them into the preparation and support of fully trained, full-time workers rather than volunteers. Generally, that will be a more effective use of resources in the long term.

Then there are the resources for operating our schools, for fuel and outboard motors and school supplies. Anyone who visits the Pacific will know that the situation in respect to all these resources is desperate. Repairs and maintenance needs are so great that some former missionaries on returning to the fields of their former labour have been distraught. They have wondered why the division is not giving more. Well, the division is giving more than ever, but it can only give what it receives and that is a drop in the bucket.

Please allow me to give some counsel here. It is important that the major channel of funds be through the regular church organisation. That way, we can ensure that the funds are evenly distributed; distributed according to priorities of need; and insist that proper accountability measures are in place. The church organisation that the Seventh-day Adventist Church has developed over the years is the best vehicle for accomplishing all these things. To disregard that well developed system and bypass it can be perilous for both the recipient of the resources and the donor.

**5. Low socio-economic capacity.** Everything that we have said above is compounded by the decreasing socio-economic capacity of many economies in the Pacific. Currency devaluation has played havoc with church budgets in such places as the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea. Whereas, for example, the Papua New Guinea Kina was worth $1.30 Australian just a few years ago, it is now only worth about 48 cents. This means that prices have almost tripled due to currency fluctuations alone. The situation is even worse in the Solomon Islands. Civil unrest has complicated this situation robbing the people of the opportunity to grow and market cash crops from which they derive their income.[1]

Meanwhile expenses continue to escalate, both for individual, families and the church. In this context tithes and offerings go down. Despite all this our people are being faithful to the Lord. The majority continue to return a faithful tithe and give what they are able. The economic situation is having its impact, however. It seems that in Papua New Guinea this year total offerings will downturn after some years of steady increase, due no doubt to the state of the economy. Baptisms continue, but they continue especially in those areas where resources are very few and the people do not have the capacity to give what they would like to.

**6. The Challenge of Education.** In the early years of our work in the Pacific one of the most effective evangelistic methodologies was the establishment of schools. Our schools have served us well over the years. But today we have closed so many of our schools, particularly primary schools, that our education system is only a shell of its former self. Our primary schools used to be the backbone of our education system. Both in the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea we have had no option but to hand most of those schools back to the village people to operate. They cannot afford to pay the level of school fees that are needed to operate a school and the missions do not have the resources to operate them without school

fees. If school fees are not paid, missions are then forced to utilise other operating funds to pay teachers wages and the whole operation of the mission thus rapidly becomes untenable.

In this context the church, both in the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea has approached the respective governments with a request for assistance to meet the spiralling costs of education. This has resulted in the government of the Solomon Islands now paying teachers' wages, and the government of Papua New Guinea agreeing to commence doing so in 2006. Of course this brings its own set of challenges. Leaders must be vigilant to see that the special character of our schools is maintained. We need to ensure that our Adventist ethos and mission is a high priority for education personnel and administrations of the missions and unions.

**7. The Difficulty of Finding Expatriates Willing to Serve in the Pacific.** I have the greatest admiration for the wonderful band of people who have left their homelands and are currently serving alongside the local leadership in each country across the Pacific. Many of these people come from other countries of the Pacific. They have been willing to leave their families and homes to serve God in far away places with great distinction and sacrifice. Then there are also people from Australia and New Zealand and elsewhere who are serving. I visit many of them with reasonable regularity and encourage them and spend time with them. They are a unique group of people.

**But there are far too few of them**. It is getting more and more difficult to fill positions in the Pacific, despite the fact that there are fewer positions to be filled than there used to be.[2] I know that there may be reasons why people feel they cannot serve God in a place where he may call them, but I sometimes wonder where has that spirit of commitment, adventure and sacrifice gone. Where is that willingness to launch out into the unknown and sense the excitement of being surprised by God. This church will be the poorer because too many are now choosing easier options (if there is such a thing). The Pacific is in need of capable, educated, committed people who are as willing to let God perform miracles in their lives as were the pioneers of yesterday. I stand in awe of their commitment and I am praying for that same spirit of the pioneers to take hold of all of us.

**8. Loss of sense of mission.** Is this predicament due in some respect to a loss of a sense of destiny for this church and its message? Are we fulfilling Christ's words with reference to Laodicea—the love of many growing cold? Have we lost our mission?

I guess I am expressing myself openly here because I am one of the fortunate few who continually see the needs and opportunities first hand as I visit our people and our churches around the Pacific. I am continually astounded by the wonderful Christian hospitality and warmth that is shown toward me by God's people. It is indeed a wonderful privilege to belong to the family of God. But there is so much more that can be done. Nothing that has been said here should be read as if somehow we are not subject to and dependent on the leading of the Spirit of God. This is His work and we can be confident in Him. The point is, He has entrusted to us our work. We are remiss if we neglect His commission and spurn His trust.

The church was forced to close Sopas Hospital in the Enga Province of Papua New Guinea and I would not be honest with you if I did not tell you that we are in danger of closing Atoifi Hospital in the Solomon Islands as well. Events surrounding the death of Lance Gersbach have been the catalyst for a number of critical issues which must be addressed urgently if Atoifi is to remain viable. Fulton College is also facing some critical challenges at this time. We are doing everything possible to maintain these institutions and we are confident in God's leading.

You see, I cannot help but wonder how future generations of historians will view this period of the Church in the Pacific. Will they see it as the time the Adventist Church lost its focus and splintered into many smaller, ineffective and short-lived local or National Churches? Will they see it as a time when large swathes of members were removed from the church by other denominations and sects who were able to offer more attractive options. Or will they see it as a critical time of change when the church membership in the South Pacific Division demonstrated its capacity to reignite and reinvent its passion for mission and pool its human and financial resources to strategically position itself to reap and nurture the harvest that the Holy Spirit is bringing to the church? Every stage of the history of the development of the church in the Pacific has had its challenges. Today the challenges may be different in some respects, but they need to be met.

Meet them we will—the Lord has a thousand ways.

**References**


1. Currency values in some Pacific Territories compared with one dollar A$ at 1 March, 2005, were:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| SBD | 0.19 | Solomon Island dollars |
| WST | 0.52 | West Samoan Tala |
| TOP | 0.70 | Tongan Pa'anga |
| FJD | 0.80 | Fijian dollars |

2. In 2005 there are 62 expatriates serving the church in the Pacific Islands. For example, 32 are in education and 7 in departments. 20 years ago in 1985, 66 were in education and 12 in departments. ●





Excerpt from *Pacific Ocean* (c) Universal Press Pty Ltd, 1993. Used by permission.