9. The Beginning of Adventist Education in the Solomon Islands

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Background

The Solomon Islands are located in the western Pacific Ocean south-east of Bougainville Island. The six large islands and more than nine hundred smaller islands which make up the island nation are roughly arranged in two parallel chains which extend more than 1450 km in length and contain close to 28,000 square kilometres of land. Sitting on the Pacific Rim just south of the equator, the islands enjoy a tropical climate but are also subject to frequent cyclones and earthquakes. The terrain of the country varies from mountainous volcanic islands carrying lush forests to low-lying atolls that enclose sparkling lagoons.

The first European contact with this island group was made in February 1568 by the Spanish explorer Álvaro de Mendaña de Neyra, who discovered several of the islands while searching for a southern landmass. It was he who gave the islands their European name. While the primary quest was for land and wealth, the explorers also sought to serve God through conversion of the heathen, and included Franciscan friars among their expedition party (Whiteman 1983, 32). Amherst and Thompson note that the ship's navigator, Gallego, inscribed the following purpose for the expedition in the prologue of his journal: "to enlighten and convert to Christianity all infidels and to lead them as labourers into the vineyard of the Lord" (Amherst and Thomson,

1901, 3). Consequently, when the Spanish explorers arrived in the Solomon Islands, the new land was not only claimed for Spain, but also for God. A cross was erected as a visual symbol of the Christian conquest (Whiteman, 1983, 34).

This symbolic gesture was however, premature. While the Islanders were initially friendly, the interactions between the Spanish and the indigenous inhabitants were difficult. They were marred by frequent misunderstandings and high-handed behaviour on the part of the newcomers. Barely six months after their arrival, the Spanish explorers and their crew left empty-handed with neither riches nor conversions to Christianity. It would take more than three centuries before the first Christian conversion in these islands and an additional three-quarters of a century before the first Seventh-day Adventist missionaries arrived on its shores in 1914 (Jones, 1916a, 13).

Apart from several short visits by other Spanish sailors, the Solomon Islands remained free from Western influence until the nineteenth century when British and French explorers rediscovered the Islands (Whiteman, 1983, 118–119).

Missionaries soon followed the explorers, but like the Spanish sailors, they struggled to establish their presence in the Solomon Islands. Marist priests were the first to arrive in the mid-1840s, but they abandoned the islands a mere twenty months later after their group was significantly incapacitated by a combination of malaria and murder. The Anglican-sponsored Melanesian Mission was the next mission group that attempted to bring the gospel to the Solomon Islands. More successful than the Catholic pioneers, they became the sole Christian mission in the islands for nearly fifty years. Under the leadership of Bishop John Patteson, they began sending native children to New Zealand for education with the intention of them returning as missionaries to their own people (Olson, 1991, 564). However, native distrust of Europeans was rampant due to the widespread trader practice of blackbirding, which involved recruiting indentured labourers for sugar plantations in Queensland and Fiji either by force or trickery. While the missionaries actively denounced blackbirding, their European heritage meant they became convenient targets for the rising anger of the Solomon Islanders. The murder of the first Anglican Bishop, John Patteson in 1871, was a direct reprisal for a blackbirding raid on the island of Nukapu (Rutledge, 1974). Patteson's death highlighted the danger faced by the European

settlers and prompted a series of measures which attempted to stop the practice of blackbirding and control the resulting violence (Olson, 1991, 564-5). It is commonly considered that the establishment of a German Protectorate over the northern Solomon Islands in 1885 and of a British protectorate over the southern Solomon Islands in 1893 were at least partially motivated by these issues. It is likely, however, that military and economic concerns were more important motivating factors for their establishment (Olson, 1991, 565). Nevertheless, the first Resident Commissioner of the British Protectorate, Charles Woodford, worked hard to curb violence, headhunting and blackbirding while promoting European interests.

Woodford's efforts produced a safer environment for the European settlers which, along with the increased mission consciousness that characterized Christianity at the end of the nineteenth century, encouraged other mission groups to enter the Solomon Islands. The Catholics returned to the Solomon Islands in 1898, the Methodists arrived in 1902, and the South Seas Evangelical Mission (SSEM) shortly afterward (Steley, 1983, 36). Since the vast majority of the population had still not been exposed to the gospel, there should have been room for all the denominational groups to exist in harmony. The reality, however, was very different. An intense rivalry existed between groups, and small matters could set off arguments that led to destruction of property and not infrequently resulted in legal battles.

Most mission groups began education programs for the indigenous inhabitants. Some such as the Melanesian Mission continued to send students out of the country for education, while others concentrated on education with the local villages. They each used the gospel message and their own brand of Christianity as the focus of their curriculum. The result was an education which differed significantly from the traditional family and tribal-based education which focussed on customs, culture, and basic living skills ("Education", 2013, para. 1).

Establishment of Adventist Mission on the Solomon Islands

It was not until October 1913, that the Australian Union of Seventh-day Adventists made the decision to "open up work in the Solomon Islands as soon as practicable" (Actions Taken by the Union Conference Council Held at Wahroonga, New South Wales, September 23 to October 3, 1913, 3), and commissioned the first Adventist missionaries

to begin working there. They chose master mariner Griffith F. Jones and his wife Marion, who had become interested in Adventism after reading the Adventist periodical, The Present Truth (Anderson, 1930, 16). In 1900 both Griffiths and Marion had completed a Bible-workers course in Texas and were subsequently active in international mission work. By the time of their appointment to the Solomon Islands they were experienced missionaries, having previously worked in the Society Islands, Java, Sumatra, Borneo, the Federated Malay States (now Malaysia) and Singapore (Neufield, 1976, 798).

The Joneses arrived in the Solomon Islands on May 29, 1914, with a boat for transportation and a selection of vital supplies (Jones, 1916a, 13). With the aid of a local trader and a group of his Pidgin-speaking employees, they set about finding a suitable location for the first mission buildings and school. Hoping to begin work amongst "true heathens" on an island where missionaries of other faiths had not yet penetrated, the Griffiths left the Methodist stronghold on the northern aspect of the Roviana Lagoon on New Georgia, and sailed to Rendova Island. However, the villagers there were unwilling to have the Adventists settle among them. Jones reluctantly sailed back to New Georgia. Nearing the coastline, he was met by people from the village of Viru (Cormack 1944, 150-152). While there were firmly established Methodist missions in some regions of New Georgia, Viru was located in the south of New Georgia in an area with no mission presence. The villagers of Viru wanted a school established in their midst, and gave the missionaries permission to lease land. Jones readily agreed to begin in their midst. It was a strategic location that would allow Adventist mission to expand into the Marovo Lagoon and gain traction in the New Georgia Group of the Solomon Islands.

Barely a month after his arrival in Viru, Jones began a village school with thirty-four students in attendance. The interest was such that the school was not limited to children. Adults were also eager to learn and quickly joined in the school activities (Cormack, 1944, 154). The curriculum Focused on reading, writing, Scripture studies and singing. The undertaking for Jones was difficult and complex. Jones not only had to learn the local language, but also find a way to communicate it in written form, something that had not been done previously. Representing the sounds phonetically, he mapped out a simple alphabet which he could then teach along with the English language (Jones, 1915, 12).

By the middle of the following year Jones wrote that people came from a radius of 15 miles (about 24 km) to attend the school and the enrolment stood at more than 50 (Jones, 1915, 12). He proudly noted that the students had already learned hymns in English, and could write and spell words with the phonetic alphabet he had constructed (ibid). But, more importantly in his mind, they could describe and answer questions about the gospel and key Adventist doctrines (ibid). Education existed for the purpose of mission, and in the eyes of the missionaries, this milestone signalled progress.

In spite of the difficulties posed by World War I, Jones boldly wrote, "The signal to advance now can be clearly read. The only possible safe place is somewhere in God's work" (Jones, 1916b, 13). Convinced that the end was near, he became even more anxious to expand the mission work into the islands of the nearby Marovo Lagoon. When nursing graduate Oscar Hellestrand was sent to join the Joneses in the Solomon Islands Protectorate at the end of 1914, Hellestrand took over the Viru mission and school, freeing up Jones to begin new mission endeavours in the lagoon region (Hook, 1988, 6–7).

Jones selected land on Marovo Island as the site for a second mission station which was named Sasaghana. After building a small native-style hut on the property, he requested additional workers to staff the station. Don and Lilian Nicholson responded, joining the growing mission team in the western Solomon Islands. School opened on September 13, 1915 with twenty-three students including the sons and nephew of Chief Tatangu of the nearby Bambata village. Facilities and resources were limited. Kerosene boxes were used as both seats and cupboards, but the Nicholsons were resourceful and worked with what was at hand (Hook, 1988, 7).

Not yet satisfied, Jones pushed on relentlessly in his quest to evangelise the people of the Marovo Lagoon. By the close of 1915 a total of eight mission outposts had been established, each about 15 km apart, multiple requests for schools had been received from the islanders, and several hundred Solomon Islanders attended Sabbath Schools (Hilliard, 1966, 419).

A third village school site was established in 1917 on Gatukai Island at the south-eastern tip of the New Georgia Group and placed under the care of David Gray, while a fourth school commenced at Ughele on the nearby Rendova Island shortly afterward (Hook 1988, 9–10). Meanwhile, a sexual scandal involving one of the students

at Sasaghana upset Chief Tatangu who withdrew his support of the school, thereby threatening its viability. The mission team decided the best option was to move the school to a new site in Telina.

In early January 1918, three and a half years after Jones had arrived in the Solomons, the first Islanders were baptized by Seventh-day Adventists. Ten young people, including the sons of Chief Tatangu—Ghusa Peo and Kata Rangoso—their cousin, Pana, and two slaves of the chief joined the church (Hook, 1988, 12). They had been students in the village schools.

Ongoing calls for teachers and mission workers far exceeded the available expatriates, so Jones began to send out senior students to fill these positions. He started with the young men who had been baptized recently, but the requests were so numerous that Jones was soon sending out students with only the most rudimentary education. Writing to the world church he noted, "We are taking out of school all young people who can conduct a Sabbath School and placing them in new fields before they are ready with a very scanty knowledge about the art of teaching" (Jones, 1920b, 14). In spite of these limitations, God blessed their efforts with success.

Adventist mission efforts in the Solomon Islands were focused entirely in the southern part of the New Georgia Group of islands for six years. Expansion further north was facilitated by Vakapala, a native of Dovele on Vella Levalla who attended church at Saseghana (Hook, 1988, 14). Jones took Vakapala with him as he sailed around the islands, and used Vakapala to communicate with his own people on Dovele. Already curious about the gramophone on the boat and attracted to the singing of hymns by the boat's crew, the villagers agreed to the presence of missionaries in their midst (Hook, 1988, 14). In 1919, European nurses Harry and Emily Tutty, along with Pana, set out to build a mission station and school at Dovele. The missionaries had to learn a new language in order to communicate with the locals, since the locals spoke a language different from that spoken by the people near the Marovo lagoon where most of the other Adventist mission stations were located (Tutty, 1919, 3). Their efforts were also impeded by the central role of spiritism in village life, the impact of the 1919 influenza epidemic, and a legal battle with the Methodists who considered Adventists were illegally invading their territory (Hook, 1988, 14–16). Nevertheless, a school was begun before the school building was completed and even the chief attended. The school paved

the way for a church to be organized at Dovele twelve months later and for the establishment of a mission station and school at Mondo on the nearby Ranogga Island in 1920 (Hook, 1988, 17).

By the time the Griffiths and Marion Jones returned to Australia in 1920 there were 16 village schools in the Western Solomon Islands with a combined total of approximately 600 students (Hilliard, 1966, 440) an impressive result for a mere seven years of labour in a new territory with no previous Adventist presence. Looking at the results, Griffiths noted with satisfaction that his time had not been spent in vain. Not only could scores of people now read the Bible, many witnessed publicly to their faith, and led out in Christian meetings. "Several of them," he noted, "are already in full charge of mission stations many miles from any white worker meeting the same difficulties that they have seen their teachers experience in their home mission" (Jones, 1920a, 16).

The establishment of the Dovele mission-school led to invitations to other parts of the island nation, especially Choiseul, which had traditional links with Dovele. However, the lack of available workers frustrated attempts to respond (Steley, 1989, 184). In 1921 Harry Tutty wrote, "The natives who are still in heathenism are earnestly pleading, 'Come over and help us.' A large island near us has been pleading thus for two years, and still we have to say, 'Wait.'" (Tutty, 1921, 5). Nevertheless, the constant pleading lead to a native teacher's assistant being dispatched to Goghobe on the southern coast on Choiseul Island that same year (Hook, 1988, 21). Despite his inexperience, the school thrived and Adventist mission stations and schools were able to be planted in other parts of the island as Goghobe was transformed by the gospel message.

Over the next five years Adventist missionaries entered new territories across the Solomon Islands. They established missions on the nearby Bougainville Island (now part of Papua New Guinea), Malaita and Guadalcanal. Each followed a similar pattern of starting a day-school as soon as possible to educate the local population, but the lack of trained personnel continued to be a major issue. Many workers were new Christians who had limited education and experience.

After Jones had returned to Australia in 1920, the direction of the Solomon Islands Mission was entrusted to Harold Wicks. While much had been accomplished by Jones, Wicks was concerned about the lack of organizational framework and forward planning which

had characterized the previous administration (Hilliard, 1966, 442). Progress was solely dependent upon the ad hoc training of new workers. Wicks determined that the creation of a central training centre was necessary in order to provide a steady stream of teachers and leaders to fill the multiplying requests for workers and schools in the Solomon Islands (Anonymous, 1927, 2). Supporting Wicks' plan for a central training centre, W. G. Turner claimed that "If we had fifty trained native men we could place every one of them on new stations immediately, and probably be looking for more men" (Turner, 1923, 4). Until there were an adequate number of trained personnel, mission growth would continue to be hampered.

After searching for a suitable site for the new school, Wicks settled on a property seven kilometres south of Telina. The Batuna training centre opened on February 11, 1924 with senior students drawn from eight culturally different areas. As natural enemies, their ability to study together peacefully was seen as testimony to the power of the gospel of Christ (ibid.). While, the training school still lacked a dedicated school building, this did not dampen enthusiasm for the new school. The school provided a structured curriculum including Bible studies, reading, writing, arithmetic, geography and singing, along with English language and conversation. Students were required to work in the afternoon in order to maintain the campus. The addition of a printing press and boat-shed to the mission property provided additional work as well as opportunities to learn vocational skills such as typesetting, printing, and carpentry.

Three years after the training school opened Wicks wrote, "Already twenty-five of the students from this training school have been chosen to go out as missionaries to widely separated parts of the group, some to open new stations and others to care for the work already established" (Gleanings from the Field, 1927, 2). The school site would become the centre of Adventist mission in the Solomon Islands until after World War II when the training school was relocated to Betikama on Guadalcanal.

In theory, the presence of a central training school meant better assurance that a high quality of education could be provided and a steady stream of potential workers could be produced. Nevertheless, the reality was that students continued to be dispatched to mission posts with limited education. Once the students had taught villagers all that they knew they often returned to the training school to

supplement their own learning before taking on another mission post.

By the end of the decade, the school had attracted the interest of government officials. The high commissioner praised its strong work ethic, and invited the school to select top students to send to Fiji to train in medicine (Hilliard, 1966, 463). But ripples of concern began to be expressed about the curriculum and methods of Adventist education in the Solomon Islands. The social anthropologist William C. Groves—who later became the Director of Education for the British Solomon Islands Protectorate—was complimentary about the life-changing nature of the Adventist missions and the faithfulness of the indigenous teachers, he expressed particular concern about the failure of Adventist schools "to adapt curricula and methods to local conditions" (Hilliard, 1966, 464). He considered the schools needed properly trained educators who understood educational theories. It was an issue that had attracted little attention in the singularly focused drive to train workers for the church. It would not be adequately addressed until after World War II when Pastor Herbert White, the new Superintendent of the Solomon Island Missions, determined to rectify both the inadequate qualifications of local teachers and the failure of the education program to meet the needs of the local people (Reye, 2007, 10).

Early Obstacles, Challenges, and Support

Cultural and communication challenges posed significant obstacles to the establishment of Adventist education in the Solomon Islands. The predominantly Melanesian population was not homogenous. It consisted of a variety of people groups who spoke more than seventy indigenous languages, most of which had no written form (Simons, 2017). Furthermore, the majority of the population was clustered in small tribal groups which had such different contexts and reactions that missiologist and cultural anthropologist A. R. Tippet noted that even groups on the same islands were so different that moving between them was like moving between different countries (Tippet, 1967, 82).

The intrinsic Melanesian values of the Solomon Islanders also proved to be a challenge. The native population had no interest in the European preoccupation of determining what was true. They were much more concerned with the questions, "Does it work?" or "Is it effective?" As a consequence, power was seen as the manifestation of truth, and religious allegiance could be changed at a whim to

follow whichever being appeared to be the most powerful at the time (Whiteman, 1983, 66).

In addition to the cultural and communication challenges, the intense rivalry between the Methodist and Adventist missions absorbed unnecessary resources and time, causing problems and embarrassment for both groups (Steley 1989, 325). While it appears that the battles were initiated by the Methodist mission, the inexperience of many of the missionaries contributed to the escalation of tensions.

Nevertheless, there were a number of factors which helped Adventists succeed in spite of the challenges and outright opposition. By the time the Adventist missionaries arrived, the frequency of contact with Europeans meant there was much wider acceptance of missionaries than there had been in the nineteenth century (Whiteman, 1983, 171). Increased contact with Europeans also fuelled an interest in learning English and provided motivation to adopt Christianity. It was evident from the lifestyle of the white missionaries that they had something that worked, and therefore their rituals were considered by many to be more powerful than their own (Whiteman, 1983, 66). Accepting the Christian methodology, they assumed, would help them to also acquire the blessings of the Europeans (Steley, 1983, 90). Moreover, the creation of a British protectorate in the southern Solomons in 1893 had made the country safer since the commissioner was charged with maintaining law and order and suppressing head-hunting which had previously been common in this part of the western Solomon Islands, perpetrated mainly by people from Roviana.

Adventist mission and education also benefitted from significant external support. The Resident Commissioner of the British Solomon Island Protectorate, Charles Woodford, and acting-commissioner J.C. Barcley, put their considerable influence behind the Adventist missionaries to the extent that many saw them as unfairly favouring the Adventists (Steley 1983, 44). The motivation for this support is unclear. Perhaps they considered that the values taught by Adventist missionaries might be helpful in maintaining peace. Traders and plantation-owners also lent support to establishing Adventist missions readily. Their motivation, however, had little to do with the message of the Adventist missionaries. They were much more interested in providing competition for the Methodist mission which had offended many of the traders and planters (Steley 1983, 37). Norman Wheatley, the plantation owner who provided Jones with help on his arrival,

had clashed with the Methodist leader John Goldie, and was only too happy to reduce Methodist influence in the areas he frequented. Furthermore, the Methodists' introduction of industry in their schools was seen as direct competition by the planters. The fact that the Adventist mission had no economic interests that would compete with the business of the planters naturally led to the planters having a preference for the Adventist mission over missions that had economic ambitions (Steley 1983, 40).

However, one of the biggest keys to the success of Adventist mission and education in the Solomon Islands was the use of indigenous workers. Most western missionaries only stayed in the Solomon Islands for terms of five years or less. This fact, along with the limited number of available western missionaries, led to rapid and extensive indigenous involvement in both Adventist schools and churches. Steley concludes that the use of native workers was particularly valuable because it "provided political and social links needed to gain quick entrance into many of the villages in the vicinity" (1989, 183). In addition the use of indigenous teachers and missionaries provided a degree of local ownership of the churches and schools. Ultimately, the strong indigenous workforce along with the feeling of local ownership would result in the church's continuing to thrive in the Solomon Islands in the absence of expatriate missionaries during World War II.

Education as the Key to Mission

The impetus for the growth of education in the Solomon Islands was solely one of mission. Driven by the conviction of the soon coming of Christ, and emphasis on education in the writings of Ellen White, the church in Australasia saw education as a key strategy in the rapid spread of the Adventist message. In keeping with this strategy, Wicks noted in 1922, "Our work is educational, and nearly all our missions are schools . . ." In the villages that the mission had penetrated, almost all the children were attending the schools which continued to focus on reading and writing and Scripture study (Wicks, 1922, 13).

As the number of schools increased, so did the number of adherents to the missions. Weekly Sabbath School attendance increased from 93 people in 1915 to 1036 people by 1920 (Annual Statistical Reports 1915 and 1920). Baptisms, however, were much fewer in number with only 68 members including the mission staff recorded by 1920.

The reason for the small number of baptisms was not because there were few interested people, but rather because Jones and Wicks were concerned that they not be seen as baptizing too hastily or requiring a lesser standard of knowledge than would be required for baptism in Australia and New Zealand. Thus they spent a long time studying with candidates for baptism and subjected them to intense scrutiny and examination before approving their baptism (Jones, 1918, 4; Gray, 1920, 3). In their zeal, it is possible that this was taken to an extreme. When H. M. Blunden visited in 1922 and quizzed non-baptized adherents, he considered they understood as much as any believer elsewhere, and suggested a less restrictive approach to baptism (Steley, 1983, 60). This in turn led to a greater number of baptisms in the following years with almost 600 church-members reported by 1930. The Solomon Islands now has the second-highest number of baptized members per head of population of any country in the South Pacific. This equates to one Seventh-day Adventist for every 13 people in the nation (Annual Statistical Report, 2016).

Evaluation and Conclusion

The diverse cultural and linguistic milieu of the Solomon Islands, along with opposition from other denominations, provided a challenge to penetration of the islands by Adventist with their gospel message. Nevertheless, the early focus on village-based education provided an opening wedge for the gospel story which resulted in a steady stream of interests and conversions, thus laying a firm foundation for ongoing mission within the nation. While rudimentary in nature, education became the key strategy for ongoing church growth as it acted not only as a direct evangelistic tool, but as an incubator for developing future indigenous church workers. The careful instruction by the missionaries meant that early converts had a strong knowledge of Adventist beliefs, a drive for mission, and demonstrated a strength of character that would serve the church well as it began to grow.

Nevertheless, in this environment where education was focused solely on the conversion of the native population, academic rigour was lacking. Few early missionaries had an educational background, and little thought was given to developing individuals for roles other than as full-time missionaries and teachers to their fellow countrymen. Hence, while the early education efforts in the Solomon Islands resulted in many new Christians and workers for the church, they fell

short of the lofty holistic educational ideals expressed in the writings of Ellen White.

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