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A Vision of Freedom

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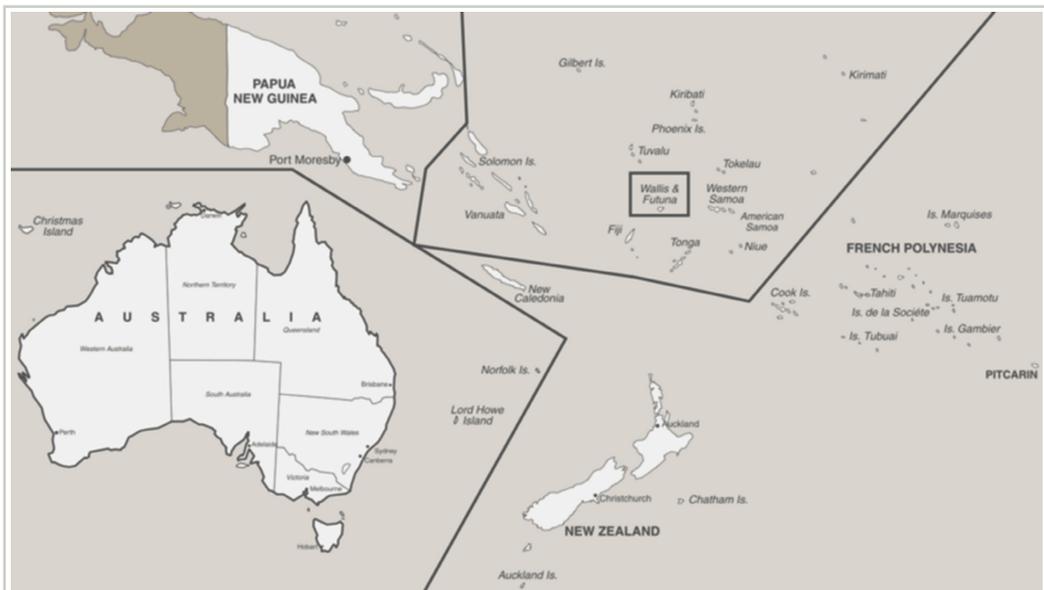
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A VISION OF FREEDOM

“WE ARE NOT DOING THE WILL OF GOD
IF WE SIT IN QUIETUDE, DOING NOTHING
TO PRESERVE LIBERTY OF CONSCIENCE.”

God expects us to continue to uphold these values.



South Pacific Division

Organized 1922

Territory: Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, and the islands of the Pacific lying south of the Equator (including Nauru, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, and others) between Longitude 140 East and Longitude 120 West, and Kiribati north of the Equator;

Churches, 2,030; membership, 424,586; population, 38,212,000.

Think of a globe. Divide its circumference into thirds in your mind. And then imagine a territory so immense, it stretches 1/3 the circumference of that globe. That is the South Pacific Division of the Seventh-day Adventist Church (SPD). It stretches almost 13,500 kilometres from the Cocos Islands in the west to Pitcairn Island in the east, and from the Antarctic in the south to above the equator in the north.

The SPD is not only the largest Adventist division by territory; it is also the most diverse. Papua New Guinea alone has roughly 850 different languages. And the SPD stretches from ultra-modern metropolises to some of the most isolated, inhabited locations on earth. It includes one of the world's most southern cities where cold winds from the Antarctic blow, through to consistently balmy tropical atolls. The division includes nations that are majority Polynesian, Melanesian, Micronesian and Caucasian. There are large Indian, Chinese, Arabic, Sudanese and Chilean communities, among many others, within its borders.¹

I've been the president of the South Pacific Division of the Seventh-day Adventist

Church for eight years. Prior to this role, I served in a variety of capacities in ministry, evangelism, tertiary teaching and administration. My PhD is in ministry and mission from Andrews University. Most of my career I've been based in Australia. However, I spent six years as a frontline missionary in northern Papua New Guinea – and these were among the most fulfilling years.

Like everywhere on earth, societies face significant challenges in our region. These challenges are as diverse as the territory.

In the more remote, developing regions, the problems centre on tribal conflicts, the killing of people accused of witchcraft in some areas, and widespread violence against women. Ironically, many of the nations with the most serious problems in these areas, are also the nations that are the most overtly Christian. But we have to remember that Christianity arrived in many of these regions relatively recently, and many of the cultural problems predate Christianity. Hence, while Christianity has brought a new ideal and dramatically modified behavior in many people's lives, it has not changed all people by any means,



and while the cultures are changing, the problems that predated Christianity's arrival remain prevalent.

The challenge we face in Australia, French Polynesia and New Zealand is quite distinct. Here there is a growing suspicion, or even outright hostility, towards Christianity from secularists. This has been exacerbated by the failings of the churches to protect children in their care from sexual predators. Increasing regulation, calls for an end to, or limitation of, tax-exempt status, and a push to impose regulations that would coerce churches that teach Biblical sexual morality are all in play. In this sense, these pressures are no different from much of Western Europe and North America.

Between the extremes of remote, traditional societies and the modern societies, are the rapidly expanding urban centres in nations like Papua New Guinea (PNG). PNG, where the majority of the Adventists in the SPD live, is developing rapidly. This year its economy is predicted to grow a staggering 20% due to a low baseline and large natural resource projects. The urban classes are consuming the same media as people are around the globe, and being influenced in precisely the same way. For example, PNG has one of the highest rates of online pornography consumption in the world. This material naturally harms the morals of society, demeans women and is associated with gross human rights violations – particularly against women and children. There is also a very large problem with government and private corruption. This corruption, unless it is checked, will result in the bounty from development being squandered and as a result, the future of PNG's young will be irreparably harmed.

Within this complex tapestry, the Seventh-day Adventist Church is striving to lead in the field of religious freedom and public policy. We are active on issues ranging from implementing protections for children in our community, through to standing up for the right of all children to have, where possible, a mother and a father. We have stood up against the killing of "witches" in traditional societies, we are educat-

ing our members to stop violence against women, we're working to encourage our members in government to be scrupulously honest, and we're promoting religious freedom for all peaceful people of faith.

The Adventist Church has championed religious freedom for over 100 years. Now is not the time to give up, or cede leadership to others. The threats we face are very serious. **Ellen White said "We are not doing the will of God if we sit in quietude, doing nothing to preserve liberty of conscience." God expects us to continue to uphold these values.** We may not agree with other people, but we uphold their right to follow their conscience. And we work hard to ensure we also have the right to preach, teach and to live our faith. 

¹ This introductory information is based on an SPD report.



Oliver Barry, President of the South Pacific Division (SPD).