



Wilfred and Serah Billy

Photographed by Eddie Piez.

Billy, Wilfred (1930-2010) and Serah Jennifer (Pandahite) (1938 - 2021)

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Alexander Shand Currie, Ed.D. (Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, USA) retired in 2001 as assistant to the president of the South Pacific Division of Seventh-day Adventists, Sydney, Australia. A New Zealander by birth, Currie has served the Church as a pastor, evangelist, college teacher, director of Theological Education, departmental director at conference and union levels, hospital chaplain, and administrator. In retirement he oversees International Children's Care Children's operations in Cambodia, Thailand and the Philippines and Solomon Island Educational Support. He has authored significant publications and magazine articles. He is married to Beverley with four adult sons, twelve grandchildren and three great grandchildren.

Born on the island of Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands, Wilfred Billy gave 45 years of service as a bookkeeper, pastor, evangelist, college teacher, departmental director, and administrator in the Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, and Australia. Serah Billy stood by his side as a pastor's spouse and mother of their children.¹

Early Life and Education

Wilfred Billy, named Thungea (meaning "ask") by his parents, was born about March 30, 1930, in Namotogo village, Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands. His birth date is a calculated guess.² He had two older siblings: a sister, Kilua Sangua (nee Bili-Buruku) who passed away December 29, 2001, and a brother, Luke Maneka, who died in August 1999.³

Thungea lived with his parents, Bili-Buruku and Uthulia, at Komamogho village in the highlands of Guadalcanal, the largest island in the Solomon Islands archipelago. The village was approximately 75 kilometres from Henderson Airfield, the center of the Guadalcanal battle between the Japanese and Americans during the World War II.⁴ His father, Bili-Buruku was a devil priest, who accepted Christ and became a Seventh-day Adventist in 1944, when he was baptized. His mother, Uthulia, was a village woman who not only became an excellent housewife but a good mother to her children.⁵

Bili-Buruku first heard the Seventh-day Adventist message in 1933, when Tapalaboi, a missionary from Choiseul Island in the Western Solomons, settled at Bubughoro village, an hour and a half's walk from Komamogho village where Bili-Buruku resided. Tapalaboi visited Komamogho village almost weekly, requesting Bili-Buruku to give permission to establish a mission school in the village. The response was not until 1942, the year the Guadalcanal war campaign erupted, when the school was built, but Bili-Buruku still refused to accept the Adventist message.⁶

Eight months after the establishment of the village school, Bili-Buruku had a dream.⁷ He started attending church the next morning (in those days Adventists conducted evening and morning worships), and his wife began accompanying him the next morning.⁸

In 1944, when Bili-Buruku was on his death bed, he called for Tapalaboi, thanked him, and said that he did not have a tangible present to give him, as dictated by custom and tradition, but that he could take his son, Thungea, who was playing outside as a gift to the mission. The caveat was that if he was any good, use him, and if not, send him home. Wilfred honored his father's promise to the mission and served the SDA church all his

life.⁹

Baptized at the Kopiu mission school on Guadalcanal in 1946, he commenced a rather limited formal education. He continued at Betikama Adventist Primary School where he received an invitation to work as the late Pastor Ray Richter's gardener and house helper. Such individuals learned English faster as they spoke to expatriates and at the same time acquired methodical methods of caring for property.¹⁰

Denominational Service and Marriage

Wilfred T. Bili-Buruku (affectionately and commonly known as Wilfred Billy or just Pastor Wilfred) began his service for the church on March 1, 1950, after attaining an equivalent of a grade 4 education. He served as an office janitor and ledger keeper in the Eastern Solomons Mission office until February 28, 1953.¹¹

Sometime after the war, Thungea attended a camp meeting in Australia and stayed with a family who found it hard to pronounce his name, so they gave him a selection of names to choose from, and he chose Wilfred. It stuck with him for the rest of his life. On his way back to the Solomon Islands as the boat came in sight of his home island, Guadalcanal, he located the shoes he had been required to wear in Australia and threw them overboard, knowing he would never use them in the Solomon Islands.¹²

On March 1, 1953, he became the first national ledger keeper in the Lae office of the Coral Sea Union Mission, Papua New Guinea, where he served until February 28, 1954.¹³

Wilfred possessed a lifelong desire to educate himself. In his quest to improve his formal education he attended Jones Missionary College situated near Rugen Harbour on the Gazelle Peninsula of New Britain, Papua New Guinea, from March 1, 1954, to December 31, 1955, where he earned College 1 and College 2 certificates.¹⁴

When he concluded his studies, the college appointed him cashier from January 1, 1956 to December 31, 1957.¹⁵

During Wilfred's study and work at Jones Missionary College he met and married Serah Jennifer Pandahite (born February 27, 1938), youngest daughter of Pastor Pandahite Romity (Panda) and his wife, Kenduri, who served for some time as missionaries at Wylala in what was then the Gulf District of Papua New Guinea. Pastor Panda's father, Chief Romity, had rejected G. F. Jones request to start mission work at Ugehele Village on Rendovah Island in the Western Solomon Islands, which resulted in Jones moving to Viru and the Marovo Lagoon to establish the work of the SDA Church in the Solomon Islands. Wilfred and Serah were married on September 11, 1958, at Jones Missionary College.

In 1958 Wilfred received an appointment to a secretarial position in the Bismark Solomons Union Mission until the end of that year when he and Serah went to the Bougainville Mission where Wilfred served as the cashier/clerk of the Bougainville Mission until December 1962. The young couple then accepted an assignment at the New Ireland Mission where Wilfred served as cashier/clerk in 1963 and as the secretary/treasurer in 1964.

¹⁶ He was ordained on April 1, 1963.¹⁷

Wilfred and Serah had five of their own children and one adopted son. Reeves Siegfried Billy was born October 11, 1959, at Kastorita Hospital on the mission station, Wakunai District, Bougainville, Papua New Guinea. Kastorita is a local name that means “the swirling sands the octopus makes when disturbed.” The shape of the inlet causes the coastline to erode, which means that waves wash away much sand. Through the years the whole coastline has experienced much erosion.

Fairall Conrad Billy was born at Nonga Base Hospital, Rabaul, East New Britain, Papua New Guinea. Wilfred and Serah then adopted Derwin Alick Billy who was born at Rumba, Bougainville, Papua New Guinea. Camilla Uthulia Billy was born at Honiara, Solomon Islands; Nicholas Larondelle Billy at Kokopo, Papua New Guinea; and Ruth Andrea at Honiara, Solomon Islands.

Toward the end of 1964 the Bougainville Mission invited Wilfred back, where he served as secretary/treasurer in 1965 and then as the assistant president of the mission from 1966 to 1968.¹⁸ The president of Bougainville Mission until the end of 1967, Horrie Watts, wrote:

We enjoyed a very happy time working together, both Margie and I appreciated the company of both Wilfred and Serah. Particularly on Saturday nights when they often came to play Scrabble. Almost every time they would beat us. Pastor Wilfred Billy was an outstanding national to have as my assistant on Bougainville. His grip of the English language left one wondering, what next!

On one occasion I was searching for an elusive paper punch and on questioning Wilfred he replied, ‘Oh, Master, I have long since relegated that to the realms of antiquity.’ He was reliable with his work as Secretary Treasurer, always faultless. There were times he was misunderstood by missionaries who were not used to gifted nationals. Pastor Wilfred also possessed excellent practical skills and was quick in learning how to use building tools and equipment.¹⁹

At the beginning of 1969 the Wilfred Billy family received an invitation to relocate to Sonoma Adventist College on the Gazelle Peninsula of New Britain where Wilfred taught ministerial students.²⁰ Wilfred was the first Solomon Island Bible teacher at the college, serving until the end of 1974. At the end of 1970 he was also the first Solomon Islander appointed to the Australasian Division Executive Committee.²¹ While the family lived at Sonoma College, Serah taught typing to women Bible instructor students, who after graduation served in offices, departmental positions, and became wives to some ministerial graduates. She also taught some potential ministers to type.²²

Alex Currie directed theological education at the college at the time and remembers planning with Pastor Wilfred his first teaching subjects. After Wilfred decided what he would enjoy teaching, Alex loaded him up with books from his library to help him prepare for his first classes. Often, he studied until the early hours of the morning and after a short sleep would be at his first class at 7:00 a.m. Although he was teaching students with greater formal education, Wilfred quickly gained the respect of students for his pastoral and administrative

experience, his linguistic abilities, and his down-to-earth practical skills. He was greatly appreciated and loved by students to whom he was a model of teaching and preaching excellence. In 1969 he conducted at Kavieng one of many successful evangelistic campaigns.²³

Early in 1975 Wilfred became president of the Madang/Manus Mission where he remained until the end of March 1977.²⁴ Then he accepted an invitation to serve as president of the Eastern Solomon Islands Mission. He remained in that capacity until the end of October 1980 when he accepted an appointment as the field secretary and stewardship director at the head office of the Western Pacific Union Mission based in Honiara. Twelve months later he added the portfolio of ministerial secretary.²⁵ Those appointments concluded at the end of 1984.²⁶

His tenure as secretary of the Western Pacific Union Mission commenced at the beginning of 1985 and ended December 1990 when he should have retired.²⁷ During this time he was awarded an MBE--Medal of the British Empire- for services to the community.²⁸ However, the South Pacific Division invited him to become associate stewardship director at its Sydney headquarters in Wahroonga where he remained from the beginning of 1991 till the end of 1994 when he retired officially.²⁹ During his years of service Wilfred became a popular speaker and teacher in Australia and New Zealand.³⁰

In retirement Wilfred responded to many invitations to preach and teach in various parts of the Solomon Islands. Between 1998 and 2001 serious tensions erupted between various militant ethnic groups on Guadalcanal. Many Guadalcanal people resented settlers from other islands, particularly Malaita, who came to the capital Honiara in search of economic opportunities.³¹ During that period government leaders sought Wilfred's wisdom and counsel. Because of the valuable contribution he made to the peace process, the Solomon Island government asked him to become part of the Townsville Peace Agreement Team.³² Pastor Wilfred Billy died in the Solomon Islands March 10, 2010.³³ He had served his church in the South Pacific Division (SPD) for 45 years.³⁴ Twenty four of those years he spent as a missionary to Papua New Guinea and four as a missionary to Australia. Although Wilfred had only limited formal education, he was gifted with administrative qualities and possessed emotional intelligence and compassion for others. His wife, Serah, faithfully served with her husband throughout all his years as confidant and helpmate. She died at their home village of Inus, Guadalcanal, on March 22, 2021. Their oldest son, Reeves, is a lecturer at Pacific Adventist University, Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea. Wilfred's obituary notice in the Australasian Record stated: "Whether it was preaching, evangelising, teaching or administering, he poured his mental acumen and boundless energies into his work. Many paid tribute to Pastor Billy, saying he was a prince in Israel, a man of integrity, humble, wise, understanding and most of all, a man of God who had a positive influence on the entire Solomon Island nation."³⁵

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NOTES

1. The author is indebted for much of the information in this article to the son of Wilfred and Serah Billy, Reeves Billy. Also, some of the information in this article comes from the personal knowledge and experience of the author as a colleague and friend of Pastor Billy for more than 40 years.
2. Reeves Billy, email to author, December 2, 2019. Used by permission.
3. Ibid.
4. "Battle for Guadalcanal." Accessed January 2, 2020, <https://www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii/battle-of-guadalcanal>
5. Reeves Billy, email to author, December 2, 2019.
6. Ibid.
7. "Christianity is Beyond Culture," *Australasian Record*, November 26, 1995, 9.
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9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Wilfred Billy Service Records; South Pacific Division of the General Conference Archives; Folder: "Billy, Wilfred;" Document: "South Pacific Division Personnel Report."
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14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. E. R. Piez, "Union Mission Survey," *Australasian Record*, November 16, 1964, 2.
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18. R. D. Trim, "Bougainville Walkabout," *Australasian Record*, February 2, 1968, 9.
19. Horrie and Margaret Watts, email to author, December 16, 2019. Used by permission.
20. Wilfred Billy Biographical Records, South Pacific Division of the General Conference Archives; Folder: "Billy, Wilfred;" Document: "South Pacific Division Personnel Report."
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31. "The Tensions," accessed January 7, 2020, <https://www.ramsi.org/the-tensions>.
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