



Medisonship operated in the Solomon Islands by Sonship.

Photo courtesy of Trevor Oliver.

Sonship (South Pacific Division)

BARRY OLIVER

Barry Oliver, Ph.D., retired in 2015 as president of the South Pacific Division of Seventh-day Adventists, Sydney, Australia. An Australian by birth Oliver has served the Church as a pastor, evangelist, college teacher, and administrator. In retirement, he is a conjoint associate professor at Avondale College of Higher Education. He has authored over 106 significant publications and 192 magazine articles. He is married to Julie with three adult sons and three grandchildren.

Sonship is an officially recognized supportive independent ministry of the South Pacific Division of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.¹ It is based in Cooranbong, New South Wales, Australia. It operates a fleet of floating clinics in the Western Province of the Solomon Islands. The vessels, all named *Medisonship*, visit the islands and villages of the province, providing medical care, spiritual care, and health education for the people.

Sonship grew out of the initiative of Helen and Trevor Oliver who, at the request of the Western Solomon Islands Mission (WSIM) president, Nathan Rore, commenced the operation of a shipping business at Meresu, Kolombangara Island, Western Province, Solomon Islands, in 1995. The site of the operations base next to the

planned mission slipway and workshop was made possible by the leadership of the WSIM presidents Puki Tasa and Wilfred Liligetto. The assistance of Cyril Vavazo, the WSIM marine engineer, was crucial in finding qualified local captains and crew. Gora Joseph, son of the Kolombangara paramount chief and resident of Irii, commenced work nineteen years ago as a deckhand and is now captain of *Medisonship 3*.

Sonship commenced operations in 2003. It was incorporated under the umbrella of Adquest Proprietary Limited in 2008.² Helen was the daughter of missionary parents Wallace and Phyllis Ferguson who were long serving missionaries in the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea and Pitcairn Island.³ The name “sonship” was chosen as an acronym for serving overseas nations by ship. It also carries the connotation that all people have sonship with God and the ships belong to the Son of God.⁴

Medical Initiatives Prior To and After the Procurement of the First Medisonship

Since 2004, Sonship has facilitated and sponsored at least twenty-one short-term visits by student and volunteer groups who provided practical and skilled assistance to both Adventist and non-Adventist schools, clinics, churches, and other entities in the Western Province of the Solomon Islands.

In 2004, the interior of the Kukudu Clinic in Western Solomon Islands was refurbished and painted by members of the Hillview Seventh-day Adventist church in Morisset New South Wales. This visit was an inspiration for the Adopt-a-Clinic initiative of the South Pacific Division when division staff noted the difference between the Kukudu Clinic and others in the SPD.⁵ During this visit, volunteers also conducted a children’s program in local villages.⁶ Members of the Hillview Adventist church returned in 2005, to refurbish the Kukudu Clinic’s exterior and tile the bathroom and laundry facilities. Once again children’s programs were conducted in local villages.⁷ They returned to Kukudu Clinic again in 2008 for further refurbishment.⁸

Volunteers from the Hillview Adventist church, along with the Wagner family from Walla Walla, Washington state, returned to Kukudu, Western Province, Solomon Islands for the next two years. In 2006, they painted classrooms and a girls’ dormitory at Kukudu Adventist College (KAC).⁹ In 2007, with the Wagner family, they painted the Kukudu Adventist College chapel/church and conducted a children’s program in local villages (including Ranonga Island).¹⁰

In 2009, Abide Family Ministries conducted programs in various villages and presented a major concert performance in the Gizo town center.

Between 2009 and 2013, Brisbane Adventist College (BAC) and Darling Downs Christian School (DDCS) worked on a number of projects in Western Province, Solomon Islands. Most included a children’s program in the local villages. In 2009, volunteers from both schools refurbished boys’ dormitories at Kukudu Adventist College and conducted children’s programs in local villages.¹¹ They returned in 2010 to paint the girls’ dormitories.¹² BAC

volunteers returned to Kukudu in 2011 to tile the dining hall while DDCS volunteers working in Kena and Hunda, Kolombangara Island, became the first to assist a church of another denomination when they painted the United Church pastor's house.¹³ In 2013, BAC volunteers painted the girls' dormitory at Batuna Adventist Vocational School, Western Province, Solomon Islands. This was the first *Sonship* trip to the Marovo Lagoon. Visits were made to four villages to the south of Batuna: Tetambere, Keto Keto, Kokete, and Manabusu.¹⁴ The same year, DDCS volunteers continued their work for other denominations, painting the South Sea Evangelical Church's (SSEC) training school dormitories. The DDCS volunteers worked Niumalla and Tiparere, Vonavona Lagoon, Western Province, Solomon Islands.

In 2013, the Wagner family from Walla Walla, Washington, returned to work their own project in Meresu, Kolombangara Island, Western Province, Solomon Islands. The local Adventist church was painted and spiritual programs were conducted in the local villages.

The Hillview Adventist church from Morisset, New South Wales, returned to Kukudu, Western Province, Solomon Islands, further refurbishment for the Kukudu Clinic including building a covered walkway between the maternity ward and general ward in 2014.¹⁵ Children's spiritual programs were conducted in local villages. Also, in 2014 BAC volunteers returned to Batuna Adventist Vocational School, Western Province, Solomon Islands. A second coat of paint was applied to the girl's dormitory. Visits were made to four villages to the north of Batuna: Lolovuru, Cheke, Telina, and Bisuana.¹⁶

In 2015 and 2017, DDCS returned to Kolombangara Island, Western Province, Solomon Islands where they painted classrooms and some dormitories at Kaza Community High School and Mount Seoika Seventh-day Adventist Primary School. Spiritual programs were conducted in the local village at Kaza. Water was connected to the toilet block. In 2016, members of Hillview Adventist church joined the work on Kolombangara Island by painting the ships and Sonship staff houses. Spiritual revival programs were conducted in local villages Iriri and Hambere.

BAC volunteers returned to Batuna Adventist Vocational School, Western Province, Solomon Islands, in 2016 at which time they painted the wooden chapel. Further village visits were conducted.¹⁷ In 2017, a small team of BAC graduates accompanied Medisonship III and Medisonship IV crewmembers with visits to villages including Cheke, Chea, Seghe, and several villages in the Vona Vona and Roviana Lagoons before visiting villages around Kukudu. At each village, medical assistance was provided and the team gave health instruction, focusing on teenagers and their unique issues.¹⁸ In 2018, BAC volunteers returned to Batuna Adventist Vocational School, Western Province, Solomon Islands, to paint the original church at the school, Motusu, on the peninsula at Batuna. This church was dedicated on June 7, 1934.¹⁹

The Medisonships

When the Hillview Seventh-day Adventist church team visited Kukudu in 2007, there was opportunity to visit many villages that had been decimated by a recent tsunami and earthquake. The team members witnessed firsthand the desperate need of the isolated villages. The outcome was that it was decided that one way to help on a more permanent basis was to provide medical services that were delivered to the villages.²⁰

By 2019, six vessels had been put into operation. *Medisonship I* commenced service in 2008.²¹ It was retired in 2015.²² All other vessels are still operating at the time of writing: *Medisonship II* since 2015, *Medisonships III and IV* since 2016,²³ and *Medisonships V and VI* since 2019. Each vessel has a team of Solomon Island personnel to care for its operation: a captain and an engineer along with two nurses and one chaplain.²⁴

The purchase of each vessel has been financed through the donations of individual and business donors. While operational expenses were originally also being financed through donations, those expenses are now being largely met from the sales income at the *Sonship Op Shop* in Morisset, New South Wales. Personal donations continue and also contribute to the operation of the vessels.²⁵ In 2012, the prime minister of the Solomon Islands, Gordon Darcy Lilo, donated SI\$25,000 to *Sonship*.²⁶ In 2016, a fund-raising cruise was organized. A percentage of the cost of the cruise was donated to *Sonship* and participants were able to visit the Solomon Island headquarters of *Sonship* at Meresu, Kolombangara Island, Western Province, Solomon Islands.²⁷

The Op Shops

The first Op Shop opened in August 2017 at 25 Allianz Avenue, Morisset, New South Wales. It worked on the basis that people from the community donated their used items to the shop. These items were sold and the income derived was utilized in the operation of *Sonship* projects, primarily the *Medisonships*. After fifteen successful months, the shop was relocated to larger premises at Unit 3, Gateway Boulevard, Morisset. The office of *Sonship* is now located on these premises.²⁸

Outcomes

Up until the end of 2019, the medical ships had treated over 120,000 patients free of charge, with many lives saved. The area known as the Vonavona Lagoon where *Medisonships* started work in 2008 had always been an area where the Adventist Church was not welcome. The work of *Sonship* opened the region for all facets of the Adventist work. A small church was established with around forty people attending each Sabbath, and three villages in this area allowed weekly Bible Study meetings with approximately fifty people attending each group. At the time of writing, five volunteer ministers were permanently located in this area. At least eighty baptisms have occurred as a result of the work of the *Medisonships*.²⁹

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Jackson, Clinton. "Girls Get \$5000 to Serve." *Adventist Record*, January 18, 2014.

Jackson, Clinton. "Students Minister in Solomon Islands." *Adventist Record*, October 29, 2016.

Jackson, Clinton and Jarrod Cherry. "Adventist Students Help Restore Solomons Landmark." *Adventist Record*, September 8, 2018.

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NOTES

1. The author acknowledges the assistance of Trevor Oliver, president of Sonship, Braden Oliver, Glenda McClintock, Joy Taplin, and Graham Taplin in the preparation of this article. Unless otherwise credited, the information in this article comes from the personal knowledge and experience of Trevor Oliver, Braden Oliver, son of Trevor and Helen Oliver, and the author, brother of Trevor Oliver.
2. Trevor Oliver, email to author, December 12, 2019.
3. Personal knowledge of the author as the brother of Trevor Oliver.
4. Trevor Oliver, email to author, December 12, 2019.
5. Elizabeth Lechleitner, "South Pacific Clinics," *Adventist World*, February 2008, 5-6.
6. Trevor Oliver, email to author, December 12, 2019.

7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. "Two Schools in Queensland...," *Record*, August 1, 2009, 4.
12. Trevor Oliver email to author, December 12, 2019.
13. Clinton Jackson, Hayden Jaques and Trevor Oliver, "PM Donates to Adventist Ministry," *Record*, June 2, 2012, 7.
14. Clinton Jackson, "Girls Get \$5000 to Serve," *Adventist Record*, January 18, 2014, 3.
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17. Clinton Jackson, "Students Minister in Solomon Islands," *Adventist Record*, October 29, 2016, 7.
18. Clinton Jackson, email to Trevor Oliver, December 7, 2019
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21. Andrew Kingston, "New Mission Boat for the Solomon Islands," *Record*, May 10, 2008, 4.
22. "New Addition," *Record*, November 7, 2015, 12.
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24. Trevor Oliver email to author, December 12, 2019.
25. Ibid.
26. Clinton Jackson, Hayden Jaques and Trevor Oliver, "PM Donates to Adventist Ministry," *Record* [South Pacific Division], June 2, 2012, 7.

27. "Sonship Mission Cruise," *Record*, June 20, 2015, 8; "Sonship Cruise to the Pacific Islands," *Adventist Record*, December 24, 2016, 10.

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid.

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