



(L-R) Esther and George Quinlin greeting General Conference President Neil Wilson and South Pacific Division President Keith Parmenter, c. 1980.

Photo courtesy of South Pacific Division Heritage Centre.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Leadership in the South Pacific Division

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The development of leadership among indigenous Seventh-day Adventists in Australia has met with varying degrees of success throughout the history of the Church in the country.¹

Beginnings: Rudge and Branford

Pastor Phillip Rudge was appointed to the Macleay Valley region in New South Wales sometime towards the end of the first decade of the 20th Century.² Rudge embraced his work, and the success of his evangelistic outreach to the Burnt Bridge Aboriginal community caught the eye of church leaders, who arranged his transfer at the end of 1911 to follow up `interests' at Berambah, a government-run Aboriginal station near Murgon, Queensland.³

Although Rudge reported positively on the work at Berambah, he quickly recognized that if something of lasting value was to be achieved, the church should follow the example of some other denominations and adopt a `mission station' methodology.⁴ Church leaders agreed, and in 1913 Rudge, together with Pastor Branford, were directed to pioneer the establishment of the first Seventh-day Adventist Aboriginal mission at Mona Mona, near Kuranda, in north Queensland.⁵

Unfortunately, Rudge was unable to remain in North Queensland due to his wife's ill-health, and in mid-1914 the Australasian Conference reassigned him to develop the Aboriginal work on the mid-north coast of New South Wales, where he had experienced previous success.⁶ Rudge located himself in Kempsey, where he took some time reflecting on how to minister more effectively to his Aboriginal parishioners. This proved a wise course of action. The work began to grow, and the Macleay River Aboriginal Church of Seventh-day Adventists was soon established.⁷

As Rudge reflected on these early experiences and the effectiveness of his ministry, he recognized that in order to be more successful in evangelizing Aboriginal community groups, it was important to train people to be leaders and "enable them to reach their own people."⁸ This reflection formed part of his report to the tenth Session of the Australasian Union Conference in 1918.⁹

While there is no record of an official response to Rudge's report, subsequent events indicate that the Church was supportive of his recommendations. Aboriginal missions and their schools were established and funded at considerable expense at Mona Mona in North Queensland, and later at Karalundi and Wiluna in Western Australia.¹⁰

Mona Mona Mission 1913 – 1962

In July 1916, just two and a half years after opening, Mona Mona celebrated its first baptisms. Five young women, between fifteen and 30 years of age, became the `first fruits' of the mission. Four of these young women remained committed to their faith and went on to become matriarchs of well-known Adventist families, with names such, as Brim, Levers, Assan, and Sheppard. These families, along with others, were to play important roles in the future of the church's work in North Queensland and beyond.¹¹

Within fifteen years of this baptism, trained leaders were being sent from Mona Mona to other mission fields. The first to volunteer were Richard and Jessie Richardson. Richard was appointed to assist in the mission building program within the Australian administered territory of Papua. He and Jessie were soon followed by their daughter and son-in-law, Minnie and Willie Sheppard, in 1933. Minnie had been one of those baptized in July 1916. In 1937 they were joined by Stanley and Mabel Sheppard, who remained in Papua until the outbreak of the Second World War.¹²

According to pioneer missionary Pastor Robert Frame, who was “well acquainted” with the Sheppards and Richardsons, they were “a fine example of Christian missionaries.”¹³ Ken Boehm, son of pioneering missionary Eric Boehm, and a missionary to Papua New Guinea himself, noted, “the Aboriginal missionary couples were a tremendous success and played an important role in imparting not only the gospel of Christ but practical Christianity.” Like the Adventist Missionaries from the Pacific Islands, he argued that they “learnt and spoke the Motu language and were able to translate for English speaking missionaries. The wives were good leaders, and some taught in schools and ran sewing classes.”¹⁴

At the outbreak of the Second World War, the last Aboriginal missionary, Stanley Sheppard, was evacuated back to Australia with his family. These missionaries had served the church and the community as builders, teachers, and Bible workers. They made a significant contribution and helped spearhead the early growth of the Seventh-day Adventist faith in the Aroma, Mirigeda, and Bisiatabu regions of Papua.

Karalundi & Wiluna Missions 1954 – 1974

Inspired by the early successes at Mona Mona, the Western Australia Conference requested permission to begin Aboriginal mission work as early as 1914, and again in 1916.¹⁵ Unfortunately, from 1915 onwards the Western Australian Chief Protector of Aborigines was opposed to church involvement in Aboriginal affairs. This attitude lasted until the appointment of Stanley Middleton as Commissioner for Native Affairs in 1948, and meant that the Western Australian Conference was unable to begin formal Aboriginal mission work until the mid-1950s.¹⁶

An Aboriginal boarding school was commenced at Karalundi, Western Australia, in September 1954.¹⁷ Children from Wiluna mission and the surrounding region were sent to Karalundi to complete junior secondary school. Of those who completed school and showed promise academically and spiritually, a select number were sponsored by the Adventist Church to continue their training at Carmel College in the hills, east of Perth. Some of the students who benefited from this additional training included Clarry Cameron, who became a leading employee at Wiluna Mission; ¹⁸ Pam Brockman, Kaye Stewart, Jeannie Kyanga, Madeleine Walley, Francis Riley, Lucy Wallace, Mervyn Lewis, Kathy Green, Irene Jackson, Angie Stewart, and Stanley Hill.¹⁹

A number of students received on-the-job training from qualified mission teachers such as Esther Robartson and May Miller. Gladys Freddie was trained and assigned the role of junior teacher at Karalundi for a period of four years. Freddie was competent in her duties and at the end of her time at Karalundi was transferred to

Wiluna Mission, where she was employed in a similar capacity.²⁰ Freddie played the organ for morning and evening worship and the weekly church programs.²¹

By 1966, Lorna Redmond (nee Stewart) was working as a teacher and was eventually given the Wiluna Mission kindergarten class of about twenty children to teach. It is reported that the State Education Department Inspector commended her on the work she was doing and confirmed that she “is the only full blood native in Western Australia who is teaching full-bloods, people of her own tribe.”²²

In 1971, Pastor Dudley Vaughan, who pioneered the establishment of both Karalundi and Wiluna Mission, wrote with pride about “the educated staff of young people who have been through our schools” and who were now working for their own people. He went on to say, “these young people are loyal, sharing the responsibilities of conducting a busy and growing mission programme.”²³

With the eventual closure of Mona Mona in 1962, and Wiluna and Karalundi mission in 1974, most of these training initiatives faltered. While the plan was to continue working with Aboriginal communities from local church settings, in many areas the work languished.

New South Wales

In 1974, the same year that the Western Australian Conference closed its Aboriginal missions, North New South Wales Conference appointed Alec Thompson to minister at Kempsey Church. As part of his role, Thompson was expected to provide pastoral care to the large Aboriginal community. Many of these families identified as Seventh-day Adventists because of their connections to the early work started by Phillip Rudge, and the later efforts of Edward Rosendahl and the Seventh-day Adventist Aboriginal school at Five Day Creek.

Alec Thompson had experience working with other cultures, and was convinced that his work with the Aboriginal community would be significantly enhanced by the appointment of an Aboriginal assistant. North New South Wales Conference leaders agreed, and in early 1975 George Quinlin from Bellbrook was appointed as a ministerial intern under Thompson’s supervision.²⁴

It was a successful two-way partnership. Quinlin received his ministry training on the job, while Thompson learned how to minister more effectively to his Aboriginal parishioners. In 1978, clearly motivated by what he had learnt, Thompson submitted a comprehensive and insightful report to conference leaders in which he reminded them of the need for a simple, practical training program to equip potential Aboriginal leaders with the skills to reach their own people.²⁵ The proposal captured the original intent of the Aboriginal mission programs and the recommendations of Phillip Rudge 60 years earlier.

George Quinlin became a prominent figure in the Adventist Church’s Aboriginal work. He, along with a team of indigenous advisors, worked with Ronald Taylor and other church leaders to establish a more coordinated approach for the Church’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ministry. In 1980, the year that Quinlin was

ordained, the national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ministries (ATSIM) department was formed at the Australasian Division under the direction of Bruce Roberts. Pastor Quinlin became an effective right-hand-man to the newly appointed ATSIM coordinator.²⁶

It was reported that the Adventist Aboriginal community was welcoming of the new ministry which they could call their own. When canvassed by senior church leaders, the consistent response of Aboriginal church members was, “give us the tools to work with and we will work with you for our own people”²⁷

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ministries

Under the direction of Bruce Roberts, leadership development and training became a major focus of the newly formed ATSIM department. Within a short time, George Quinlin was sponsored for 12 months to audit selected theology classes at Avondale as part of his ongoing professional development.²⁸ After seeing some of the challenges faced by a number of other indigenous students at Avondale, Roberts realised that ATSIM needed a way of “training its own ministers or the work would die.”²⁹

A number of options were explored, and in 1984 it was decided to sponsor two students to Oakwood College, in Huntsville Alabama, U.S.A. This centre of learning was originally founded in 1896 to educate African American students from the southern states of America. However, by 1984 students were attending the College from across the USA and around the world.

The sponsorship opportunity was advertised in the Australia-wide ATSIM publication called the *Good News*. The sponsorship was eventually awarded to³⁰ two students who departed to undertake courses in pastoral ministry and secondary teaching, respectively. Unfortunately, neither entered church employment at the completion of their studies. After some deliberation, it was agreed not to send further students to Oakwood College.

The same year the Oakwood scholarships were offered, Frank Saunders, an ex-Navy man and brewery worker who was living in South Australia, passed the Avondale College entrance exams. Saunders enrolled in the theology course on a full sponsorship with ATSIM and graduated at the end of 1988. Following graduation, he was employed as a church pastor in Sydney.³¹ Saunders was ordained to the gospel ministry on Christmas Eve, 1994.³²

In 1985, the year that Frank Saunders started theological studies at Avondale, ATSIM sent Ron and Dawn Archer, who had replaced Pastor George Quinlin at Kempsey, to Longburn College for six months to attend the Ministerial In-service Upgrading School.³³ Dawn’s maiden name was Levers, and her family traced their Adventist connections to the first baptism at Mona Mona in 1916. Dawn was an excellent partner-in-ministry for Ron, and in 1987 they were transferred from Kempsey to minister in Wiluna, Western Australia. Ron was ordained to the gospel ministry at the Perth Camp Meeting in April 1987.

Also in 1985, George Quinlin, who was pastoring congregations in Mareeba and Kuranda in North Queensland, was sent to New Orleans, Louisiana, to represent ATSIM at the Adventist Church's world-wide General Conference Session. Following this event, he embarked on a professional development study tour, which included a visit to Oakland College and various centers of Adventist work among Native Americans.³⁴

In the 1990s, ATSIM continued to work to train indigenous leaders, and to reopen Karalundi School. But while Aboriginal leaders were being mentored into their respective ministry roles and various training opportunities were presented, it became obvious to all concerned that a facility dedicated to training Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ministry workers was desperately needed.

ATSIM Bible College

In 1991, a Western Australian lay training school initiative had been established to fill the training vacuum. This initiative was a partnership between ATSIM and the Western Australian Conference. The advertisement in the *Good News* described the proposed curriculum. It included, "how to prepare and give Bible studies, speak in public, talk to others about Jesus and what the Bible teaches and share with your people who follow traditional culture and religion."³⁵ This was the first formal attempt of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Australia to provide culturally aligned ministry training for Australian indigenous people. The lay training school continued for a number of years, and some of the attendees later enrolled at the ATSIM Bible College (which became known as Mamarapha College).

However, ATSIM continued to wrestle with the idea of establishing an "alternate ministerial training program designed to meet the needs of its culturally diverse people and give them the skills to minister to their own people." In 1994, an ATSIM sub-committee led by Eric Davey was established to plan the way forward.³⁶

Pastor Davey immediately sought the advice of Ken Vogel, president of Western Australian Conference. Vogel understood the issues as he had been actively involved with the ATSIM lay training school and had also been principal of Omaura Lay Training School in Papua New Guinea some years earlier. Informed by his understanding, Vogel proposed a competency-based learning model, which was subsequently approved by the committee.³⁷

Vogel and Davey, along with retired education director Max Miller and his wife Val, prepared the relevant documentation for submission to government. Together with a number of others, they worked for two years to get national accreditation for the college and gain registration as a training organisation.³⁸

The new college opened as ATSIM Bible College, and classes began in 1997 under the leadership of Pastor Gordon Stafford and his Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander assistant, Lynelda Tippo. Global mission funding had been set aside for operational costs, and it was the ATSIM committee's hope that the college would survive long enough to train just a few additional Aboriginal ministers to fill the various ministry and leadership

positions that were needed.³⁹

The achievements of the college far exceeded expectations. Graduates have been employed as conference departmental directors, pastors, church-sponsored Bible workers and volunteers, all trained for the gospel ministry, fulfilling the dream first expressed by Phillip Rudge more than one hundred years ago.

Pastor Darren Garlett was sponsored to complete degree level studies in theology at Avondale College in 2007. Towards the completion of his studies, Garlett was appointed as the ministry coordinator for Mamarapha College, and served in that capacity until December 2017. The Australian Union Conference appointed him to be the first Aboriginal national ATSIM director at its 2017 year-end meetings.⁴⁰

At the time of writing in 2020, there are seven Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander departmental directors and coordinators across the Australian Union Conference, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders are represented on the Australian Seventh-day Adventist Church's governing bodies at every level.

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NOTES

1. Much of the information in this article comes from the personal knowledge and experience of the author, who was the national coordinator for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ministries, a department of the Australian Union Conference, between 2007 and 2017.
2. See Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ministries, Australia; Glynn Litster, "The Aborigines," in *Seventh-day Adventists in the South Pacific*, ed. Noel P. Clapham (Warburton Victoria: Signs Publishing Co, 1985), 188; See Rudge, Phillip B.
3. George Teasdale, "The Work in Queensland," *Australasian Record*, January 1, 1912, 5.
4. Glynn Litster, 188.
5. Selwyn Hawken, "Monamona to 1929." Unpublished document held in the Northern Australia Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church Archives, Aitkenvale, Queensland, 2.
6. "Brother P. B. Rudge . . .," *Australasian Record*, June 29, 1914, 8.
7. P.B. Rudge and Isa Rudge, "Kempsey Aborigines Mission," *Australasian Record*, October 21, 1918, 57-60.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. See Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ministries, Australia.

11. Grandma Lucy Levers, "History of Mona Mona Mission: Part Two," *Good News for Aborigines and Islanders*, vol. 8, no. 3, 1988, 3; H. E. Piper, "A Visit to Mona Mona," *Australasian Record*, July 14, 1941, 4.
12. Ken A. Boehm, "The Aborigines of Papua New Guinea." Unpublished manuscript, January 17, 2006, personal collection of the author; See Australian Indigenous Missionaries from Mona Mona Mission.
13. Robert Frame, email to Ken Boehm, November 21, 2007, personal collection of the author.
14. Ken A. Boehm, cited in Brad Watson, "Australian Indigenous Missionaries from Mona Mona Mission," *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists*, encyclopedia.adventist.org, 2020.
15. Western Australian Conference Executive Committee Minutes, November 8, 1914. Western Australian Conference Executive Committee Minutes, October 11, 1916.
16. Stephen Piez, *What Are You Doing for Us: The Untold Story of Karalundi 1954-2004*, Warburton, Victoria: Signs Publishing Company, 2006, 3-9.
17. See Karalundi.
18. A. D. Vaughan, "Among the Aborigines in Western Australia," *Australasian Record*, October 18, 1971, 1.
19. Piez, 2006, 64-65.
20. Western Australian Conference Executive Committee Minutes, October 26, 1971.
21. Vaughan, 1971, 5; Gladys Ashwin, interview by author, July 13, 2003.
22. W. E. Rudge, "Gospel Triumph Among the Aborigines," *Australasian Record*, February 28, 1966, 5.
23. Vaughan, 1971, 1.
24. Nathan Brown, *Pastor George: The Story of the First Aboriginal Adventist Pastor*, Warburton, Victoria: Signs Publishing Company, 2010, 23-24; see Quinlan, George.
25. A. Thompson, "The Aboriginal Work: A Report presented to Seventh-day Adventist Church leadership North New South Wales Conference Officers," c.1978, held in the personal collection of the author.
26. Australasian Inter-Union Conference, more commonly referred to as the Australasian Division, became known as the South Pacific Division in 1985.
27. Ronald Taylor, email to author, March 17, 2010.

28. Bruce Roberts, interview by author, April 8, 2020.
29. Bruce Robert, email to Darren Garlett 2010, in the possession of the author.
30. "Oakwood College Offer to Aborigines," *Good News for Aborigines and Islanders*, vol. 4, no. 3, 1984, 4.
31. "Editorial," *Good News for Aborigines and Islanders*, vol. 8, no. 6, 1988, 2.
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36. "News Spots," *Good News for Aborigines and Islanders*, vol. 14, no. 3, 1994, 10.
37. Ken Vogel, interview by author, May 31, 2007.
38. Ibid.
39. Eric Davey, interview by author, March 7, 2007.
40. Personal knowledge of the author from working as the national ATSIM director from 2007-2017.

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