

Australasian Union Conference Involvement in Southeast Asia Before 1912

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The close proximity of Australia to Southeast Asia naturally led union conference officials in Australia to adopt responsibility for the establishment of Seventh-day Adventist missions in that region, first in Sumatra, then Singapore, followed by the Philippine Islands and Java. The period covers the years prior to 1912.

Introduction

Two independent forays by colporteurs had taken place in the area during the 1890s. The first was by an enterprising American, Mr. Senker, about 1893. He sold *Home Hand Book* in Singapore and India before returning to Tennessee.¹ Later, a Mr. H. B. Meyers and his son, William, traveled from India to canvass for six



John Fulton 1922. Fulton was president of the Australasian Union Conference between 1909 and 1912. Much of that time South East Asian territories were in the Australasian Union Conference.

From the collection of Julie and Barry Oliver.

months among Europeans in Singapore and the Malay States. They sold 564 books, titles including *Man the Masterpiece*, *Ladies' Hand Guide*, *The Great Controversy*, and *Patriarchs and Prophets*.²

An unrelated series of events was happening in Singapore with Ralph and Carrie Munson conducting an orphanage and school sponsored by the Methodist Mission. The Munsons then took a furlough back in Ohio, where they converted to the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church. They returned to the Orient in 1900, making their base at Padang on the west of Sumatra. Munson translated some tracts and a small hymnal, held an occasional baptism, and imported a mattress-making machine to begin a cottage industry.³ He was largely self-supporting, teaching English to Chinese boys who wanted to become clerks in the commercial world. He conducted worship services on weekends for the same boys and their friends. One youngster from his former Singapore orphanage, Tay Hong Siong, better known as Timothy Tay, transferred to Padang to help him.⁴

When Munson was establishing himself at Padang, a growing sense of mission toward the territory was developing in Australia.⁵ Elder Edward Gates had sailed on the first and sixth voyages of the *Pitcairn* as its mission leader. His aim was to explore entry points in the Pacific and Orient for SDA evangelism. Initially, his missionaries for the Pacific were enlisted from America, but when he settled in Australia, his thinking shifted primarily to Australasian recruits. In 1899 he lectured on mission work at the Avondale School for Christian Workers and searched for potential missionaries. A Mission Committee was set up at union conference level with Gates as chairman.⁶ In 1901, when he presented his report to the Australasian Union Conference Session, he spoke of progress in the Pacific Islands and included Munson's mission as one under his umbrella.⁷ At the end of the year 1901, Gates made an exploratory trip to Singapore.⁸

Sumatra, 1901–1911

In response to Munson's appeals for assistance, George Teasdale and his American wife, Mattie, were appointed to transfer from Australia to Sumatra.⁹ They arrived in January 1902 but within weeks had left their post and returned home without consulting church officials. Administrators were bewildered and annoyed by this unprecedented move, and Teasdale's reputation was dented.¹⁰

Munson persevered, producing more tracts and changing his location in order to teach English to the Dutch at Fort de Kock.¹¹ The transition was brief. Within a few months, he was back in Padang. At the same time a nurse from New York, Marcelia Walker, was appointed to initiate some medical mission work in the area.¹²

Munson described Walker as stubborn, conceited, cranky, ignorant, untidy, lazy, uncouth, quarrelsome, short-tempered, untruthful, and crazy. She scalded three infants with hot water treatments, and her infamy spread rapidly.¹³ When she tried to poison the Munson family with bichloride of mercury in their teakettle and salt shaker, the police were called, and she was interred in Buitenzorg (Bogor) asylum, Java.¹⁴

Timothy Tay, Munson's assistant, spent a few months in Amoy, China, to improve his use of the Chinese language with a view to returning as a missionary.¹⁵ In 1904 Munson reported the baptism of seven individuals, bringing the total membership to 12.¹⁶ In mid-1905 he took respite in Australia for the benefit of his children's education.¹⁷ The small group of orphan children that he nurtured were removed to Singapore, where the SDA missionaries cared for them.¹⁸ Munson continued to do some translation work in Australia and returned to the territory later.

It was not for another 12 months after Munson departed before a replacement arrived in Padang. Teasdale's brother-in-law and sister, Gustav and Margaret Wantzlick, were appointed to continue the mission.¹⁹ Wantzlick found most of the converts operated their commercial businesses on Saturdays,²⁰ and it was difficult to establish rapport because he did not speak their language. Wantzlick virtually had to start all over again. His German background made it easier for him to communicate with the those among the Battaks in the mountains behind Padang who spoke Dutch.²¹ Six young Battak men showed interest, and the three older ones, Immanuel, Ezekiel, and Gaius, were sent to the Singapore mission for training.²² They returned to their homeland in 1909. Wantzlick was the ideal man to nurture them in mission work, but he was due for a furlough and sailed to Europe, leaving Bernard and Emma Judge in charge, neither of them being familiar with Dutch.²³

Judge employed similar mission strategies to those used by Munson. He taught English to Chinese boys by using *Gospel Primer* and *Christ Our Saviour*. His sister, Tena "Teenie" Judge, arrived in November 1910 to assist with nursing and Bible work.²⁴ Munson returned in 1911 under appointment to Java but visited Padang to advise Judge. During his brief stay, he baptized two individuals and found a better instructor for Judge to become conversant with the local language.²⁵

On December 31, 1911, the Sumatra Mission was transferred from the Australasian Union Conference (AUC) to the Asiatic Division, enabling the AUC to concentrate their overseas mission efforts in the Pacific Islands.²⁶ After more than a decade Sumatra had yielded few baptisms and no established SDA church.

The Malay Peninsula, 1901–1909

When Gates made his exploratory trip to Singapore late in 1901, he remained there for a few months to test the prospects for a mission footprint in the city. He converted and baptized a British soldier²⁷ but then hurried to mission work on Norfolk Island.²⁸ It would be another two years before any real attempt was made to establish mission work in Singapore. Elder Griffiths Jones and his wife, Marion, were appointed to pioneer the city together with colporteur Robert Caldwell.²⁹ They arrived on October 28, 1904, and rented a home at 32 Sophia Road. Jones used *Good Health* magazines to introduce his mission. The first breakthrough came with the conversion and baptism of the Fox family, who later moved to Java.³⁰ Fox was a Britisher married to an Asian. He conducted a private school for locals wanting to learn English. Caldwell met with a great deal of opposition from resident clergymen while selling *The Desire of Ages* and moved on to Siam, Manila, Hong Kong, and China.³¹

On January 10, 1905, an important planning session was held in the Joneses' home. Elder George Irwin, president of the AUC, visited, along with Munson from Sumatra, and consulted with the newly arrived missionaries. They agreed that Singapore was ideally situated as their base of operations. They proposed to set up a small press in addition to requesting the Avondale Press to supply some larger translated books. They applied to receive two more colporteurs and a doctor and two nurses for medical missionary work and to establish a health food store.³² Most of these goals were fully met in the following years.

One press was sent from Australia and another from Samoa, and yet another was purchased for £40 in Singapore.³³ Back in Australia, at the Avondale Press, work began on Munson's translation of *Christ Our Saviour*, both in Singapore- or Baba-Malay and Javanese-Malay. These were delivered in 1907. Timothy Tay, who had started selling tracts in 1906, sold two thousand copies of *Christ Our Saviour* when it first arrived.³⁴ After Caldwell moved further afield, Fred Parkin from Australia replaced him, disembarking on February 24, 1906, and remaining about two years, selling *Daniel and The Revelation* and *Christ Our Saviour* in Singapore and the Malay States. He was known to start the day early and sell up to eight books before breakfast.³⁵ Some Chinese converts, Chan Teck Sung and Lee Chin Seng, witnessed by selling tracts.³⁶

Edgar and May (Burgess) Davey, recent nursing graduates of the Sydney Sanitarium, pioneered hydrotherapy treatments in Singapore. They arrived on April 29, 1905.³⁷ Their efforts did not attract a large clientele, and they transferred to America after two years in order for Edgar to pursue a medical degree.³⁸ They were replaced by nursing graduate Mabel Lewes.³⁹

A small health food store was attempted for a short time but discontinued because the goods quickly spoiled in the humid climate. Teasdale quipped that the Granose sprouted and the nut food took root.⁴⁰

At the 1906 AUC Session two appointments were made to strengthen the Singapore mission.⁴¹ William Fletcher was designated to assist Jones in evangelism and oversee tract and book distribution.⁴² Joseph Mills was chosen to establish a missionary training school and take charge of the printing presses.⁴³ A small school was first conducted in the mission home, but a search for a suitable property to develop into something bigger yielded a two-story building named "Mount Pleasant." It was located, as the name suggested, on elevated ground at 147 Thomson Road.⁴⁴ In August 1907 Jones leased it for two years, and there Mills taught a growing number of pupils, assisted initially by a convert, Miss Sim Gee Nio.⁴⁵ When she transferred to Java, Kenelm Hungerford came from Australia in November 1908 to assist Mills.⁴⁶ The institution became known as the Eastern Training School. Munson arranged for young people in Australia to send funds for the support of students.⁴⁷

In addition to the standard book learning at the training school, Mills gave the young men the opportunity to learn carpentry and printing skills. They made furniture and helped to print the Malay language tracts, including issues on the Sabbath and the Second Coming.⁴⁸ In 1907 other Protestant bodies in Singapore publicly accused the SDA church of teaching that Christ was born with a sinful nature and eventually overcame it. The mission team felt obliged to counter this misinformation and printed a tract to outline their belief in the sinless nature of

Christ, citing *The Desire of Ages* that Caldwell had sold throughout Singapore.⁴⁹ At the same time, plans were underway to publish a periodical. However, this goal was not realized until early 1909 when a four-page quarterly was first issued titled *Zaman Pughadisan* (Time of the End). Two versions, one in Dutch-Malay and another in Singapore-Malay, were printed.⁵⁰

By 1909 Jones and his team were secure in Singapore despite opposition from other church groups. There was a core of approximately 45 baptized members with extras attending Sabbath School.⁵¹ In view of these results, the AUC allocated the first quarter 1909 Sabbath School offering to build a church.⁵² Government authorities allowed plans to go ahead for construction on Penang Lane near Fort Canning and the Methodist and Presbyterian churches. The local newspaper dubbed the area “Chapel Row.” Williams, Draper, and Steadman designed the attractive building. One thousand Singapore pounds were donated from America for the land and construction costs.⁵³ A schoolroom at the back was included in the design.⁵⁴ Jones had the satisfaction of opening and dedicating the building on August 21, 1909.⁵⁵

The following month, September, it was announced at the AUC Council that the General Conference would assume control of missions in the Malaysian Peninsula and Philippine Islands. This move took effect at the end of 1909 with the AUC scrambling to transfer its regional headquarters to Java.⁵⁶ Twelve months later, the AUC asked for the Malaysian Peninsula to be restored to Australasian administration, but the request was declined.⁵⁷

The Philippine Islands, 1905–1909

In late 1904 Robert Caldwell, an Australian colporteur, sold copies of *The Desire of Ages* in Manila during a few months stopover en route to Hong Kong.⁵⁸ He returned later for a major sales campaign. Elder Edward Gates visited Manila in late 1905 to explore mission possibilities.⁵⁹ Subsequently, Americans James and Cora McElhany were appointed to sail from Australia to try to establish an SDA presence. They arrived in April 1906 and began to learn the Spanish language.⁶⁰ They distributed the Spanish language magazine *El Mensajero de la Verdad* (The Messenger of Truth) and English language periodicals such as *Good Health* and *Signs of the Times*.⁶¹ McElhany also arranged for the translation and printing of tracts in the local Tagalog language.⁶²

McElhany's stay was comparatively brief, lasting less than two years before he was compelled to move to the cooler climate of New Zealand for health reasons.⁶³ He had worked mainly with American servicemen who, of course, were a transient population and did not provide any long-term headquarters for SDA work.⁶⁴

Caldwell returned to Manila about the same time as the McElhanys were leaving. For two years, he sold books in Manila and the hinterland with astonishing success.⁶⁵ First, he used the Spanish translation of *Patriarchs and Prophets*, shipping his supplies from Pacific Press Publishing Association.⁶⁶ Later, he covered some of the same ground with *The Coming King* in Spanish.⁶⁷ He reported orders for 1,130 books. From his sales records, he obtained addresses and regularly posted Spanish tracts and periodicals to his customers.⁶⁸

Lewis and Ella Finster arrived in Manila on December 17, 1908, to join Caldwell and continue evangelism well after the departure of the McElhaneys.⁶⁹ Finster had many names from Caldwell's lists to visit and generate further interest. Within the first year, he conducted his first public crusade in the city.⁷⁰ As a result, Finster initiated a Sabbath School at Santa Ana, suburban Manila, of approximately twenty national members, which continued to grow.⁷¹

Finster quickly discovered that only 5 percent of the population spoke Spanish, so he decided to focus his attention on learning one of the chief local languages, Tagalog, and have literature translated into that and other local languages. He was fortunate to gain the services of Sofronio Calderon, translator of the Bible into Tagalog. Calderon translated *Thoughts on Daniel* for Tagalog readers and a number of tracts, including one on the Sabbath topic that persuaded him to convert to Adventism. Finster claimed Calderon was the first to be baptized as a Seventh-day Adventist in the Philippine Islands.⁷²

When the General Conference assumed control of the Philippine Islands Mission on December 31, 1909,⁷³ a robust start had been made that foreshadowed a bright future.

Java, 1906–1911

When the Fox family moved from Singapore to Surabaya in late 1905, they formed the nucleus of an Adventist mission in Java. Surabaya was a major metropolis with extreme humidity, little sanitation, and prevalent outbreaks of cholera and other deadly diseases. Fox was there to offer private tutorials to the many young men who wished to better their education. The family wished for some Adventist missionaries.⁷⁴ Their hopes were realized with the appointment of George and Mattie Teasdale in addition to Petra (Tunheim) Skadsheim.⁷⁵ The Fox family welcomed them and found lodgings for them. Teasdale had real fears about the tropics. With two little children in his family, he should never have been expected to risk their lives in a place like Surabaya.⁷⁶ The dire circumstances were exacerbated by the widespread SDA view that drugs, even antimalarial tablets, should not be taken.

Language study was the first priority for Teasdale and Skadsheim. Dutch, of course, was the easier one to acquire. Skadsheim reverted to her maiden name of Tunheim. She found a few individuals willing to attend Bible readings in their home.⁷⁷ Teasdale learned of an elderly Dutch woman, Miss Janz, living near Semarang, who kept the Saturday Sabbath. He visited her and found she wanted the SDA mission to take control of her established mission commune. She was situated in an elevated place called Pangoengsen, providing a cool and healthy rural environment. A core group observed the Sabbath with her. Tunheim lived in the commune for a few months, learning more of the Dutch language and waiting on Elders Gates and Jones to visit and decide on the takeover offer.⁷⁸

Gates and Jones made the fateful decision not to accept the offer. Instead of using Pangoengsen as a ready-made mission headquarters, they chose to risk the perils of Surabaya. Within a few months, a deadly form of

malaria raged in the city. One of the Fox children died. Teasdale lost one of his sons, Lawrence. Tunheim barely escaped with her life, and her skin was blotched purple and black. Thousands around them lost their lives.⁷⁹ Teasdale's initial fears of the region were realized. He later published a defence of the hydrotherapy treatments they used without recourse to quinine. The Java Mission had publicly advocated this view but had to admit the error.⁸⁰ It was a major tragedy for all and forced a change in strategies.

Mourning the loss of his son, Teasdale realized the enormity of his problem. He believed he was in a fight for his life and those of his fellow missionaries. He immediately began a desperate search for another property outside Surabaya, one with a cool climate like Pangoengsen.⁸¹ However, in a matter of weeks, his other son became so ill with malaria that he and Mattie fled back to America with him.⁸² A nurse, Anna Nordstrom, was despatched from Australia to provide medical assistance for Tunheim.⁸³ Miss Sim Gee Nio, a convert from Singapore, joined the two women in their mission efforts.⁸⁴

Tunheim and Nordstrom continued the search for a cool sanctuary in the mountains. They needed funds urgently, so they invested in quantities of *The Ministry of Healing* and sold them on the streets and in the business houses of Surabaya, salting away the profits in order to pay for a property.⁸⁵ In mid-1908 they found an ideal home called "Soember Wekas" (Well of Blessing) at Prigen. They purchased it for £166 with visions that it would provide a haven from the humidity and disease of the city and perhaps be used as a small sanitarium one day.⁸⁶ Indeed, nursing graduates Bert and Lily Thorpe were the first to make it their home in the closing months of 1908.⁸⁷ They immediately began to give treatments in the local community, using packhorses to minister further afield. Lily related her brush with a tiger on one occasion. She dashed for the shotgun, but the animal slunk away.⁸⁸ At another time a huge python slithered under a mat in their home. Lily emptied both barrels into the mat.⁸⁹

The tragic loss of lives in Surabaya, among missionaries and converts alike, left an indelible mark on the hearts of church officials. Elder John Fulton, vice-president of AUC, was despatched to Java to make amends and lay plans for a safer future. He arrived in October 1908, visited Janz at Pangoengsen, and agreed to assume control of her enterprise. Tunheim was appointed to return to the commune and take charge temporarily.⁹⁰ She conducted a school for over forty pupils. Teasdale himself received vindication when he and his family were welcomed back to Australia from America, and he was appointed in 1909 to tour the Java and Sumatra region in an advisory capacity.⁹¹

During the next three years, 1909–1911, there were a number of new arrivals, including George Wood, who married Nordstrom. The couple took the lead at Pangoengsen.⁹² Dorothy Knight came from Sydney to assist in Bible work for 18 months before moving to England for a cooler climate.⁹³ Elder William Hofstra and his wife, Rolena, arrived from Michigan to superintend mission work among the Dutch but only stayed nine months before illness overtook him.⁹⁴ Another Dutchman, Jacob van de Groep, sold the Dutch version of *The Coming King* throughout the island.⁹⁵ When the General Conference assumed control of the Singapore Mission, the

printing presses were taken to Soekaboemi in the Preanger district of Java, and Hungerford transferred in order to operate them.⁹⁶ Munson returned to Java from Australia to continue his translation work and assist Hungerford but retired to America after less than two years because his wife became ill.⁹⁷ The Thorpes returned to Australia when Lily was stricken with severe malaria.⁹⁸ Only the Woods and Tunheim managed long-term mission work in Java, made possible by periodic spells at high and cool altitudes. Much seed was sown, but at the end of 1911, when Java and Sumatra were ceded to the Asiatic Division, the few baptized members were scattered, and no church was organized.

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