

Quinlin, George Lester (1939–2008)

NATHAN BROWN

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George Quinlin was the first Australian Aborigine to be ordained as a Seventh-day Adventist pastor. He ministered in churches around Australia over a period of 29 years, during which time he was one of the pioneers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ministries (ATSIM), first as a department of the South Pacific Division, then as the Australian Union Conference.

Early Life

George Lester Quinlin was born on September 8, 1939, on the Nulla Nulla Creek Aboriginal Reserve at Bellbrook in the Macleay Valley, west of Kempsey, New South Wales. He was the sixth of 18 children born to John and Minnie Quinlin and a member of the Thungutti people, the traditional custodians of the tribal lands of the Macleay River.¹

Quinlin grew up on the aboriginal reserve and began attending school there. The Seventh-day Adventist Church had been reaching out to aboriginal people in the Kempsey region since 1915 and continued to have influence with some of the aboriginal families, including books of Bible stories that were in the Quinlin home. When Quinlin was an early teenager, an Adventist pastor held evangelistic meetings at Bellbrook, and a number of his family members were baptized.

To allow him to receive two years of high-school education, Quinlin was sent voluntarily to board at the Kinchela Boys' Home in Kempsey, an institution that became infamous for its brutality and harsh treatment of aboriginal



Esther and George Quinlin

Photo courtesy of Barry Oliver.

boys, most of whom had been forcibly taken from their families and home communities.² At age 15 Quinlin left school to work with his father and uncles clearing land in the Macleay Valley.

At about eighteen years of age, Quinlin was baptized at a church camp, along with a number of other young people from the aboriginal community, including a young woman by the name of Esther Scott, who was also from Bellbrook. However, Quinlin moved to Sydney to escape some of the restrictions placed on aboriginal people in the Macleay region, including the restrictions on the access to alcohol, and found employment in the Holden car factory. On his regular visits home, Quinlin developed a relationship with Esther. She eventually agreed to return to Sydney with him, and they set up a home in the suburb of Marrickville, while they continued to have Bible studies with a Pastor Needham.³

While they both had good jobs, Quinlin had developed a serious problem with alcohol, which culminated in his hospitalization. This experience turned his life around in a number of ways. He continued Bible studies, and he and Esther were married by Pastor Needham on May 29, 1964. After work opportunities took the Quinlins to Armidale, they were rebaptized together in 1972.

Ministry

In 1974, returning from mission postings in the Pacific islands, Pastor Alec Thomson was transferred to the Kempsey region with a brief to grow the Adventist Church's work among the aboriginal communities in the region. He was keen to adopt a pattern of working that he had used in previous postings: adopting a local person as a trainee who could minister to their own people and facilitate communication with them.⁴ Thomson met Quinlin during their respective visits to Bellbrook, and he noticed Quinlin's quiet leadership among the group of church young people. Accordingly, Quinlin was offered the position of intern minister, which he accepted with some misgivings about his background and limited education.⁵

In the following six years, Quinlin's work contributed to building up and ultimately building the Kempsey Aboriginal Centre, which was officially opened in March, 1983, and would serve both as an aboriginal church and the office of the Australasian Division's Department for Aboriginal Work, under its first director Pastor Bruce Roberts.⁶ During this time, both George and Esther contributed to the first issues of a new magazine, *Good News for Aborigines and Islanders*, to which Quinlin would continue to contribute across the rest of his ministry. Recognizing and affirming his growing ministry and leadership, Pastor Quinlin was ordained to ministry on December 12, 1980.⁷

Quinlin's ministry continued in a number of the key aboriginal population centers in Australia, including Kuranda and Mareeba in northern Queensland (1982–85), Tennant Creek in the Northern Territory (1986–1988), Meekatharra and Wiluna in the central desert of Western Australia (1988–1993)—during which time Quinlin oversaw the construction of a new church building at Meekatharra⁸—and as departmental director for aboriginal work in the Greater Sydney Conference (1994–2000), before he returned to pastor the Bellbrook,

Kempsey South, and Mirriwini churches in his home region (2000–2004).⁹

Across the years of his ministry, Quinlin was a regular speaker and leader at national and regional aboriginal camp meetings and similar events. As the “aboriginal work” continued to develop, he was also a member of successive advisory committees for this work, as well as representing aboriginal church members at church business sessions and executive committees. In 1985 Quinlin became the first indigenous Australian to serve as a delegate to a General Conference Session, held that year in New Orleans, Louisiana.

Described by former ATSIM director, Pastor Eric Davey, as an “unofficial assistant” director for ATSIM,¹⁰ Quinlin was keen to mentor other aboriginal pastors and championed the opening of a Bible college to make a pathway for others. In 1997 he was excited to be part of the planning and opening of Mamarapha College, based near Perth, Western Australia¹¹—and to celebrate its first graduation of 16 students at the end of that year.¹² At the time of his retirement at the end of 2004, Quinlin celebrated the ordination of the church’s second and third aboriginal pastors—Pastor Darren Garlett and Pastor Eddie Hastie, respectively.¹³

Later Life

While officially retired, Quinlin continued to travel, speak and serve as an “unofficial” leader of the Adventist Church’s ministry to Australia’s indigenous peoples. But living in Bellbrook, he was again surrounded by many members of his extended family and reengaged with his local community. Quinlin spoke on health issues that were affecting his people, and he and Esther contributed to projects that taught and preserved the Thungutti language in their region.

In 2007 Quinlin was diagnosed with cancer but took the opportunity for extensive travel, revisiting many of the places around Australia in which he and Esther had pastored. After participating in the national ATSIM campmeeting in January, 2008, he was admitted to Sydney Adventist Hospital for surgery but died as a result of further health complications on February 13, 2008, the day on which the Australian prime minister officially apologized for some of the past mistreatments of Australian aborigines. Quinlin was buried in Kempsey after a funeral attended by more than fifty of his fellow Adventist pastors and church leaders.¹⁴

Contribution

George Quinlin was a quiet man who became an unofficial leader of the Adventist Church in Australia because of his ability to communicate cross-culturally, his wisdom in relating to people and his experience of the transformation that God made in his own life. Though never holding an administrative leadership position, he was a guiding force in the growth of the church’s ministry to Australia’s indigenous peoples and the establishment of the Mamarapha Bible College for the training of more indigenous pastors and community health workers.

His story was told in *Pastor George: The Story of the First Aboriginal Adventist Pastor*, published by the Australian Union Conference in 2010, to honor his legacy, to better educate church members about the church's ministry to aboriginal people, and as an opportunity to share with indigenous readers the faith that changed Pastor Quinlin's life.

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4. Alec Thomson, interview with author, October 14, 2009.
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