

Oli, Lui

(1923–2011)

COLIN RICHARDSON

Colin Richardson, M.Trop.Hlth. (University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia). Richardson retired in 2017 as pastor, South New South Wales Conference, Australia. A New Zealand-born Australian, Pastor Richardson served the church as nurse, teacher, and administrator in Cambodia, Singapore, Zaire, Rwanda, Somalia, Ethiopia, Guinea and Papua New Guinea, before serving 14 years as a pastor in Australia. In 2002 he founded Action on Smoking or Health (PNG). He is married to Merian, and has three adult sons.

Lui Oli was a pioneering Papuan pastor and leader. He was the first Papuan to be the president of the Central Papuan Mission and the first of his countrymen to be a member of the Australasian Division executive committee.



Lui Oli at Kikori, 1964.

Photo courtesy of Colin Richardson.

Early Life (1923-1944)

Lui Oli, was born February 23, 1923, in Irupara village, Central District (Province), Territory of Papua (Papua New Guinea), to Oli Veleke and Manu Raka, one of three girls and six boys.¹ His father was a subsistence fisherman/gardener. When Lui Oli was eleven years of age, he first heard the gospel story from missionary Galama Pau and his wife, Kila Kapa (who was Lui Oli's cousin). He was very interested, and desiring to learn more, followed them 70 kilometers east to Pelagai on the Aroma coast, along with a number of other boys, several of whom also later became pastors.² Over the next two years he completed all classes to Standard 3, under teacher Kairi Kekeao, and missionaries J. Ross James and Alma Wiles³.

In 1937, Lui Oli continued his education at Mirigeda Training School near Port Moresby, where in 1939 he completed Standard 5.⁴ His teachers were Ken Gray and Stan Pennington. He also worked as houseboy for Robert Frame, the Papuan Mission treasurer.⁵ It was during this period that he was baptized at Mirigeda on November 15, 1938, by William Lock.⁶

In mid-1940, Lui Oli married Kila Iao Kalawa (circa 1924-1944), before returning to Irupara.⁷ Kila Iao Kalawa was born in Irupara around 1924. A son, Jonathan Vela (now deceased), was born to them. He was raised by Kila Iao

Kalawa's family after her premature death.⁸

World War II engulfed the Pacific by 1941, and in early 1942, Australian army personnel came to Irupara drafting young men to serve as carriers. Lui Oli was conscripted with a number of others. In Konedobu, Port Moresby, most were made carriers, but he was among those selected to serve the officers, duties he performed until the end of the campaign in Papua New Guinea.⁹ Among other responsibilities, he served as houseboy and cook for Major-General Basil M. Morris, who was in charge of Australian forces in Port Moresby.¹⁰

Lui Oli saw the missionaries depart for Australia on the mission ship *Diari* on February 5, 1942.¹¹ When the missionaries returned in early 1944, they negotiated the release of the Adventist young men from military service. Lui Oli was among those released. He returned to Pelagai where he helped in evangelistic work and, in about May 1944, his wife, Kila, passed away from pneumonia and malaria despite all the missionaries could do.¹²

Career in Ministry (1944-1981)

On September 1, 1944, Lui Oli was officially appointed as a teacher for the Papuan Mission. His first assignment was in his home village of Irupara, where over the next year he established an Adventist congregation.¹³ For the next eight years, he served in this capacity in a number of villages in the Hula-Aroma coastal area, including Irupara, Pelagai, Maopa, Gaivakala, Madana, and Korela, visiting, preaching, and teaching the Bible, studying with people, and building up churches.¹⁴ In 1946, he taught a day school in Irupara with seventy students and a baptismal class of twenty.¹⁵

In March and April of 1947, Lui Oli accompanied Lester Hawkes on an extensive inland mission journey on foot from Korela (Marshall Lagoon) to the Owen Stanley Ranges. Over a three-week period, they entered areas that had never heard the gospel, and others that eagerly sought a teacher.¹⁶ In June of the same year, Lui Oli with Kila Kai, another mission teacher, repeated this journey, preaching and teaching.¹⁷ About the same time, donated funds from Australia furnished him with a bicycle to facilitate his expanding work.¹⁸

In a wedding officiated by Martin Pascoe, Lui Oli married Esther Pala Kila at the Korela Mission on October 15, 1947.¹⁹ She was born at Irupara to Kila Rupa and Augerea Iga,²⁰ Esther Pala Kila studied at Alma Wiles' girls' school at Korela.²¹ Lui Oli and Esther Pala Kila had four sons, Walter, Gideon, Joel, and Iga. In 1965, they adopted a daughter, Alma.²²

From 1953 to 1955, Lui Oli served as a teacher at the Coral Sea Union Training School at Kabiufa in the Eastern Highlands District (Province) under the leadership of Ken Gray, his former teacher, and Stan Gillis.²³ During this period, on April 2, 1955, Lui Oli was ordained to the gospel ministry at Kabiufa by J. B. Keith, president of the Coral Sea Union Mission.²⁴

The administrative phase of Lui Oli's work began in 1956 when he was called to serve as secretary/treasurer of the Western Papuan Mission, based at Oriomo near Daru in the Western District (Province) of Papua, with Kila

Galama as president. In addition to these duties, he continued his missionary and teaching work.²⁵ To aid in this work, he had the use of a small mission ship, *Diari II*. During 1958, he sat exams in Port Moresby and received a boat captain's certificate enabling him to skipper the mission ship.²⁶

Mission re-organization in 1960 saw the merging of the Western Papuan and Papuan Gulf Missions. Lui Oli continued to work in Oriomo, but became a member of the new Papuan Gulf Mission executive committee.²⁷ The same year he travelled to Brisbane, Australia, to help sail the new mission ship *Uraheni* to Papua New Guinea.²⁸

Lui Oli was appointed assistant president of the new Papuan Gulf Mission and assumed his new duties in January 1961.²⁹ This involved moving to Karokaro on the Vailala River, where he served with first, Elwin Martin and then, John Richardson. He was a delegate to the 1962 Australasian Division quadrennial session, held in Sydney, Australia. In February 1964, the mission headquarters was moved to a new station at Kikori and the Oli family moved there.³⁰

The mission ship *Light* was transferred from Madang to Oriomo in 1966, to serve the western district of the Papuan Gulf Mission. Lui Oli was sent to help captain the ship on the voyage.³¹

In 1967, Lui Oli was appointed assistant president of the Central Papuan Mission in Port Moresby, the capital city. He served in this role for six years, working with three presidents, Ernest Lemke, Lester Lock, and his old colleague, John Richardson.³² In 1970, he was appointed a member of the Australasian Division executive committee, the first Papua New Guinean to be given this responsibility.³³ He remained a member for the next ten years.

With the departure of John Richardson for Goroka, Lui Oli was appointed president of the Central Papuan Mission in 1973.³⁴ Over the next four years, four new churches were established in the Port Moresby area. He visited remote parts of his territory, often on foot, including villages along the Kokoda Track.³⁵ This period saw major church growth throughout the mission.

In March 1977, Lui Oli became president of the Madang-Manus Mission, based in Madang.³⁶ Here, he again had the use of the mission ship *Light*.³⁷ During this time he opened new work in the Simbai district³⁸ and initiated an extensive prison ministry in Madang.³⁹ His maturity and caring leadership was much appreciated by those with whom he worked.⁴⁰ He retired on February 1, 1981.⁴¹

Later Life (1981-2011)

In retirement, Lui Oli and his wife returned to live in their home village, Irupara, where he rebuilt the old church.⁴² He then commenced missionary work in the large nearby village of Hula (population 5,000). In 1982, a small church was built there and a number were baptized. For the rest of Lui Oli's life, he ministered to the Hula company,⁴³ walking 5 kilometers each way every Sabbath.

One Sabbath in 2001, Lui Oli collapsed while walking to Hula. Taken to Port Moresby hospital, he was diagnosed with a left cerebral hemorrhage. Surgery saved his life, but two days later he suffered a second hemorrhage, this time on the right. The doctor predicted only a 10% chance of surviving further surgery, but Lui Oli's son, Gideon, requested him to proceed. The surgery was successful and Lui Oli's health was restored.

While in hospital convalescing, he awoke one morning, and asked his daughter, Alma (who was caring for him), if she had seen anyone enter the room. She answered no. Then, Lui Oli told her that someone had visited him, instructed him to return home, and to build a church at Hula.⁴⁴ Lui believed it was a message from God.

The Hula church company became an organized church in 2004.⁴⁵ One of those Lui Oli baptized in 2006 was the minister of another church.⁴⁶ In 2007, he wrote to his old friend, John Richardson, seeking financial help to build a larger church at Hula.⁴⁷ As a result, A\$26,000 was raised⁴⁸ and on May 23, 2010, the church was opened and dedicated.⁴⁹

Lui Oli died in Port Moresby on July 11, 2011, at the age of 88.⁵⁰ His family believed God had granted him another ten years to complete his work in Hula. He was buried at Hula on July 20, 2011.⁵¹

Legacy

Lui Oli was one of the most prominent Papuan mission leaders of his time. He was the first national president of the Central Papuan Mission, and the first Papua New Guinean to serve on the division executive committee. He was a quiet achiever. His most noticeable quality was his humility. He served for many years in the shadow of foreign missionaries, as their mentor and guide, often knowing their work better than they did. He was gifted in understanding people, how to bring out the best in them,⁵² and a very capable administrator.⁵³ When appointed to leadership, his ability resulted in strong growth in membership. In many ways, he pioneered the way for national leaders to take over the work of the Church in Papua New Guinea. His son, Walter, also became an ordained pastor and mission president.

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NOTES

1. Lui Oli, "Saved from a Spear for Service," *Journal of Pacific Adventist History* 6, no. 1 (June 2006): 27; Gideon Oli, email message to author, April 24, 2019, information from Mrs. Esther Oli (Lui's widow).
2. Ibid.; Lui Oli Service Records, South Pacific Division of the General Conference Archives, folder: "Oli, Lui," document: "Personal Service Record;" Gideon Oli, son of Lui Oli, email message to author, April 24, 2019.
3. Lui Oli, "Saved from a Spear for Service," 27.

4. Ibid.; Lui Oli Service Records, South Pacific Division of the General Conference Archives, folder: "Oli, Lui," document: "Personal Service Record."
5. Lui Oli, "Saved from a Spear for Service," 27; Robert Frame, "Mission and Memories of life and service in the Pacific Islands," *Journal of Pacific Adventist History* 6, no. 1 (June 2006): 43-44.
6. Lui Oli, "Saved from a Spear for Service," 27.
7. Ibid.
8. Gideon Oli, email message to author, April 24, 2019.
9. Lui Oli, "Saved from a Spear for Service" 28.
10. Personal comment to Pr. John Richardson, his president and colleague (and author's father), ca 1965.
11. C.E. Mitchell, "Papua to Australia on the 'Diari,' *Australasian Record*, March 30, 1942, 3-4.
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13. Graham John Humble, "Contextualization and Christianity in a Changing Traditional Society: Maritime Redemptive Analogies in Hula Culture" (PhD diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 2012), 45.
14. Lui Oli Service Records, South Pacific Division of the General Conference Archives, folder: "Oli, Lui," document: "Personal Service Record."
15. T. A. Sherwin, "New Guinea Walkabout (concluded)," *Australasian Record*, December 16, 1946, 6. Sherwin says the school was in Hula, which would be a district name here—the family states it was in Irupara (Gideon Oli, email message to author, April 24, 2019); T. A. Sherwin, "New Guinea Walkabout (continued)," *Australasian Record*, December 9, 1946, 4.
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18. "A Letter from a Papuan Teacher," *Australasian Record*, September 1, 1947, 5.
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22. Lui Oli Service Records, South Pacific Division of the General Conference Archives, folder: "Oli, Lui," document: "Personal Service Record;" Lui Oli, "Saved from a Spear for Service," 28, 29.
23. Lui Oli Service Records, South Pacific Division of the General Conference Archives, folder: "Oli, Lui," document: "Personal Service Record;" "Coral Sea Union Training School," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1954), 251.
24. Lui Oli Service Records, South Pacific Division of the General Conference Archives, folder: "Oli, Lui," document: "Personal Service Record;" Lui Oli, "Saved from a Spear for Service," 29.
25. Lui Oli Service Records, South Pacific Division of the General Conference Archives, folder: "Oli, Lui," document: "Personal Service Record;" "Western Papuan Mission," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1957), 76.
26. John R. Richardson, "What Would You Have Done?" unpublished memoirs in the personal collection of the author. Gideon Oli, emails to author, April 24, 2019 and April 26, 2019. Gideon was with him when he sat his exams.
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28. Lewis & Dulcie Parker, *Following God's Command* (self-published), 85.
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30. Personal knowledge of the author who, as a child accompanied the Richardson and Oli families to Kikori.
31. H. A. Dickins, "New Seas for a Forty-Five," *Australasian Record*, June 13, 1966, 5-6.
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33. "Tidings from the East," *Australasian Record*, February 11, 1970, 12.
34. "Flash Point," *Australasian Record*, February 5, 1973, 16.
35. Gideon Oli, email message to author, April 26, 2019.
36. Lui Oli Service Records, South Pacific Division of the General Conference Archives, folder: "Oli, Lui," document: "Personal Service Record."
37. Lui Oli, "Saved from a Spear for Service" 30.
38. Gideon Oli, email message to author, April 26, 2019.

39. Raymond Coombe, "Opening Prison Doors," *Australasian Record*, October 1, 1979, 7.
40. Kevin Amos, "Pr. Lui and Esther Oli," unpublished document in the personal collection of the author.
41. Lui Oli Service Records, South Pacific Division of the General Conference Archives, folder: "Oli, Lui," document: "Personal Service Record." The service record gives last day of service as "January 31, 1980," but this is plainly an error since the previous line gives the entire year of 1980 in service as president of the Madang Manus Mission. The additional month is recorded on a line beginning "1981," and can only be January 1981; thus, retirement commenced on February 1, 1981.
42. Gideon Oli, email message to author, April 24, 2019.
43. Lui Oli to John Richardson, February 6, 2007, private letter, personal collection of the author.
44. Gideon Oli, email message to author, April 26, 2019.
45. Lui Oli, "Saved from a Spear for Service," 30.
46. Lui Oli to John Richardson, February 6, 2007, private letter, personal collection of the author.
47. Ibid.
48. Gideon Oli, email message to author, April 24, 2019.
49. Roy Richardson, email message to author, June 3, 2010. Richardson was the family representative at the dedication.
50. Lui Oli Service Records, South Pacific Division of the General Conference Archives, folder: "Oli, Lui," document: "Personal Service Record."
51. Gideon Oli, email messages to author, April 24, 2019 and April 26, 2019.
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