



Sepik Mission Headquarters office, building 1.

Photo courtesy of Aaron Mendai.

Sepik Mission, Papua New Guinea, South Pacific Division

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The Sepik Mission is the Seventh-day Adventist administrative entity for the Sepik Region of mainland Papua New Guinea. Its headquarters are in Wewak, Papua New Guinea.¹

The Territory and Statistics of the Sepik Mission

The territory of the Sepik Mission is “East Sepik Province and Sandaun Province (excluding Telefomin District and Western Islands District of Manus Province) of Papua New Guinea.”² It is a part of and responsible to the Papua New Guinea Union Mission (PNGUM), Lae, Morobe Province, Papua New Guinea. The Papua New Guinea Union

Mission comprises the Seventh-day Adventist Church entities in the country of Papua New Guinea. There are nine local missions and one local conference in the union. They are the Central Papuan Conference, the Bougainville Mission, the New Britain New Ireland Mission, the Northern and Milne Bay Mission, the Morobe Mission, the Madang Manus Mission, the Sepik Mission, the Eastern Highlands Simbu Mission, the Western Highlands Mission, and the South West Papuan Mission. The address of the administrative office of the Sepik Mission is Seventh-day Adventist Mission, Wewak, 531, Papua New Guinea. Its postal address is P.O. Box 54, Wewak 531, Papua New Guinea.³

The mission operates under General Conference and South Pacific Division (SPD) operating policies. Those policies state that the officers of the Sepik Mission are elected by the PNGUM.⁴ “The mission president elected by the union is a member of the union committee and is the union representative in the conduct of the work in the mission. The president shall, with the local mission committee, supervise and carry forward the work in the local mission.”⁵ Mission associate officers and departmental personnel are elected at a duly called session of the mission where representatives from all churches in the mission are present.⁶

In 2018, the Sepik Mission had sixty-eight organized churches and 178 companies. Church membership at the end of 2018 was 14,865. The mission had eighty-seven active employees. Its tithe receipts for 2016 totaled US\$530,035. Its tithe and offerings per capita were US\$62.37.⁷

The Schools of the Sepik Mission

At the end of 2018, there were eleven primary schools and one secondary school in the mission with a total of 1,389 students and sixty staff.⁸ The schools were:

Ambunti Seventh-day Adventist Primary School, located at Ambunti on the Sepik River, had an enrollment of 196 students and a teaching staff of eleven.

Bonahoi Seventh-day Adventist Primary School, located at Maprik in the East Sepik Province, had an enrollment of 242 students and a teaching staff of eleven.

Darapap Seventh-day Adventist Primary School, located on Wewak Island in the East Sepik Province, had an enrollment of sixty-six students and a teaching staff of two.

Dawary Adventist Primary, located in Yangoro-Kubalia in the East Sepik Province, has not reported student enrollment or teaching staff in recent years.

Imombi SDA Primary School, located at Ambunti in the East Sepik Province, no report of enrolment or teaching staff has been received in recent years.

Jalalap Seventh-day Adventist Primary School, located on Wewak Island in the East Sepik Province, had an enrollment of 120 students and a teaching staff of six.

Kreer Seventh-day Adventist Primary School is located on Wewak island in the East Sepik Province.

Nagum Seventh-day Adventist School, located at Yangoro-Kubalia in the East Sepik Province, had an enrollment of 210 students and a teaching staff of ten.

Nindiwi Adventist Primary, located at Yangoro-Kubalia in the East Sepik Province, the school has an enrolment of 392 and a teaching staff of twelve.

Sio Primary School, located at Ambunti in the East Sepik Province, had an enrollment of eighty-two students and a teaching staff of two.

Sisida Adventist Primary, located on Wewak Island in the East Sepik Province, had an enrollment of eighty-one and a teaching staff of six.

Wamba Adventist Primary, located at Yangoro-Kubalia in the east Sepik Province, no report of enrolment or teaching staff has been received in recent years.

Wauningi Seventh-day Adventist Primary School is located at Aitape in the Sandaun Province.

The Medical Institutions

As of 2018, the Sepik Mission operated four clinics and one medical launch.

Ambunti Health Centre., P.O. Box 7, Ambunti 534, Papua New Guinea.

Koil Island Health Centre, c/o P.O. Box 54, Wewak 531, Papua New Guinea.

May River Health Centre, c/o P.O. Box 54, Wewak 531, Papua New Guinea.

Tumolbil Health Centre, P.O. Box 23; Telefomin 555, Papua New Guinea.

The *Pathfinder* (medical launch) operated on the Middle Sepik River with a mailing address of P.O. Box 7, Ambunti 534, Papua New Guinea.

The Arrival and Early History of the Adventists in the Sepik

Alexander Campbell, reporting on the Annual Council held in Rabaul in 1940, observed that “the great coastline of the mainland has not yet been touched. The very large Sepik Valley has yet to be entered.”⁹ A few weeks later he wrote a short article appearing in the *Australasian Record* in which, once again, he brought to readers’ attention the fact that to that time there was no Adventist work in the Sepik River Basin.¹⁰

In 1942, Campbell wrote a letter, which was included in the Week of Prayer readings in 1942. Speaking of his desire to see something started in the Sepik region he said, “at different times calls have come from the Sepik people. We are ready to sacrifice two boys from our work here, though we can ill afford it, to go there when the opportunity arises. It is all rather wonderful that such calls and changes should come at this time.”¹¹

However, it was not until mid-1948 that Stanley Gander, who was stationed at Madang, reported that Bert Grosser had been “on the river for six weeks.”¹² A start had been made. At the special Australasian Union Conference session held in August 1948, the president, W. G. Turner, was able to tell the assembled delegation that the Sepik territory had “been entered in the last few months.”¹³

About one year later, a new mission vessel was delivered for use in the Sepik Basin. Called the *Leleman* (meaning light), the vessel was a welcome addition to the resources of the fledgling operation. It was reported that

The enormous Sepik district, largely uncivilized, is first to be visited by Pastor and Mrs. Gander in this ship. They will spend six months in that area, travelling up the mighty rivers, pioneering the way... From the Rhai Coast, where Brother Bert Grosser is working, to the Dutch border will be its sphere of operation.¹⁴

Pastor and Mrs. Gander sailed the *Leleman* up the river and discovered what they believed were exciting prospects. Gander wrote, “we are finding a real spirit of friendliness and are constantly asked to come back and start a mission. As we study with them they are astonished and very much stirred.”¹⁵

Even though the work of the Church was very much in its infancy in 1950, the Sepik area and the Manus area were organized as the North West New Guinea Mission with headquarters in Wewak. S. H Gander was the president.¹⁶ Between 1953 and 2018, the mission grew from two churches with 403 members to sixty-eight churches and 178 companies with 18,855 members.

Since the Sepik Mission was organized in 1953 the church has grown as follows:

1953	2 Churches		403 members ¹⁷
1960	15 Churches		1490 members ¹⁸
1970	26 Churches		2846 members ¹⁹
1980	34 Churches		4128 members ²⁰
1990	41 Churches		6862 members ²¹
2000	57 Churches	191 Companies	11227 members ²²
2010	61 Churches	199 Companies	10262 members ²³
2018	68 Churches	178 Companies	18855 members ²⁴

Organizational History of the Sepik Mission: Structure

There was no formal organizational structure in the mission territories of the Australasian Union Conference in New Guinea, which included the territory of the Sepik until 1929. With the arrival of Griffiths Jones at Matupi on the Island of New Britain in 1929, an entity simply known as the “Mandated Territory of New Guinea” appeared

in the Seventh-day Adventist *Yearbook*. The superintendent was G. F. Jones. The address was “SDA Mission, Matupit, Rabaul.”²⁵ This entity, as its name implied, included within its territory the whole of the mandated territory of New Guinea, including the Sepik. In 1932, the name of the entity was changed to simply Territory of New Guinea.²⁶

In 1945, the “Papua-New Guinea Mission” was formed.²⁷ This mission included all of the territory of the former Territory of New Guinea Mission and the former Papua Mission. (The Papua Mission had been organized in 1928.)²⁸ The Papua-New Guinea Mission headquarters were located in Port Moresby, Papua. The first superintendent was R. A. R. Thrift.²⁹ In 1946, the name of the Papua-New Guinea Mission was changed to Papua North East New Guinea Mission.³⁰

In 1947, the Bismarck Archipelago Mission was formed. Charles Mitchell was the first president. The territory of this mission had been previously included in the Papua-New Guinea Mission. In 1947, New Britain, New Ireland, Bougainville, Buka, the St. Matthias Group, the Admiralty Group (Manus), and adjacent islands were taken out of the Papua-New Guinea Mission and organized as the Bismarck Archipelago Mission.³¹ The remaining territory of the Papua-New Guinea Mission, including the Sepik, was organized as the Papua North East New Guinea Mission under Superintendent Robert R. Frame.

In 1949, the Coral Sea Union Mission was formed incorporating the territory of the Sepik region.³² In 1950, the North West New Guinea Mission was organized. The mission headquarters were in Wewak and the mission president was S. H. Gander. The territory of the mission included Manus as well as the Sepik.³³

In 1953, the Coral Sea Union Mission was reorganized with eight local missions. The Central Papuan Mission under L. I. Howell, the Eastern Highlands Mission under A. J. Campbell, the Eastern Papua Mission under Ngava, the Madang Mission under T. F. Judd, the Morobe Mission under J. H. Newman, the Sepik Mission under S. H. Gander, the Western Highlands under F. J. Maberley, and the Western Papua under H. M. Pascoe.³⁴

In 1972, the Sepik Mission became one of ten local missions in the newly organized Papua New Guinea Union Mission.³⁵

Organizational History of the Sepik Mission: Union Mission Affiliation

Affiliation with the Australasian Union Conference

Until 1949, all of the local conference and mission entities throughout the Australasian Union Conference related directly to that union with headquarters in Sydney. At a specially called session of the Australasian Union between August 16 and 21, 1948, a major reorganization was approved. Australia and New Zealand were divided between two union conferences known as the Trans-Tasman Union Conference, and the “rans-Commonwealth Union Conference. The mission territories were divided into two union missions known as the Coral Sea Union Mission (CSUM) and the Central Pacific Union Mission.

Sepik Territory within the Coral Sea Union Mission

In that reorganization in 1949, the territory of the Coral Sea Union Mission was designated as “Papua, the Mandated Territory of New Guinea, and the British Solomon Islands Protectorate.”³⁶ The Sepik was part of the ‘Mandated Territory of New Guinea’ and thus parts of the CSUM.

Sepik Territory within the Reorganized Coral Sea Union Mission

In 1953, the territory of the Coral Sea Union Mission was divided into the Coral Sea Union Mission and the Bismarck-Solomons Union Mission.³⁷ After it was reorganized in 1953, the Coral Sea Union Mission continued to have its headquarters in Lae, New Guinea. The reorganized union now had as its territory “Papua and the mainland of the Mandated Territory of New Guinea; comprising the Central Papuan, Eastern Highlands, Eastern Papuan, Madang, Morobe, Sepik, Papuan Gulf, Western Highlands, and Western Papuan Missions.”³⁸ The Sepik Mission was affiliated with the CSUM throughout the period of the existence of this union from 1953 to 1972.

Affiliation with the Papua New Guinea Union Mission

In 1972, there was yet another reorganization of the union missions in the Australasian Division. The Papua New Guinea Union Mission (PNGUM) was formed with ten local Missions.³⁹ They were the Bougainville Mission, organized in 1953; the Central Papuan Mission, organized 1928; the Eastern Highlands Mission, organized in 1953; the Madang Manus Mission, organized in 1949 and reorganized in 1953, 1972; the Morobe Mission, organized in 1953; the New Britain New Ireland Mission, organized in 1953 and reorganized in 1961, 1972; the North East Papuan Mission, organized in 1953 and reorganized in 1972; the Papuan Gulf Mission, organized in 1954 and reorganized in 1960; the Sepik Mission, organized in 1953; and the Western Highlands Mission, organized in 1953.⁴⁰

The missions that had existed up until the reorganization in 1972, but which were absorbed into other missions on reorganization were: Madang Mission, Manus Mission, New Ireland Mission, East New Britain Mission, West New Britain Mission, Milne Bay Mission, and North Papuan Mission.⁴¹

In 2000, another major reorganization of the unions in the South Pacific Division occurred at the South Pacific Division session.⁴² Five unions were reduced to four by rearranging boundaries. This change did not alter the territory of the Papua New Guinea Union Mission.

Presidents of the Sepik Mission Since 1950

North West New Guinea Mission (1950-1953): S. H. Gander (1950-1953).

Sepik Mission (1953-): S. H. Gander (1953-1954); Ernest C. Lemke (1955-1960); Elwyn A. Raethel (1961-1963); C. T. Parkinson (1964-1967); Lionel A. Smith (1968-1973); Frank J. Dyson (1974-1976); John H. Gate (1977-1980); Kevin G. Amos (1981-1986); Samson R. Genun (1987-1991); Peter Oli (1992-1998); John Hamura (1999-2003); Simeon

Nara (2004-2005); William Moke (2006-2007); Joel Markau (2009-2015); Samuel Silas 2015-).

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NOTES

1. Much of the information in this article comes from the personal knowledge and experience of the author as a former General Secretary and President of the South Pacific Division of Seventh-day Adventists. The author acknowledges the contribution of Pauline Yorio, Administrative Secretary in the Papua New Guinea Union Mission Office in the collation of the information for this article.

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