

Kiribati

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Kiribati, officially the Republic of Kiribati, is a sovereign state in Oceania. Kiribati straddles the equator in the mid-Pacific Ocean. The first Sabbath schools were officially established in the late 1940s, and the first Seventh-day Adventist church in 1954.

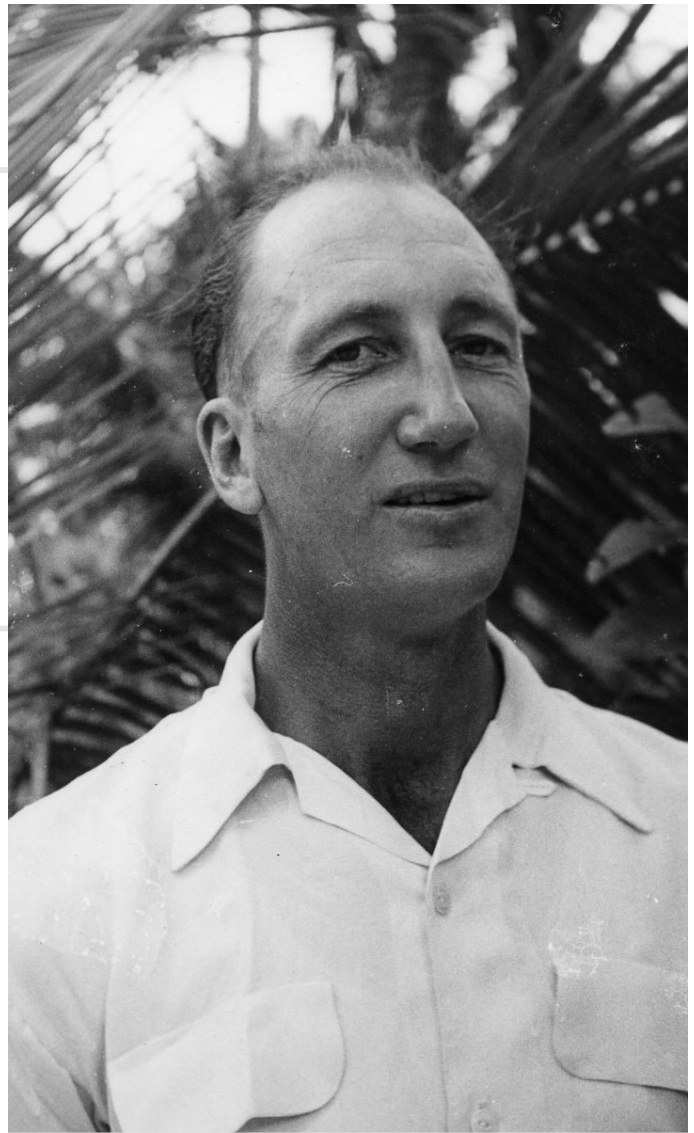
Background

Kiribati, formerly known as the Gilbert Islands, was a British protectorate until its independence in 1979. During the Second World War the Japanese secured a foothold but were defeated at the Battle of Tarawa in November 1943 on the island of Betio, the south-west tip of Tarawa Atoll. Approximately nine hundred Americans of the Second Marine Division lost their lives. Of the 4,700 Japanese infantry only 17 survived.¹

The group of coral islands and atolls form the last mission territory entered by the Australasian Division (now South Pacific Division) and remains the most northerly portion under their nurture.

Establishing the Mission

After hostilities ended in the Pacific the Australasian Division commissioned a custom-built boat, the MV "Fetu Ao," for use in the Gilbert and Ellice Islands. John Howse captained it from Sydney harbour to the island group



Alec C. Thomson officially organised the first SDA church in the Gilbert Islands (now Kiribati) in 1954.

Photo courtesy of Adventist Heritage Centre, Australia.

via Fiji, departing on April 10, 1947. On board were Mr. Harde and a Gilbertese man, Baru, both of the Education Department for the Gilbert and Ellice Islands government. They were in favour of the Seventh-day Adventist mission establishing schools on the atolls similar to the institutions in Samoa and Fiji.²

On the maiden voyage Howse carried twenty-two bags of mail to help pay for the fuel costs. Arriving in the Gilbert Islands he by-passed Arorae Island, Onotoa Atoll, Tabiteuea Atoll, Nonouti Atoll, Aranuka Atoll and Miana Atoll, pausing in the lagoon at Tarawa Atoll where the government headquarters were located. The reef and sands of Betio were still cluttered with rusting wrecks, artillery and barbed wire, reminders of the battle four years earlier. Before returning to Fiji, Harde accompanied Howse south to Abemama Atoll where a suitable plot of ground was identified for mission headquarters, close to a pier for mooring the ship.³

Howse made a second exploratory trip from Fiji in 1948, extending his visitation further north beyond Tarawa Atoll. He made stops at Abaiang Atoll, Marakei Island, Butaritari Atoll and Little Makin Island, addressing the local people and noting their requests for teachers. He returned to his base at Abemama Atoll where a retired magistrate, Tobinabina, was actively assisting the mission to build a foundation despite opposition from other church quarters. Tobinabina translated Sabbath School lessons and choruses for Howse.⁴

Consolidation

Two separate Sabbath schools were first established. These met together on January 29, 1949, for the baptism of five individuals, the first-fruits of the mission.⁵ The following year Howse was replaced by Graeme Miller and in 1951 Kenneth Wright was appointed as assistant.⁶

Miller's strategy entailed touring the outlying atolls and gathering young men who volunteered to do six weeks of intensive training at his Abemama station. He would then return them to their homes where they would begin elementary schools and worship services in chapels constructed of native materials. Within twelve months there were eight of these satellite stations operating, four of them offering schooling.⁷

Educational Facilities Strengthened

Miller's training program was the embryonic stage of the mission's emphasis on education. Early in 1953 Frank Gifford replaced Wright and with limited finances built a school on Abemama Atoll. At the time some young men had gone to train at Fulton Missionary College but, eventually, the Gilbertese would find the mission school would serve most of their needs. In 1954 A. W. Martin arrived as a temporary replacement for Clifford until Wally Dawson could transfer from Fiji in 1955.⁸ In the same year, 1955, a government trained Tongan teacher, Henri Moala, was added to the teaching staff.⁹ Dawson was followed by Alan Sonter (1957-1961)¹⁰ and Robert Sutcliffe (1962-1968).¹¹

Further Developments

In mid-1954 arrangements were made for Alec Thomson to learn ocean navigation and replace Miller.¹² On September 18, 1954, Thomson officially organized the Kauma, Abemama, church with twenty-two charter members. It was the first Seventh-day Adventist church in the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Mission.¹³

Thomson would return to serve a second four-year term, 1964-1967, but during the interim Walter Ferris was district director. He was instrumental in mobilizing a number of trained Fijian missionaries to take leading roles in the Gilbert Islands. In 1960 Marika transferred his family from Vatuvonu Training School to be headmaster at Kauma. Sakaraia and his wife were designated assistants in the school. Emosi Seru and his wife, Seni, were appointed to pioneer a school far to the north on Butaritari Atoll. Emosi was gladly welcomed by the local islanders and his school prospered until about twelve months later he was struck with dysentery. He struggled for months in his isolated situation, becoming emaciated and weak. Ferris went to his assistance and managed to bring the family back to Tarawa Atoll for medical help. He briefly rallied but in a few weeks had passed away. He was interred alongside the fallen allied soldiers.¹⁴

During Thomson's second term he and Sutcliffe continued to strengthen the Kauma school. News reports carried stories of Thomson visiting all the atolls to transport the students back to headquarters. In 1965 the school enrolment totalled 134.¹⁵ Combined church membership for the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Mission had risen to approximately 200.¹⁶

Finances were lean. Sutcliffe lamented the fact that a Bible correspondence course was translated and gathering dust on an office shelf simply because they did not have \$4,000 to print the series.¹⁷ High maintenance and fuel costs for the "Fetu Ao" forced its sale. Mission personnel and students became dependant on inter-island vessels.¹⁸

New Headquarters

After the sale of the "Fetu Ao" it was prudent to move mission headquarters from Abemama to the commercial and shipping center of the Gilbert Islands at Tarawa. The new district director, Peter Colquhoun, established himself on the southern edge of the atoll at Korubu in 1968.¹⁹ He was followed by Alan White (1971-1973),²⁰ Raymond Fraser (1974-1976)²¹ and Ferguson Mackay (1977). Mackay's tenure was cut short because his wife, Elsie, became another victim to the herpes virus in one of her eyes. They had to seek prolonged medical help but she lost sight in the eye.²²

In the late 1960s and early 1970s the fruit of the educational system began to appear. School finishers were placed as missionaries to their own kin on various atolls. Eventually these men were ordained and some were assigned departmental roles in addition to their pastoral duties. Fred Langley, a European who married a local

woman, was one of the first in this category. Other early names were Kakaiwa Kirimawa, Bwebwe Tabuariki and Ioane Taburimai.²³ On September 16, 1978, Ientake Kairireta, stationed on Marakei Island, was ordained at headquarters while a choir he had formed rendered items during the service. At the same time Tabeti Taaia, supervisor of the Southern Gilbert Islands stationed on Tabiteuea Atoll was ordained.²⁴

Better Church Buildings and Music

The arrival of Leslie Webster as district director in 1978 heralded the start of a vigorous church building program. As funds became available many of the open-walled structures with roofs of pandanus thatch, known as maneabas, were replaced with European style churches. The first was the Korubu church at headquarters. Further around the atoll another was constructed at Betio, scene of the Battle of Tarawa. Others were built on Kuria Island and Abemama Atoll.²⁵

Webster was the incumbent leader in 1979 when independence was granted from the United Kingdom and the group became known as Kiribati. William Blundell (1983-1988)²⁶ succeeded Webster and then Alvin Coltheart served a three year term as district director.²⁷ Coltheart was followed by the first of the national leaders, Baraniko Mo'oa (1992-1995).²⁸ During these years two men had volunteered to publish a hymnal with music. Tekemau Ribabaiti, principal of the Kauma SDA school was the chief translator and Glynn Litster generated most of the \$15,000 in Australasia for the initial printing costs. It was finally issued in 2003 under the title "Anene N Nebo" and received widespread popularity.²⁹

There have been twenty-four changes of leadership during the seventy year history of the Gilbert Islands/Kiribati Mission, some periods when governance had to drift because of difficult transportation problems. Recent directors are listed as Colin Dunn (1998-2000),³⁰ John Horvath (2002-2005),³¹ Kevin Brown (2006),³² Tengon Ta'abuke (2007-2010),³³ Benjamin Asa (2011-2012),³⁴ Kabata Toaki (2013-2014),³⁵ Titau Tavita (2015-2017)³⁶ and Luther Tanaveki (2018). The membership on June 30, 2017 is recorded at 2,625 among fourteen churches.³⁷

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