Western Highlands Mission, Papua New Guinea, South Pacific Division

BARRY OLIVER

Barry Oliver, Ph.D., retired in 2015 as president of the South Pacific Division of Seventh-day Adventists, Sydney, Australia. An Australian by birth Oliver has served the Church as a pastor, evangelist, college teacher, and administrator. In retirement, he is a conjoint associate professor at Avondale College of Higher Education. He has authored over 106 significant publications and 192 magazine articles. He is married to Julie with three adult sons and three grandchildren.

The Western Highlands Mission is the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) administrative entity for the Western Highlands province of Papua New Guinea. Its headquarters are in Mt Hagen, Western Highlands province, Papua New Guinea.

The Territory and Statistics of the Western Highlands Mission

The territory of the Western Highlands Mission is “Enga, Hela, Jiwaka, Southern Highlands, and Western Highlands provinces, Telefomin district of Sandaun province, and Kiunga district of Fly River province of Papua New Guinea.” 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 (SDA) 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, Morobe Mission, Madang Manus Mission, Sepik Mission, Eastern Highlands Simbu Mission, Western Highlands Mission, and South West Papuan Mission. The address of the administrative office of the Western Highlands Mission is Kimumina, Mt. Hagen 281, Western Highlands Province, Papua New Guinea. The postal address is P.O. Box 420, Mt. Hagen 281, Western Highlands Province, Papua New Guinea.

The mission operates under General Conference and South Pacific Division (SPD) operating policies. Those policies state that the officers of the Western Highlands Mission are elected by the PNGUM. “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.” 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. In the 2018 Annual Statistical Report of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, the Western Highlands Mission was listed as having 265 organized churches and 1,012 companies. Church membership at the end of 2018 was 86,041, the largest of the SDA administrative entities in the PNGUM. The mission had 231 active employees. Its tithe receipts for 2016 totaled US$1,691,493. Its tithe and offerings per capita were US$30.33.

The Schools of the Western Highlands Mission

The report of the SPD education director at the end of 2018 showed that there were 13 primary schools and two secondary schools in the mission, with a total of 4,925 students. The schools are:

- Gretutu Primary School. The school has an enrollment of 254 in grades 1 to 6.
- Habare Primary School. The school has an enrollment of 400 in grades 1 to 6.
- Karik Primary School. The school has an enrollment of 263 in grades 1 to 6.
- Kimininga Primary School. The school has an enrollment of 755 in grades 1 to 6.
- Koemal Primary School. The school has an enrollment of 467 in grades 1 to 6.
- Komo Primary School. The school has an enrollment of 249 in grades 1 to 6.
- Minamb Primary School. The school has an enrollment of 195 in grades 1 to 6.
- Paglum High School. The school has an enrollment of 675 in grades 7 to 10.
- Paglum Primary School. The school has an enrollment of 211 in grades 1 to 6.
- Rakamanda Primary School. The school has an enrollment of 190 in grades 1 to 6.
- Silim Primary School. The school has an enrollment of 208 in grades 1 to 6.
- Sopas Community School. The school has an enrollment of 73 in grades 1 to 4.
- Togoba Primary. The school has an enrollment of 539 in grades 1 to 6.
- Upper Nebilyer High. The school has an enrollment of 252 in grades 7 and 8.
- Wea Primary School. The school has an enrollment of 86 in grades 1 to 4.

Clinics and Health Centers

The Western Highlands Mission operates four health centers, one day clinic, and four aidposts. They are:

- Chimy River Aidpost. P.O. Box 420, Mt. Hagen 281, Papua New Guinea.
- Kum Aidpost. P.O. Box 420, Mt. Hagen 281, Papua New Guinea.
- Minsmu Health Centre. C/o P.O. Box 420, Mt. Hagen 281, Papua New Guinea.
- Mitiku Aidpost. C/o P.O. Box 420, Mt. Hagen 281, Papua New Guinea.
- Paglum Health Centre. P.O. Box 725, Mt. Hagen 281, Papua New Guinea.
- Pipika Health Centre. C/o P.O. Box 420, Mt. Hagen 281, Papua New Guinea.
- Togoba Health Centre. C/o P.O. Box 420, Mt. Hagen 281, Papua New Guinea.
- Tomba Day Clinic. C/o P.O. Box 420, Mt. Hagen 281, Papua New Guinea.
- Tombil Aidpost. C/o P.O. Box 420, Mt. Hagen 281, Papua New Guinea.

The Arrival and Early History of the SDA Church in the Western Highlands

The first recorded Seventh-day Adventist presence in the Western Highlands region was that of Laurence Gilmore, a medical officer with the Australian army who was stationed in Mount Hagen for a short time during the latter stages of World War II. Gilmore and his wife were to return to the mandated territory of New Guinea as missionaries, where they served for six years from 1948.
Reporting on plans to commence working in the Central Highlands as the area was then known, the *Australasian Record* of December 8, 1947, stated:

Early in 1946 plans were discussed for the extension of the work into the areas of Chimbu, Wahgi, Hagen, and Wabag. Representations were made, provisional plans for a quick advance were in readiness; only one thing was necessary. The government had restrictions upon the movement of Europeans in these areas, unless stations had been established in those areas prewar. In our case, unfortunately, no stations had been established.

On July 1 the country was thrown open, and freedom of movement was possible. Soon after the lifting of government restrictions on July 1, 1947, Frank Maberly and Laurence Howell, together with a teacher, Gominis, and his assistant, Atukenge, who were from Mussau, flew into Wabag searching for a site in order to establish a mission station. After searching for some days, they selected a site that had many desirable features. It had a good view: the length of the valley to the main Hagen Range, good land for gardens, and close proximity to an airstrip. It was discovered to be an old battleground. Neither side had occupied it for many years. But all agreed that the mission should have the land, and “thus remove a cause for further fighting.” The teacher and his assistant were left to maintain the relationship with the clans, and to erect some temporary buildings while Maberly and Howell returned to Bena Bena. On November 4, Frank Maberly and his wife, Liela Maberly, together with baby Rhondda, arrived in Wabag to commence working among the people of Enga and the Western Highlands. Again, the event was reported in the *Australasian Record*:

Tuesday, November 4, was a red-letter day in the history of the work in the highlands. Brother and Sister Maberly and their three-month-old baby took off from the Bena Bena ‘drome in a small Dragon Rapide for Wabag. . . . They are the most isolated of missionaries in the New Guinea-Papua mission field, probably in our entire Pacific area. . . . They are understaffed, underfinanced; but great things have been accomplished in the past in spite of small beginnings. . . . Not only do we anticipate breaking new ground territorially. We are also planning to make our medical work in the central highlands a really effective factor. Up to now no really beneficial, medical organization has been operated here. Now we hope to put each of our dispensaries on a solid operating basis and also to open a properly constituted hospital and leprosarium. . . . It is estimated by the medical department that at least 1 percent of the total population are infected with leprosy.

The Maberly family and the SDA mission were welcomed to Wabag, where the mission headquarters was established at Rakamanda. On the first Sabbath, just a few days after their arrival, 1,100 people gathered at the mission compound for worship. “At the conclusion several chiefs stood up to express regret that they had not heard before of the great God, and they stated that the people were anxious to follow the good way of life. No other mission has ever come in touch with these people.”

A reconciliation ceremony between warring tribesmen was conducted during the afternoon of that first Sabbath. This mission site itself had been their battleground of the past. The land was situated between two tribes who had been longtime enemies. It was observed that the mission had come to teach the way of peace. They were tired of the ways of the past. Maberly observed that “the people are most eager to hear the gospel and grasp the truths very quickly.”

In February and March 1948 Robert Frame and Ward Nolan, together with a number of porters, walked from Bena Bena to Hagen and then on to Wabag, a distance of 240 miles (386 kilometers). They were investigating sites for new mission stations. When they arrived in Rakamanda, where the Maberlys had been for just four months, they observed that already there were several “neat buildings” on the compound, extensive gardens of kaukau [sweet potato], and a church for 600 people. A school had commenced for a rapidly growing number of children.

**Some Significant Ongoing Events in the Early Growth of the Church of the Region**

In June 1949 Leonard and Mavis Barnard and their three-year-old daughter Sharyn arrived in Mt Hagen and shortly afterward commenced construction of the Togoba Leprosarium.

In March 1950 the Togoba Leprosarium opened nine months after the construction work had begun. Sisters Olive and Elsie Pearce arrived to become the first nurses in the hospital.

In 1952 Paglum district was established by Calvyn and Beryl Stafford.

On July 25, 1953, the first recorded baptism of seven candidates in Enga took place at Rakamanda during the first Enga camp meeting.

In 1955 Tari district in the Southern Highlands was established by Louis Grieve.

On August 6, 1955, John Newman organized the Rakamanda SDA Church. It was the first church to be organized in the Western Highlands Mission.
In 1958 the first baptism was held in Laiagam. Fifteen candidates were baptized. Ken Mitchell and his wife, self-supporting laypersons, were stationed there. There was no SDA pastor assigned there as yet.\(^\text{27}\) The Lagaip district based at Laiagam was formally organized in 1963 with the arrival of Leonard and Mavis Barnard.\(^\text{28}\)

In 1964 the Ialibu district was organized. Edmund and Dulce Parker were stationed there.\(^\text{29}\)

On June 25, 1967, the first SDA church building in Mount Hagen was dedicated.\(^\text{30}\)

Since the Western Highlands Mission was organized in 1953, the church has grown as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Churches</th>
<th>Members</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1953</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>986</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>44</td>
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<td>1980</td>
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<td>164</td>
<td>764</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>869</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>265</td>
<td>1,012</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The History of the Development of the Western Highlands Mission

Structure

The Western Highlands Mission was formally organized in 1953 when the territory of the Coral Sea Union Mission was divided into a Coral Sea Union Mission and a Bismarck-Solomons Union Mission.\(^\text{35}\) The territory of the Western Highlands Mission was designated as “the Western Highlands district of New Guinea.”\(^\text{36}\) F. T. Maberly was designated as the president and treasurer. L. T. Grieve was the secretary. There were two ordained ministers and six licensed ministers in the mission.\(^\text{37}\)

In 1956 Louis Grieve described the location of the mission headquarters at Rakamanda:

“The head of the Whagi Valley divides to give the valley as a whole roughly the shape of a Y. On the southern branch of the head of this Y is situated the government station, which is also Western Highlands headquarters. Our own Western Highlands headquarters is also situated there, Pastor A. D. Pietz being president. On the northern side, just under the mountains and at the axis of the Y, our Paglum Mission is situated.”\(^\text{38}\)

The mission moved its headquarters office from Rakamanda to Mount Hagan in 1963. It was located at an address on the Highlands Highway, Mount Hagen, until a new office was built at Kimininga in 2002.

The History of the Affiliation of the Western Highlands Mission With the Union Mission

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. But 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 Trans-Commonwealth Union Conference. The mission territories were divided into two union missions known as the Coral Sea Union Mission and the Central Pacific Union Mission. The headquarters of the Coral Sea Union were in Lae, mandated territory of New Guinea.

Western Highlands Territory Within the Coral Sea Union Mission

In that reorganization in 1949 the Papau North East New Guinea Mission, which included the territory of the Western Highlands, became one of the local missions of the Coral Sea Union Mission. The territory of the Coral Sea Union Mission was “Papua, the Mandated Territory of New Guinea, and the British Solomon Islands Protectorate.”

Western Highlands as a Local Mission Within the Reorganized Coral Sea Union Mission

In 1953 the territory of the Coral Sea Union Mission was divided into a Coral Sea Union Mission and a Bismarck-Solomons Union Mission. 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.”

Affiliation With the Papua New Guinea Union Mission

In 1972 there was yet another reorganization of the union missions in the Australasian Division. A Papua New Guinea Union Mission (PNGUM) was formed, with ten local missions. They were as follows:

- Bougainville Mission; established in 1929 and organized in 1953.
- Central Papuan Mission; established in 1908.
- Eastern Highlands Mission; organized in 1953.
- Morobe Mission; organized in 1953.
- Sepik Mission; organized in 1953.
- Western Highlands Mission; organized in 1953.

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.

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

Progress and Challenges in the Mission

The mission statement of the Western Highlands Mission, together with Papua New Guinea Union Mission, is “to make disciples (Matthew 28:18–20), and witness in the context of the three angels’ messages (Revelation 14:6–12) through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit.”

Fulfilling the Mission of the Western Highlands Mission

The Western Highlands Mission has adopted the PNGUM corporate strategic plan. The key focus area is disciple-making. Cell groups are a key focus in evangelism and nurture.

Area supervisors are stationed in each of the five provinces and also for two of the largest districts. Western Highlands Mission has 24 districts. Apart from the two largest districts, which have supervisors, 22 of the districts have district directors operating from their respective district headquarters.

Presidents of the Western Highlands Mission Since Its Organization in 1953


**SOURCES**


*Annual Statistical Report of Seventh-day Adventists* Various years.
http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Statistics/ASR


**NOTES**

1. The author acknowledges the contribution of Luke Nathan, secretary of the Western Highlands Mission, and Pauline Yorio, administrative secretary in the Papua New Guinea Union Mission office, in the collation of the information for this article.?


3. Ibid.?

4. “ADM 10.05, Principles of Denominational Organization,” in *South Pacific Division Working Policy* (Wahroonga, NSW: South Pacific Division, 2018).?

5. Ibid.?

6. Ibid.?


8. All data is derived from the “2018 Annual Statistical Report of the South Pacific Division Education Department to the General Conference” (unpublished report held in the files of the education director, South Pacific Division of the General Conference, Wahroonga, NSW, Australia).?


17. Ibid.


22. Ibid.


24. Pauline Yorio, administrative assistant, PNGUM, email to author, June 24, 2019.


41. Ibid.


48. Ibid.


50. Pauline Yorio, administrative assistant, PNGUM, email to author, June 24, 2019.

51. Ibid.