



Kiribati Mission office in Kiribati on the Island of Tarawa.

Photo courtesy of Barry Oliver

Kiribati Mission

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 Kiribati Mission is a small mission in the territory of the Trans Pacific Union Mission of the South Pacific Division of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.

Territory and Statistics

The territory of the Kiribati Mission is the country of Kiribati.¹ It is a part of, and responsible to, the Trans Pacific Union Mission, which is based in Tamavua, Suva, Fiji Islands. The Trans Pacific Union comprises the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church entities in the countries of American Samoa, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Niue, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. The administrative office of the Kiribati mission is located at Korubu on the island of Tarawa, Kiribati. The postal address is PO Box 70, Bairiki, Tarawa, Kiribati.

The mission operates under the operating policies of the General Conference and the South Pacific Division (SPD). Those policies state that the officers of the Kiribati Mission are elected by the Trans Pacific Union Mission.

² “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.”³ 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.⁴

In the *2018 Annual Statistical Report of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists* the Kiribati Mission was listed as having 14 churches and 11 companies. Church membership at the end of 2017 was 2,837. The mission had 41 active employees. Its tithe receipts for 2016 totaled US\$164,829. Its tithe and offerings per capita were US\$72.16.⁵

The Institutions of the Mission

The only institution of the Kiribati Mission is Kauma Adventist High School. Located on the island of Abemama, Kiribati, the school has an enrollment of approximately 250 students in grades one through twelve. It is a boarding institution.⁶

Origin of Seventh-day Adventist Work

Seventh-day Adventists first arrived in the territory of modern Kiribati in 1947. John Howse captained the MV *Fetu Ao* from Sydney to the Gilbert Islands via Fiji, departing on April 10, 1947.⁷ He arrived at Tarawa atoll, where the government headquarters for the Gilbert and Ellice Islands were located, on June 5. Before returning to Fiji, he identified a suitable plot of ground for a mission headquarters on Abemama atoll, to the south of Tarawa.⁸

Organizational History

Howse made a second trip from Fiji in 1948 and established a base on Abemama.⁹ Insofar as the islands were under British rule, the mission was known as the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Mission, but it had just a school with two local teachers, no churches, and only six members. It was a very small beginning.

Until 1949 all of the local conference and mission entities in the Australasian Union Conference, including the Gilbert and Ellice Islands, related directly to the union headquarters in Sydney. But at a specially called session of the Australasian Union between August 16 and 21, 1948, a proposal for a major reorganization was presented, discussed, and 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 Central Pacific Union Mission included Samoa along with the New Hebrides, New Caledonia, Fiji, the Gilbert and Ellice Island groups, the Cook Islands, Samoa, Niue, Nauru, Society Islands, and Pitcairn.¹⁰ From that time, the infant church in the Gilbert and Ellice Islands was administered by the Central Pacific Union Mission. This allowed for a much more consultative approach. Whereas previously the relationship was direct to an entity in Australia, now the relationship was direct to an entity in the Pacific itself. The headquarters of the union was in Fiji rather than Sydney, Australia.

In 1953 the territory of the Coral Sea Union Mission was divided into a Coral Sea Union Mission and a Bismarck-Solomons Union Mission.¹¹ This reorganization did not directly affect the Gilbert or Ellice Islands because the missions continued to be within the territory of the Central Pacific Union Mission.

Progress was slow in the Gilbert Islands. On September 18, 1954, when Alec Thomson was the president of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Mission, he officially organized the Kauma Church on Abemama with 22 charter members. It was the first SDA church in the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Mission.¹² The Seventh-day Adventist yearbooks appear to recognize this event as the organization of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Mission.¹³

In 1968 the mission moved its headquarters and established itself on the island of Tarawa. Peter Colquhoun, the superintendent of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Mission at the time, recognized the need for the mission office to be located closer to government agencies and the availability of better communication. The Kauma School, which was developing its influence, remained on Abemama.¹⁴ There were still only three churches in the mission. The membership was 369.¹⁵

In 1972 there was a reorganization of the union missions in the Australasian Division. A Western Pacific Union Mission was organized, bringing together parts of the former Bismarck-Solomons Union Mission and the Central Pacific Union Mission. A Central Pacific Union Mission remained, but it was now reconstituted, and the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Mission was now a part of the Western Pacific Union Mission. The headquarters for the new union was in Honiara in the Solomon Islands.¹⁶

Then in 1978 independence came to the Ellice Islands. The independent nation was named Tuvalu. The mission was renamed the Gilbert and Tuvalu Mission.¹⁷ Then in 1979 the Gilbert Islands were granted independence and were named Kiribati. The mission was renamed the Kiribati and Tuvalu Mission.¹⁸ There were now seven churches with 527 members.¹⁹ The territory of the mission was "Kiribati, Line, Nauru, Phoenix, and Tuvalu Islands."²⁰

Growth continued slowly, the principal source of accessions being the students of the Kauma High School. Some were gaining further education at Fulton College in Fiji, and others, at the newly established Pacific Adventist College in Papua New Guinea.²¹ Then in 1986, another change was made. A Kiribati Mission was separated from a Tuvalu Mission. The territory of the Kiribati Mission was “Kiribati, Line, Nauru, and Phoenix.”²² The territory of the Tuvalu Mission was the “Tuvalu Islands.”²³ The Kiribati Mission remained in the Western Pacific Union Mission. The people of Kiribati and Nauru are primarily Micronesian, so there was considered to be greater cultural affinity there. The Tuvalu Mission was affiliated with the Central Pacific Union Mission. The people of Tuvalu are Polynesian, so there was thought to be a greater cultural affinity with that union.²⁴

In 1989, the territory of the mission was altered and was listed as simply “Kiribati and Nauru” in the yearbook.²⁵

In 2000 another major reorganization of the unions in the South Pacific Division occurred at the division session.²⁶ This change involved all of the unions, not just the union missions as was the case in 1972. The total number of unions in the division was reduced from five to four. A union mission, initially designated as the Western Pacific Union Mission but shortly thereafter designated as the Trans Pacific Union Mission, was formed. The former Central Pacific Union was dissolved, and the Kiribati Mission was now a part of the newly named Trans Pacific Union Mission.²⁷ That union had its headquarters in the same place as the former Central Pacific Union Mission: Tamavua, Suva, Fiji.²⁸

One further change occurred in 2011: Nauru was no longer listed as part of the territory of the Kiribati Mission. The territory was specified simply as Kiribati in the yearbook.²⁹

Superintendents/Presidents

Gilbert and Ellice Islands Mission

J. T. Howse (1947–1950); Graeme Miller (1950–1954); Alec Thompson (1955–1959); Walter Ferris (1960–1963); Alec Thompson (1964–1967); Peter Colquhoun (1968–1970); Alan White (1971–1973); Ray Fraser (1974–1976); Ferguson Mackay (1977)

Gilbert and Tuvalu Mission

Leslie Webster (1978–1979)

Kiribati and Tuvalu Mission

Leslie Webster (1980–1982); William Blundell (1983–1986)

Kiribati Mission

William Blundell (1986–1987); Alvin Coltheart (1988–1991); Baraniko Mo’oa (1992–1995); vacant (1996–1997); Colin Dunn (1998–2000); John Horvath (2002–2005); Kevin Brown (2006); Tengon Ta’abuke (2007–2010); Benjamin Asa (2011–2012); Kabata Toaki (2013–2014); Titau Tavita (2015–2017); Luther Tanaveki (2018–).

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NOTES

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4. *Ibid.*

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