



Mamarapha College
Photo courtesy of Barry Oliver.

Mamarapha College, Australia

GORDON STAFFORD

Gordon Stafford lived in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands for 36 years and worked as a minister pilot, district director, area supervisor, president, and college principal. On returning to Australia, Stafford established and was principal of the Mamarapha College for Aboriginal students in Western Australia for 17 years. He is married to Ruth and they are retired in Perth, Western Australia.

Mamarapha College is a postsecondary theological institution for indigenous Australians located in Karragullen, Western Australia (WA). The college is a part of the Seventh-day Adventist education system. It is a Registered Training Organization (RTO) with the Training and Accreditation Council (TAC) of Western Australia.

Establishment

A shortage of Aboriginal pastors made ministry difficult to Australian Aboriginal people. Pastoral training at Avondale College did not seem to meet their needs, and many indigenous members dreamed of having their own training college. The president of the Western Australia Conference, Kenneth Vogel, presented a proposal for a practical ministry course to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ministries (ATSIM) director Bruce Roberts and his

assistant, Eric Davey. The proposal was approved by the South Pacific Division committees, and Vogel was commissioned to develop the curriculum and proceed with setting up an institution.¹

Founding

Max and Val Miller were recruited to help write the curriculum, and Certificates II and III in Biblical Studies were accredited by the WA TAC in June 1996.² Gordon Stafford was appointed as the principal. Stafford came with cross-cultural, teaching, and administrative skills, having grown up in Papua New Guinea (PNG) and the Solomon Islands, and then worked in PNG for 18 years in administrative and teaching roles.

Two years of Global Mission funding were obtained by the South Pacific Division. To keep costs down, half of Ashcroft Hall—the former boys dormitory of Carmel College, WA—was refurbished to house the ATSIM college.³ The lounge area served as a classroom, and the other rooms were used for offices, library, staff rooms, and computer room.⁴

On March 15, 1997, the college was opened. It was to “provide a practical education in ministry and a foundation in Bible and related subjects.”⁵

Development of the College

The college began with 23 students, nine men and 14 women from five of the seven Australian states and territories.⁶ Four days a week were spent in classes, and one day each week in practical ministry to the Aboriginal people in Perth.⁷

During the first year a Diploma in Ministry was finalized and accredited, in preparation for the following year.⁸ At the end of 1997 a graduation was held. Sixteen students graduated with a Certificate III in Biblical Studies.⁹ At the end of 1998, 11 students were awarded a Diploma of Ministry.¹⁰

The two years of ministerial training was increased to three in 1998, when the college developed an Advanced Diploma. A second stream, Ministry Studies, was added to the course, to cater for students who wanted greater Bible knowledge and skills in lay ministry.¹¹ Pastoral students in 1999 were located with a suitable minister at various churches around Australia for their practical training, and government policy financed them to travel back to the college for six study blocks. At the end of the year seven students graduated with an Advanced Diploma in Pastoral Ministry, and two with an Advanced Diploma in Ministry Studies. By the end of the year 38 students received Statements of Attainment toward a Certificate I in Biblical Studies.¹²

The year 1998 ended the two years of global mission funding, but with the help of South Pacific Division assistant treasurer Lynray Wilson, and careful financial management, funds were found for a third year, and then a fourth. When the Australian Union Conference was formed in 2001, the college became a union institution. Attempts to attract some government funding had failed, until a new head of the department responsible was appointed. During the few months she was in the position, she visited the college and approved the funding.

In the year 2000 the college restructured the courses to provide an annual intake of first-year students, while continuing the second-, third-, and fourth-year students. A Certificate IV was developed and accredited for the second year, making the Advanced Diploma a four-year course. Because of limited teaching staff, second- and third-year studies were delivered alternate years.

At the end of 2001 the college relocated to vacant primary school premises at Karragullen, and leased them from the Western Australian Education Department. This arrangement continued until 2009, when the Australian Union Conference purchased the property. The college was renamed the Mamarapha College in 2003, a composite name from western desert Aboriginal and Hebrew, meaning “God Makes Whole.”¹³

Students and Staff

Students came from all states of Australia and ranged in age from 18 to 70 years. Their educational background ranged from marginal literacy to some with a degree. Enrollments through the years can be seen in the graph (see graph in photo gallery).¹⁴

The college commenced with only two staff: Gordon Stafford as college director and Lynelda Tippo, assistant director. From 2003 to 2010 the college ran a full-time teaching program, with classes for pastoral students in between the study blocks. This was made possible only by using local pastors as guest lecturers.

Michael Steed was added to the staff in 2007 to develop a health promotion course. This was accredited at the end of that year, and the course commenced in 2008.¹⁵ The following year Sharlyn Rahman replaced Michael Steed as health course coordinator.

After studying part-time while at college, Lynelda Tippo gained a BA degree in Adult Education in 2004, then commenced a MA study program at Avondale College. In 2010 a ministry coordinator position was created. A Mamarapha graduate, Darren Garlett was appointed to that position, and replaced Ms. Tippo when she was transferred in 2011.

Courses

Personal spiritual development was always the primary focus of the college, and learning to minister to others was and is part of that.

Since 2001 Mamarapha College has offered a Certificate I through to a four-year Advanced Diploma, with study conducted through study block intensives.

In 2020 the college offers the following courses:

Advanced Diploma of Indigenous Pastoral Ministry	4 years
Certificate II in Indigenous Studies	1 semester
Certificate III in Indigenous Studies	1 year
Certificate IV in Indigenous Studies	2 years (incorporating Certificate III)
Diploma of Indigenous Studies 3 years	3 years (incorporating Certificate IV)
Advanced Diploma of Indigenous Studies	4 years (incorporating the diploma)

The Advanced Diploma of Indigenous Pastoral Ministry aims to develop the knowledge and skills needed for full-time pastoral ministry among indigenous Australians. The Indigenous Studies courses incorporate subjects in Bible, ministry, lifestyle, and health, with two streams of study. The ministry stream is designed to promote spiritual growth, enhance biblical knowledge, encourage personal development, and give ministry skills in a lay capacity. The health promotion stream is designed to give skills in promoting lifestyle change, addressing underlying emotional and spiritual issues, and working with various agencies to encourage lifestyle health changes.¹⁶

Graduation is held at the end of each year, and each student is awarded a Certificate or Diploma according to the level of their current achievement. This has proved to be a worthwhile incentive toward academic progress.

Challenges

There have been many challenges through the years. Operating a postsecondary education institution with limited funding and a small staff has been a great challenge since from the beginning. Ongoing funding continues to be a challenge, especially since 2017, when government assistance ended.

In the first two years of operation, classes were conducted daily. When study blocks were introduced in 1999, six weeks of teaching had to be covered in only two weeks. This posed a challenge for both staff and students. Then in 2011 the nine teaching days in each study block had to be reduced to seven because of financial constraints.

The work of developing, revising, and accrediting college courses every three years had to be done by existing staff on top of their and other duties. The cost of accrediting the courses also rose dramatically, from a few hundred dollars in 2001 to nine thousand dollars in 2007, then to more than sixty thousand dollars in 2016. Another challenge has been meeting constantly increasing regulation and compliance requirements without any extra staff or resources.

Impact

Personal spiritual development has been the primary focus of the college program. Through the influence of students in their home communities, a number of areas in Australia have become more attuned to Christian values. Baptisms have taken place, churches have been established, and Christian values have been shared in such remote places as Finke, Ali Curung, Manningrida, Tjitjikala, and Mungkata.¹⁷

A number of graduates from the college have been ordained to pastoral ministry in the Seventh-day Adventist Church.¹⁸ As of 2019 Eddie Hastie, Darren Garlett, Richard Reid, John Beck, David Garrard, John Murison, Leo Wright, and Aymond Burdett have been ordained. Many others have served as Bible workers and volunteers in various capacities around Australia.

Learning to minister to others has been another focus of the college, and in each study block the students take a church service in one of the Perth SDA churches. This has helped many students to develop ministry and speaking skills while breaking down prejudice among church members. Pastoral students have assisted Don Fehlberg with evangelistic programs in many of the small towns in Western Australia, which have impacted the spiritual life of the indigenous residents.¹⁹

The impact of the college on students is a constant inspiration.²⁰ A student from another denomination is now a baptized Seventh-day Adventist. A quiet and shy student now leads out confidently in worships and health talks. A legally blind student kept attending, using a magnifying glass. Another with a very turbulent past is now the spiritual leader in her home church.²¹ The college continues to change students' lives, and they in turn continue to spread the message of God's grace and power among their families and friends across indigenous Australia.²²

College Principals

ATSIM Bible College (1997–2002): Gordon Stafford (1997–2002)

Mamarapha College (2003–): Gordon Stafford (2003–2012); David Fletcher (2013–2018); David Garrard (2019–)

Mamarapha College Address

23 School Road, Karragullen, Western Australia 6076, Australia

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NOTES

1. Kenneth Vogel, telephone interview with author, December 19, 2019; Gordon Stafford, "Mamarapha Dreaming," *Record*, April 17, 2004, 9.?
2. Lee Dunstan, "ATSIM to Have Its Own College," *Record*, October 12, 1996, 11.?
3. Bruce Manners, "New ATSIM Bible College Opens," *Record*, April 12, 1997, 1.?
4. Personal knowledge of the author as founding principal of the college, 1997–2012.?

5. Lee Dunstan.?
6. Personal knowledge of the author.?
7. Personal knowledge of the author.?
8. "Ministry Course Accredited," *Record*, November 8, 1997, 10.?
9. "16 in First-ever ATSIM Bible College Graduation," *Record*, March 7, 1998, 11.?
10. "Bible College Graduation," *Record*, January 30, 1999, 5?
11. Personal knowledge of the author.?
12. Mamarapha College academic records.?
13. Brenton Stacey, "A New Name for Indigenous College," *Record*, August 2, 2003, 6.?
14. Mamarapha College academic records.?
15. Record Staff/ Michael Steed, "Health Course for Mamarapha," *Record*, January 26, 2008, 4; Nathan Brown, "Health Course Expands College Ministry," *Record*, March 22, 2008, 4.?
16. "Mamarapha Courses," accessed December 17, 2019,
17. Don Fehlberg (ATSIM associate director), phone interview with author, December 20, 2019.?
18. Ken Vogel, "Passing On the Mantle," *Record*, February 26, 2005, 8, 9.?
19. Evangelistic programs have been run in Jigalong, Wiluna, Katanning, Newman, Derby, Cue, Geraldton, Nullagine, Mullewa, Carnarvon, and Mowanjum.?
20. Gordon Stafford, "Mamarapha Builds Indigenous Ministry," *Record*, April 15, 2006, 9.?
21. Gordon Stafford, "2009 Mid-Year Report," unpublished manuscript held in the personal collection of the author.?
22. Ibid.?

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