



Omaura campus

Photo courtesy of Joy and Bob Butler.

# Omaura School of Ministry, Papua New Guinea

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## 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.

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The Omaura School of Ministry is located in the Eastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea (PNG), at an altitude of 4,650 feet (1,417 meters). It was originally established as the Omaura Training School, "for the purpose of

training workers to carry the message to the multiplied thousands of the great inland who have not yet been reached by any mission influence.”<sup>1</sup>

## Objectives of the School

The aim of the school is to equip men and women to minister to village people in PNG. Only students who have shown the call of God to ministry are accepted. The course aims to

strengthen conviction and personal devotion

develop a spirit of self-sacrifice, dedication, and service

train effective village ministers to win people to Christ

help them to grow into Christian maturity

help in building and supporting the local churches in PNG<sup>2</sup>

It was stated in 2017 that by the end of the course, each student will be

committed to Christ

growing in devotional life and family worship

supported by their family in ministry

integrated with village life

making the gospel fit the local culture

having their ministry filling needs being community centered

developing skills to teach nonliterate

developing a working knowledge of the Bible

developing skills in Bible research, analytical thinking, and problem solving

equipped to preach the Word, evangelize, minister, and lead a local church,

able to coach church officers<sup>3</sup>

These objectives were to be achieved by applying practical Christianity into everyday life, modeling devotions and family worships through the Ladies School program to help wives understand and become better ministers' wives. Living quarters and general facilities approximate average village levels of technology, to minimize undue expectations. Class lectures are in Tok Pisin, while blackboard work and textbooks are in English, to develop skills in communicating spiritual ideas to village people. Weekly practical ministry programs are part of the course.

## Founding of the School

Work was commenced at Omaura in 1934. Two mining brothers donated their "solidly constructed mining camp to the SDA mission," and S. H. Gander accompanied four teachers to the area, "among a really wild people."<sup>4</sup> Early native missionaries were Guibau, Sobu, Lamai (all from Mussau), Saki, and Taunai and Paul (from Buka)<sup>5</sup>

In 1939, permits were obtained from the government for David A. Brennan and family to locate at the proposed training school for inland New Guinea.<sup>6</sup> Although tribal fights were common in the area, Brennan was appointed to establish and head up the school, which included a "girl's school."<sup>7</sup>

## History of the School

1942: World War II disrupted the missionary work of the church in PNG. In 1942 an enemy invasion was threatening, and after much prayer, it was felt that local people could manage the missions better without the presence of expatriates, who would attract enemy attention. Brennan and Alex J. Campbell joined the evacuation organized by the Australian army.<sup>8</sup>

1944: After the war, missionaries in New Guinea requested that the training school reopen, several of them offering to assist with portion of their wages. The Omaura Training School was authorized for "the training of native workers who will be sent to carry the message to their own people." Members were invited to give £500 for this purpose.<sup>9</sup> In 1944 Brennan was again appointed headmaster of the Omaura Training School.<sup>10</sup>

1946: Frank Maberly was appointed to Omaura.<sup>11</sup> Brennan returned to Omaura,<sup>12</sup> and W. G. Turner wrote in 1947, "At Omaura we have a school of one hundred students. The mission is well laid out and the work is under careful management."<sup>13</sup>

1948: In November 1948 Ormond Speck was in charge of the school. There were about fifty students.<sup>14</sup> By July 1949 the Omaura Training School was "at full strength."<sup>15</sup> L. Thrift was principal, O. L. Speck headmaster, and E. J. Gane headed up the industrial department, with a sawmill in full swing. May of that year saw seven teachers graduate.<sup>16</sup>

1952: Erwin J. Gane was in charge of the Omaura Intermediate School,<sup>17</sup> but was also involved in medical work, while Mrs. Gane coached the teachers at night.<sup>18</sup> Gane was appointed headmaster for the following year.<sup>19</sup>

1953: A hospital and medical training center were opened at Omaura by Lester and Freda Hawkes in July 1953. Local villagers donated logs for timber, bamboo, or grass for roofs, or labor. The school was "expected to be the key which will open the Markham Valley to the gospel."<sup>20</sup> The training center commenced with 21 young men and two young women enrolled in the St. John first-aid class.<sup>21</sup> A district school was also in operation at the same time.<sup>22</sup>

1954: The first graduates from the Omaura Medical Training School were appointed to the field.<sup>23</sup> In September 1955, after two years of study at the Omaura Hospital and Medical Training School, seven nurses graduated with a diploma: six boys and one girl. At the same ceremony, some village men who had studied for seven months were awarded a St. John first-aid certificate.<sup>24</sup>

1956: Len H. Barnard went to Omaura to relieve the Hawkeses, but remained there when the Hawkeses were appointed to Pitcairn.<sup>25</sup> The graduating "doctor boys" received "two years' training at our Omaura station," and then went out with "well-equipped medical kits" to "patrol away back in the wild country, meeting the people and giving treatments."<sup>26</sup>

1958: Mr. and Mrs. Len Doble were appointed to Omaura.<sup>27</sup> Beryl Doble helped in the hospital.<sup>28</sup> During the following year Len Doble wrote, "At present we have 14 boys and three girls in training for a medical career,"<sup>29</sup> and at the end of the year, eight young men and three young women graduated from the two-year course, noting that "teaching and examinations were all in English."<sup>30</sup>

1965: A maternity ward opened in the Omaura Hospital, "with labor ward, sterilizing and utility room, and a five- or six-bed ward."<sup>31</sup>

1966: V. Irvine was appointed superintendent, when medical training was transferred to the Sopas Hospital. The Bible school recommenced.<sup>32</sup> Omaura received a share of the Thirteenth Sabbath Offering overflow for 1971, and three houses and a dormitory were built to accommodate 32 single young men.<sup>33</sup>

1973: Ian Rankin and family moved to Omaura.<sup>34</sup>

1976: Allan Foote was director of the Omaura Training School.<sup>35</sup> He returned to Australia at the end of the year.<sup>36</sup>

1977: From 1977 to 1979 Timothy Pakivai was director of the Omaura Bible Training School.<sup>37</sup>

1979: The Omaura Bible Workers' Training School upgrading program was implemented, to enable the enrollment of Omaura to be doubled to sixty students.<sup>38</sup> A team of volunteers under the direction of Ken Boehm spent three weeks putting up the student homes and classrooms.<sup>39</sup>

1980: From 1980 to 1985 Ray Roennfeldt was director.<sup>40</sup> He developed a coherent curriculum, including subjects in community development, and extended the program to two years (students returned to the field after the first year for a year or two). A fly-and-build built the campus church, and many buildings were upgraded with permanent cladding, and a library was created. Local village people were enrolled, and churches were

established in a number of unopened villages through branch Sabbath schools and welfare work. There was no contact with the “outside world” at Omaura until a radio was installed in 1985.

1986: Kenneth and Marlene Vogel<sup>41</sup> added practical subjects to the curriculum, and four electricians set up a generator and switchboard and wired 36 student homes.<sup>42</sup>

1987: Under John and Beth Kosmeier,<sup>43</sup> an airstrip was constructed on the property, and a classroom for the Ladies School that was started by Marlene Vogel was completed with ADRA funding.<sup>44</sup>

1988: Under Gordon and Mary Stafford, a Level 3 curriculum for district directors was created and implemented in 1991.<sup>45</sup> The Bible school and hospital were closed between 1992 and 1996, because of tribal fighting.

1997: Under David Bryce, Bible training recommenced in 1997.<sup>46</sup> The PNGUM president wrote, “We need 20 or 30 more pastors right now. We have the budget to employ 20, but we don't have the trained men.”<sup>47</sup>

2011: Under Simeon Waiwai, the principal’s house burned down, and the curriculum and most of the important records were lost.

2013: Under Joanis Fezamo, a transportable mill was bought, and a new principal’s house, a new classroom, a new library and administrative block, and some additional student houses were built to accommodate 120 students. The farm was revitalized and a new curriculum developed with specialist assistance from Gordon Stafford.

2018: Kaple Ghapu was appointed principal.

## Omaura Courses

Ormond Speck wrote in 1948 of a typical day at Omaura, starting with a bell at 6:00 a.m., worship at 6:30, followed by breakfast, then the work line. “Classes are not held in the morning owing to the fact that rain comes very frequently in the afternoon.”<sup>48</sup>

“Six local missions sent selected young men for nine months of intensive training in teaching and evangelistic methods suitable for native peoples living in villages and towns.” Student wives and prospective wives were also taught hygiene, sewing, nutrition, mothercraft, and physiology.<sup>49</sup>

A survey conducted with local mission presidents in 2016 identified skills and needs for ministers, which were then used as a basis for revising the curriculum to meet the needs of the field.<sup>50</sup>

## Challenges Moving Forward

Funding has always been a challenge for Omaura. Lester Hawkes was told to erect temporary buildings to establish the Omaura Hospital and Medical Training School, as there were no funds available. He refused to do that, and the committee eventually found £500.<sup>51</sup>

Student accommodation is another challenge, as there are more students wanting to come to Omaura than accommodation permits.

Tribal fighting has also posed a problem at times, particularly when the campus became a prime battleground in 1991, and the school and hospital had to be closed.

## Impact of Omaura

Omaura has made a contribution to ministry training in Papua New Guinea, providing ministers for a country with a large population of subsistence farmers with little or no literacy. Because training is adapted to village values and lifestyles, it has been the backbone of ministry in rural PNG.<sup>52</sup> The need for Omaura training was seriously questioned in 1991, but a study conducted by the Bible school showed that almost 70 percent of the population had no schooling, and only about 15 percent could understand what they read. If Omaura closed, the country would run short of ministers very quickly.<sup>53</sup>

Former Western Highlands Mission (WHM) president, Roger Millist said that all WHM district directors and more than 80 percent of the ministers graduated from Omaura, and under their leadership more than six thousand new members were baptized and ninety churches and companies established in a three-year period. Later, as CEO of Adventist Aviation, Millist noted that the church was strong and growing in all of the remote areas, and with very few exceptions, the pastors, missionaries, and lay leaders were all Omaura graduates.<sup>54</sup> In the words of Ken Vogel, former area supervisor in WHM and Morobe Mission: “The missionary zeal, evangelistic impact, and local church leadership of Omaura graduates were appreciated across a very diverse Papua New Guinea. Without Omaura Bible College, the work of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Papua New Guinea would not be where it is today.”<sup>55</sup>

Some Omaura students went on to prominent church positions. Jessley Farugaso, for example, became president of Eastern Highlands Mission. Geoffrey Pomaleu became president of the Papua New Guinea Union Mission.<sup>56</sup>

## Directors / Principals of Omaura

Omaura Training School (1940–1952): D. A. Brennan (1940–1942), F. Maberly (1946–1947), L. Thrift (1948–1951), J. Gane (1952–1955).

Omaura Medical Training School (1953–1964/1965): Lester Hawkes (1953–1955), L. H. Barnard (1956–1957), Len Doble (1958–1964/1965).

Omaura Bible Workers' Training School (1965/1966–1979): V. Irvine (1965/1966–1972), Ian Rankin (1973–1975), Allan Foote (1976), Timothy Pakivai (1977–1979).

Omaura Bible School (1980–1991): Ray Roennfeldt (1980–1985), Kenneth Vogel (1986), John Kosmeier (1987), Gordon E. Stafford (1988–1991).

Omaura School of Ministry (1996– ): David Bryce (1996–1999), Nathan Mano (2000–2002 [date uncertain]), Lepsie Koia (2003–2005), Titus Alimon (2006), Brian Simi (2007–2010), Simeon Waiwai (2011–2012), Joanis Fezamo (2013–2017), Kaple Ghapu (2018–2020).

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