

Tolhurst, Hubert
Leonard
(1890–1981) and
Margaret Gladys
Pearl (Philps)
(1891–1919); later
Elsmer Ruth
(Philps)
(1897–1967)



Hubert Tolhurst and Pearl wedding, 1915.

Photo courtesy of Colin Richardson.

COLIN RICHARDSON

Colin Richardson, M.Trop.Hlth. (University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia). Richardson retired in 2017 as pastor, South New South Wales Conference, Australia. A New Zealand-born Australian, Pastor Richardson served the church as nurse, teacher, and administrator in Cambodia, Singapore, Zaire, Rwanda, Somalia, Ethiopia, Guinea and Papua New Guinea, before serving 14 years as a pastor in Australia. In 2002 he founded Action on Smoking or Health (PNG). He is married to Merian, and has three adult sons.

Hubert Tolhurst was an early Adventist missionary to Tonga, teacher, pastor, administrator, and poet.

Early Life (1890-1911)

Hubert Leonard Tolhurst was born on April 20, 1890, at Petersham, a suburb of Sydney, New South Wales, Australia, to James Matthew Joseph and Martha Murphy Tolhurst (1854-1898, 1854-1915). Hubert Tolhurst was the second of four children, two of whom died in infancy. His father was a drover, a mining machine operator,

and a farm worker.¹ When Tolhurst was two, the family moved to western New South Wales, settling on Willamurra Station, about 39 miles (62 km) east of Byrock. Six years later, his father died of heart disease, and his mother took him and his younger sister, Ivy, to live in Parkes, some 250 miles (400 km) to the southeast. There she acquired a small block of land with a shop front, and took in sewing to survive.²

Tolhurst attended school in Parkes until December 1906, and received a gold medal³ as dux of the school.⁴ From 1907 to 1910, he was employed as an apprentice printer at the *Parkes Examiner* (newspaper), and attended night school to further his education.⁵

In February 1905, when he was fourteen, a tent mission came to Parkes, run by W. H. McGowan, with Mr. and Mrs. Garced James and Edith Ford.⁶ Martha Tolhurst had often wondered about the Sabbath, and these meetings provided answers.⁷ Tolhurst, his mother, and sister accepted the Adventist faith, and were baptized in May 1905⁸ by S. M. Cobb, who also organized the Parkes church at the same time.⁹ Tolhurst became an active leader in the Parkes church Young People's Missionary Society,¹⁰ before accepting a call to colporteur work in 1911. Together with Walter Stevens, he sold *The Great Controversy* from Condobolin to Dubbo, Coonamble and the surrounding region, travelling by bicycle.¹¹

Education and First Marriage (1912-1915)

In April 1912, Tolhurst began his studies at Australasian Missionary College (now Avondale College of Higher Education). He supported himself by working as a compositor in the college printing press, and by canvassing during the summer breaks. It was at Avondale that he met his wife-to-be, working together in the printing shop. Tolhurst graduated from the missionary course in October 1914.¹²

On January 6, 1915, at Bendigo, Victoria, Hubert Tolhurst married Margaret Gladys Pearl Philips (1891-1919), known as Pearl. J. H. Woods was the presiding minister.¹³ Pearl Tolhurst was born March 10, 1891, at Beechworth, Victoria, Australia, the daughter of Thomas Wix and Margaret Hannah Matthews Philips (1859-1943, 1861-1948). She was the eldest of five girls. Her parents both accepted the Adventist message about 1885 under the ministry of Elders Corliss and Israel,¹⁴ and were married in 1887. Thomas Philips, the son of a Congregational minister in South Australia, was a farmer who also engaged in literature ministry after 1916. Pearl Tolhurst studied at Australasian Missionary College from 1910 to 1914, also graduating from the missionary course in October 1914.¹⁵

The newly married Tolhursts were appointed to serve in the Friendly Islands¹⁶ (Tonga) then part of the Central Polynesian Mission.

First Missionary Appointment (1915-1919)

The Tolhursts set sail on the "Tofua" from Sydney on February 3, 1915, arriving in Suva, Fiji seven days later. Three days later they boarded the "Atua" for Nuku'alofa, Tonga, arriving on the 15th.¹⁷ After a month in Nuku'alofa, becoming acquainted with the culture and beginning to learn the Tongan language, they sailed again on the "Atua" for their assigned mission location, at the village of Faleloa, on Foa Island, Ha'apai Group, arriving March 16.¹⁸ On March 29, they opened the school with thirty students (a number had to be turned away).¹⁹ Two months later, on May 18, Tolhurst's mother died; it was three weeks before he heard of it.²⁰

For the next four years the Tolhursts managed the school at Faleloa, while doing general missionary work, preaching, teaching, ministering to the sick, and continuing to learn the language.²¹ On January 30, 1916, Tolhurst preached his first sermon in Tongan,²² which he spoke fluently for the rest of his life. Hubert and Pearl Tolhurst translated G. F. Root's "Under the Palms," a religious cantata, into Tongan, and trained their students to sing it. The performance in 1917 was well appreciated by the community, and aroused considerable interest in school enrollments.²³ One of their students was Semisi Moala, later one of the first two Tongans to be ordained to the gospel ministry,²⁴ and who became Tolhurst's life-long friend and colleague.

In 1918, the global "Spanish 'Flu" pandemic arrived in Tonga, with over 1200 fatalities throughout the country. First Hubert Tolhurst, then Pearl Tolhurst contracted the disease. For a number of months, first one, then the other would improve, then relapse. Hubert Tolhurst recovered, but on March 14, 1919, Pearl Tolhurst laid down her life.²⁵ The village chief built a casket, but the Tongans told Tolhurst he must be strong and take the funeral himself.²⁶ The next day, as the sun set for Sabbath, Pearl Tolhurst was laid to rest in Faleloa. She was the first Avondale graduate to give her life in mission service.

A few days before her death, Pearl Tolhurst spoke longingly of travelling home to see her parents and sisters, during recovery. Then she asked if anyone was coming to take their place. On receiving a negative answer, she said, "Then we can't go; we can't go till someone comes, can we?" Her first concern was the work the Lord had entrusted to her.²⁷

In a letter written later that year, Musie, the Tongan left in charge of the work at Faleloa, wrote to Tolhurst, "The work is growing in Faleloa. It is better now than it has ever been since its establishment in this place. Mrs. Tolhurst sleeps in Faleloa. She gave her life for the work, and this is the reason for the good results now seen"²⁸ Tolhurst stayed on a further three and a half months until relieved. During this time, a series of violent earthquakes shook the islands, and a tsunami 11 feet (3.4 meters) high struck Faleloa. A nearby volcanic island erupted.²⁹ On June 30, he sailed for Sydney, via New Zealand, where he spent six weeks visiting churches throughout the North Island. He arrived in Sydney on September 26.³⁰

Second Missionary Appointment (1920-1921) and Second Marriage

After some weeks travelling and speaking in Sydney, Avondale, and Brisbane (where he visited his sister, Ivy), Tollhurst travelled to Melbourne and Bendigo where, on December 5, 1919, he arrived to visit Pearl Tolhurst's family (Philps). Earlier in the year, soon after Pearl Tolhurst's death, her parents wrote, "We feel deeply burdened about the work in Ha'apai and will gladly release another of our girls if it will help, till another worker is appointed."³¹ On December 13, Tollhurst asked Pearl Tolhurst's younger sister, Elsmer Ruth Philps (1897-1967), known as Ella, to marry him.³² Born on June 10, 1897, at Beechworth, Victoria, Australia, Ella Philps was the third of the five Philps girls. She matured early in her Christian experience, and was baptized about 1908 at the age of 11. She became a trained state school teacher, and pioneered the Bendigo Church School.³³

For the next year, during their engagement, Tollhurst worked in evangelism in Caulfield (a Melbourne suburb),³⁴ and in western Victoria, based in Ararat.³⁵ On March 15, 1921, at Bendigo, Victoria, Tollhurst married Ella Philps, with A. H. Piper as the presiding minister.³⁶ It was a double wedding, with Ella Philp's sister Nellie marrying Sydney Butler (later a pastor) at the same time.

At the Australasian Union Conference meetings in November 1920, it was decided to call H. L. Tollhurst to serve in the Central Polynesian Conference in the new year.³⁷ Hubert and Ella Tollhurst, with their adopted daughter, Mava Elsmer (1916-1992), sailed from Sydney for Tonga on the "Atua" on 9 April 1921.³⁸ Their assignment was to the northern island group of Vava'u.

Arriving on May 27, 1921,³⁹ they embarked on missionary work, preaching, and teaching. However, on August 4 Tollhurst was bitten by a sick kitten, and developed severe septicemia.⁴⁰ He grew worse, and on September 30, 1921, the family sailed for Auckland, New Zealand, arriving October 11.⁴¹ Tollhurst was hospitalized for several weeks, and gradually recovered, though it was several months before he was completely well.

New Zealand (1922-1926)

For the next four years, the Tollhursts served in the North New Zealand Conference conducting evangelism and colporteur. They were based in Palmerston North in 1922, in the Napier-Hastings district in 1923, in the Feilding-Wanganui area in 1924-1925, and in Dannevirke in 1925-1926.⁴² In January 1926, Ella Tollhurst gave birth to their eldest child, Pearl Ivy (1926-2002).

Third Missionary Appointment (1927-1941)

In late 1926, Tollhurst was appointed to the Tonga Mission for the third time, this time as superintendent, a post he held until December 1940.⁴³ The family sailed from Sydney on the "Ventura" on February 26, 1927, via Suva, arriving in Nuku'alofa on March 5, 1927.⁴⁴ They were based at the Beulah school and mission station at Vaini, on Tongatapu island. It was here that the rest of his children were born: Dorothy Gwenella (1929-2007), Leonard Philps, Leonainie Ethel (1933-2001), Athal Hubert (1935-2017) and Desmyrna Ruth (1939-2018).

At the Australasian Union Conference Council in August 1927, Hubert Tolhurst was recommended for ordination to the gospel ministry.⁴⁵ He was ordained at the Workers' Meetings at Somabula near Suva, Fiji, with Elder A.G. Daniells leading out, on 2 June 1928.⁴⁶

As Superintendent of the Tonga mission, Tolhurst's duties included mission treasurer, departmental leader, and ministerial secretary. At different times, totaling seven years, lacking anyone else, he also served as principal for Beulah mission school. Tonga consists of three main island groups, and Tolhurst regularly visited them all, encouraging workers, holding camp meetings, and running evangelistic series. Travel was not easy; inter-island travel was by boat, often on small sailing vessels (cutters). At times, storms or hurricanes interrupted travel.⁴⁷ Between islands connected by shallow reefs, horses might be used, at the risk of falling into holes in the reef.⁴⁸

Ella Tolhurst was his help and support. She would share her faith and witness where she could, but her biggest responsibility was her growing family. Trained as a teacher, she home schooled her children.

In 1937, Tolhurst oversaw the re-launch of a Tongan language church periodical, *Talafekau Mo'oni* (True Messenger), with six issues per year, and a circulation of 1,000 copies.⁴⁹ (It had been issued years previously, but had ceased publication.)

One of Tolhurst's dreams was to obtain government recognition for the Beulah school. Since the school was not recognized, many students did not stay to complete their studies, and moved to other schools which were recognized. In 1933 and 1934, special efforts were made to coach the senior class, and the students who sat the government exams had excellent results.⁵⁰ In 1935, the school applied for recognition, and was inspected, and again, the students sitting the state exams achieved high results. In 1937, despite health problems, Tolhurst focused on the senior students, and again, the students gained outstanding results. When application was made for recognition following the 1937 exams, it could no longer be denied.⁵¹ It was a turning point for the church; the excellent training and increased numbers of Beulah College graduates led to considerable church growth.⁵² Between 1927 and 1940, church membership almost doubled.⁵³

The Australasian Union Conference provided funds for the construction of a new classroom for the Beulah school. This building was officially opened by Her Majesty Queen Salote Tupou III, in a gracious speech, on February 21, 1939. Tolhurst offered the dedicatory prayer.⁵⁴

On December 12, 1940, Tolhurst performed his last baptism in Tonga, one of his largest with eleven candidates. They included two of his daughters, Pearl and Dorothy.⁵⁵

In 1940, the family needed a change to facilitate the older children's schooling, and Tolhurst was invited to New Zealand to focus on evangelistic work for the Maori people.⁵⁶ The family sailed from Nuku'alofa on January 8, 1941, via Samoa and Fiji, arriving in Auckland on January 17.⁵⁷

New Zealand (1941-1958)

Tolhurst was delayed many weeks in taking up of his assignment with the Maori people, due to severe neuritis.⁵⁸ He approached this work full of enthusiasm, and given his background in Polynesian culture and language, confident he could learn their language too, and work well with them.⁵⁹ He was excited as he learned of the Ringatu church, an indigenous Christian church among the Maori people, which shared some teachings with Seventh-day Adventists, including the seventh-day Sabbath, the state of the dead, tithing, baptism by immersion, and the avoidance of unclean meats.⁶⁰ The family settled near Whakatane, not far from one of the largest Ringatu settlements. For three years he worked among the Maoris of the area, and had some success, mostly with those who were *not* of the Ringatu faith. To the end of his days, the lack of success with the Ringatu people was a disappointment to him. They were offended by his disapproval of playing football on Sabbath, and when he gave Bible studies, they would "go to sleep".⁶¹

In October 1944⁶², the North New Zealand Conference, decided that the work among the Maoris was not progressing, and suspended the program pending better facilities. Tolhurst was transferred to Hamilton, to pastor the Hamilton, Huntly, and Cambridge churches.⁶³ He served there until 1951, when he was called to Rotorua.⁶⁴

However, in April 1951, Tolhurst was appointed to be Home Missionary, Sabbath School, and Temperance Secretary for the North New Zealand Conference,⁶⁵ a position he held until April 1955.⁶⁶ This necessitated moving to Auckland.

After his term as a departmental leader, Tolhurst returned to pastoral ministry, serving the Rotorua, Whakatane, and Opotiki churches until his retirement.⁶⁷

Retirement and Later Years (1958-1981)

In December 1958, Tolhurst officially retired from church employ.⁶⁸ However, as a subsidized retiree, he continued pastoring churches in the Auckland area, notably Otahuhu and Papatoetoe, until July 1963.⁶⁹

In late 1965, Hubert and Elsmer Tolhurst moved to their retirement home in Cooranbong New South Wales, Australia. Less than two years later, Elsmer Tolhurst passed to rest at the Sydney Sanitarium and Hospital on February 3, 1967.⁷⁰ She was buried at the Avondale Cemetery, Cooranbong.

Two years later Tolhurst formed a friendship with a gracious lady named Ivy Doris McQueen (nee Jones, 1905-1988), who had also retired to Cooranbong. On December 26, 1969, they were married in Cooranbong.⁷¹ Ivy Tolhurst was born in London, England, and emigrated to Western Australia. The remaining twelve years of Tolhurst's life were made happy in the love and companionship of this fine Christian lady.

On October 7, 1981, Hubert Leonard Tolhurst passed to rest at Cooranbong. He was buried at the Avondale Cemetery on October 11, 1981.⁷²

Contribution

Arguably Tolhurst's biggest contribution to the work of the church was his success in achieving recognition of the Beulah school in Tonga as a college in 1937. The impact this college made on the growth of the church in Tonga, as well as the positive impact it has made in the country, is hard to over-estimate. It seems probable that without his direction, coaching of students and positive contacts with government, including the royal family, that this would have been delayed many years. But let not this overshadow the impact of his leadership and ministry in Tonga generally over more than twenty years and in New Zealand for almost thirty years. His example inspired many in Tonga and New Zealand. It was always Tolhurst's great joy that all his children and their spouses chose to enter the work of the church. Two sons, a son-in-law and two grandsons entered pastoral ministry and were ordained. They would agree that it was in large part due to his influence and example.

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