



The Northern Australia Conference office in Aitkenvale, Queensland, Australia.

Photo courtesy of Darren Slade.

Northern Australian Conference, Australia

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The Northern Australian Conference is a constituent of the Australian Union Conference in the South Pacific Division of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.

Territory and Statistics

The territory of the Northern Australian Conference is “all that portion of the State of Queensland north of a straight line parallel with the 22nd degree of latitude commencing at the coast at a point immediately south of the town of St. Lawrence, and running due west between Winton and Muttaborra, and north of Boulia to a point on the border line between the Northern Territory and Queensland; the Northern Territory; and all islands off the coast of the above named, which are included in the Territory of the Commonwealth of Australia.”¹

The Northern Australian Conference headquarters is located at 45-49 Leopold Street, Aitkenvale, Queensland, Australia.² Its unincorporated activities are governed by a constitution that is based on the model conference constitution of the South Pacific Division of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists (SPD). Its real and intellectual property is held in trust by the Australasian Conference Association Limited, an incorporated entity based at the headquarters office of the SPD in Wahroonga, New South Wales (NSW). The Conference Executive Committee has transferred most of its functions to two corporations to act as Trustees for the Conference: Seventh-day Adventist Church (Northern Australian Conference) Limited, which oversees the day-to-day operations of the conference and was registered on November 3, 2003; and Seventh-day Adventist Schools (Northern Australia) Limited, which oversees the operation of the education entities within the conference and was also registered on November 3, 2003.³

In the *2019 Annual Statistical Report*, the Northern Australian Conference was listed as having 26 churches and 9 companies. Church membership at the end of 2018 was 2,742.⁴ The conference had 92 active employees in 2016. Its tithe receipts for 2016 totaled US\$2,493,272.00. Its tithe and offerings per capita were US\$1,390.04.⁵

Schools

Cairns Adventist College. When first established in 1950, Cairns Adventist College operated out of rooms in the Cairns Church located in Upward Street, Cairns, Queensland. The church and school moved to Bosanko Street, Manunda, in 1989. Due to the growth of the school, land was purchased at Gordonvale, and a new school was completed in 2014. Cairns Adventist College at Gordonvale caters for students from Prep to Year 6⁶

Carlisle Adventist Christian College. Carlisle Adventist Christian College was established in 1951 and operated on the same site as the Mackay Central Church, Milton Street, Mackay, Queensland, until 2006 when the college was relocated to its current site at 17 Holts Road, Beaconsfield. When established, it was the first Protestant school in the district. Over the years it has been known as Mackay & District Seventh-Day Adventist School, Mackay Seventh-Day Adventist School, Mackay Adventist Christian College, Carlisle Christian College, and Carlisle

Adventist Christian College. An early learning center operates on the same complex for children between the ages of three and five, and the college caters for students from Prep to Year 11 with the addition of Year 12 in 2019.⁷

Riverside Adventist Christian School. Established in 1968, Riverside Adventist Christian School operates on the conference grounds originally known as Halliday Park, in Leopold Street, Aitkenvale.⁸ An early learning center operates on the same campus and caters for children between three and five, with the school catering for students from Prep to Year 6.⁹

Adventist Book Center

Originally known as the Book and Bible House, an Adventist Book Center operates within the Northern Australian Conference office complex.

Origins of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Queensland and the Territory of the Northern Australian Conference

At the fifth session of the Australian Conference of Seventh-day Adventists held on January 6–15, 1893, it was recognized with some urgency that something needed to be done about commencing the work of the Church in Queensland. An action was voted:

Whereas, the withdrawal of Elder Curtis together with the protracted absence of Elder Tenney has reduced our number of labourers in this field, and whereas there are two large colonies, viz., Queensland and Western Australia, which ought to be entered at once, and whereas the Australian Conference has neither the means nor the men at its disposal, therefore— Resolved, that we petition the Foreign Mission Board to assist us to enter these promising fields without delay.¹⁰

Literature evangelists had already been working in the colony of Queensland before this action was taken. It was reported at the conference in 1893 that “when the work began, the staff only consisted of seven agents, three in Queensland, and four in New South Wales.”¹¹ One of those literature evangelists working in Queensland was William E. Wainman, who was in attendance at the conference.¹²

In February 1897, reporting on the first visit by a Seventh-day Adventist minister to North Queensland, G. B. Starr, superintendent of the Queensland Mission, commended the work of the literature evangelists who had already been working there. He wrote:

By the advice of the Union Conference Committee I extended a proposed trip to Central Queensland to Townsville and Charters Towers in the north, where the living preacher of present truth had never visited. The faithful canvasser, however, had preceded me many years, and many of our publications had been introduced

into the homes of the people.¹³

He specifically mentioned meeting “Brn. Whittle and Henderson at Charters Towers, also Bro. Costello, the earliest Sabbath-keeper in these parts.”¹⁴ Thomas Whittle was canvassing in the area. Starr observed that the area was “prepared for the Bible work to open here.”¹⁵ He indicated that arrangements were being made for Whittle to spend time in Bible work. He continued, “After years of experience in the canvassing work he [Thomas Whittle] has a desire to engage in this work, and he will immediately enter upon it.”¹⁶ Thus Thomas Whittle became the first employed minister in North Queensland.

Starr then described his visit to Townsville:

At Townsville we had the pleasure of meeting the Anderson brothers, Louis and Otto, who learned of the truth from Bro. Mattison in Norway. They with their wives are observing the Sabbath. It was a pleasure also to meet Sister Snell, who was the first Sabbath-keeper in North Queensland, converted by reading “Thoughts on Daniel and the Revelation.”¹⁷

The following Seventh-day Adventist churches were organized in north Queensland in the early years:¹⁸

| | |
|-------------------|------------------|
| Townsville | January 1904 |
| Mona Mona Mission | July 22, 1916 |
| Charters Towers | February 1, 1919 |
| Finch Hatton | June 1924 |
| Farleigh | March 1925 |
| Ayr | April 1926 |

The first church structure built in the North Queensland region was located at Finch Hatton, west of Mackay. It was opened in June 1924. The building, painting, and seating had cost only £160. Pastor Alfred Chesson observed that the cost was “less than the price of a Ford car.”¹⁹ The church was dedicated by Pastor Rudge, the Queensland Conference president.²⁰

Other church buildings were constructed and opened soon after:

| | |
|-------------------|----------------------------|
| Farleigh church | March 1925 |
| Mona Mona Mission | March 27, 1926 |
| Ayr church | May 15, 1926 ²¹ |

Some of the early ministers in the territory of the conference were G. A. Wantzlick (1904–1906); T. H. Craddock (1906–1907); P. B. Ridge (1913–1914); Louis Currow (1913–1917); A. H. White (1919); E. H. Guilliard (1919–1920);

Albert Were (1919– 1921); Maurice Smith (1919–1921); and F. L. Sharp (1920–1921).²²

Some of the early literature evangelists included Thomas Whittle, Frederick Reekie, J. C. E. Jacobson, Alex Costello, W. F. Ford, F. Brett, N. Kemsley, A. F. Start, E. Harlow, and P. Reekie.²³

By the end of 1929, the North Queensland Mission had 4 organized churches, 161 members, 3 church buildings, 1 ordained minister, 2 licensed ministers, 13 Sabbath Schools, 268 Sabbath School members, 7 MV societies, and 120 MV members. Mona Mona Mission had 1 organized church, 43 church members, 2 licensed ministers, 7 licensed missionaries, 1 church building, 1 Sabbath School with 131 members, 1 MV society with 91 members, 1 church school with 1 teacher, and 45 students.²⁴

Mona Mona Mission

In 1912, at the Union Conference council meetings held August 27–September 5, a decision was made to investigate the establishment of a mission for Australia's indigenous people in North Queensland.²⁵ After months of government negotiation and administrative delays, a party of five, including P. B. Rudge and J. L. Branford and their families, arrived on September 4, 1913, at a property that had been purchased at Mona Mona to commence work establishing a mission station.²⁶

The Mona Mona School opened in 1914 with 7 pupils, and by May 31 the enrollment had increased to 18.²⁷ The first Aboriginal baptism by Seventh-day Adventists took place at Mona Mona Mission on July 21, 1916. It was conducted by Pastor H. E. Piper. A young married woman and four dormitory girls were baptized.²⁸ Following the baptism, on July 22, the Mona Mona Mission Church was organized. Pastor Piper again led out, explaining the purpose, function, and support of the church. The 12 charter members consisted of 7 staff and 5 young women recently baptized.²⁹

Mona Mona Mission was closed in 1962. The last financial statements on record and held in the archives of the Northern Australian Conference are dated 1962.³⁰

Torres Strait Islands

The dream of Seventh-day Adventists from Kubin village on Moa Island in the Torres Strait became a reality in 1989 with the construction of a new church at Kubin by volunteers from Victoria and the support of Seventh-day Adventists around Australia and overseas. The new church, dedicated on September 9, 1989, was the first church structure built by Seventh-day Adventists in the Torres Strait and was the culmination of 35 years of saving, planning, and praying.³¹

On August 6, 1994, a new complex was opened on Thursday Island that comprises a church chapel, an administrative office, a home for the minister, and, downstairs, a Sabbath School room, a generous two-

bedroom transit house, boat and car storage, and an ablution block. The building was the result of labor by volunteer tradesmen from many states and Norfolk Island, along with the resident minister and his wife, Ken and Jill Hiscoe.³²

Darwin and the Northern Territory

The first paragraph of an article in the *Australasian Record* of October 6, 1924, reads:

Perhaps the only centre of importance in Australia still possessed against the advance guard of our forces is Port Darwin and its environs. But this right of possession is soon to be contested, for an overland attack on this last fort is in operation, the forces of right and truth being already on the march, conquering as they go³³

The union conference council had voted in 1923 to place a literature evangelist at Darwin.³⁴ Efforts to do so proved unsuccessful until Neville R. Westwood and G. Davies reached Darwin after canvassing up the Western Australia coast in 1925.³⁵ Westwood again visited Darwin in 1926, this time with R. Schick, having traveled overland from Townsville through the gulf country and the Northern Territory by motor vehicle.³⁶ After a short stay in Darwin, they continued down the Western Australia coast.³⁷

While in Darwin, Westwood made contact with the wife of the mayor of Darwin, J. R. Porter. Mrs. Ethel Porter was the first Seventh-day Adventist in the Northern Territory.³⁸

In 1968, the *Australasian Record* reported on what it said was “the first time we have conducted a series of evangelistic meetings in Darwin.” Pastor Roy Naden, together with Pastor Ken Wright, commenced the series on June 15. “More than eighty people are showing an active interest in the meetings,” the *Australasian Record* stated.³⁹

Also in 1968, a new church building was dedicated in Darwin. Plans had commenced in 1967 for the construction of the present church building at 80 Cavenagh Street, Darwin.⁴⁰ The church was constructed by Eddie Long and associates from Sydney and officially opened on June 29, 1968.⁴¹

While resident minister at Darwin in 1970, Pastor Thomas Ludowici reported on the conversion of the indigenous princess Bett Bett, who was featured in Mrs. Aeneas Gunn’s Australian book *The Little Black Princess* and in the other equally popular outback story by the same author, *We of the Never Never*.⁴²

In 1973 a school opened in the Sydney Williams building at the back of the pastor’s residence. The first teacher was Mrs. May Miller. The school relocated to a new facility at Malak in 1979, where Chris Frahm taught 28 students. By the beginning of 2008, the enrollment was only 5, and the school was closed.⁴³

Other churches and church buildings in the Northern Territory are located at Palmerston, Malak, Katherine, Tennant Creek, Mungkarta, Alice Springs, and Finke.⁴⁴

Significant Events Leading to the Organization of the Northern Australian Conference

A Queensland Mission was organized on January 24, 1895.⁴⁵ In 1896, the Australasian Union Conference appointed Pastor G. B. Starr as superintendent, Alfred Hughes as secretary, and Mrs. Nellie Starr as treasurer.⁴⁶ The fledgling organization remained as a mission until October 20, 1899, when, at a meeting held at Toowoomba, Queensland, under the chairmanship of Australasian Union Conference president A. G. Daniells, the attendees adopted a constitution, and the mission became a conference.⁴⁷ The new conference had four churches: Rockhampton, North Brisbane, South Brisbane, and Toowoomba, with a total of 311 members, including those designated as “scattered believers.”⁴⁸ The officers of the conference were president, G. C. Tenney; vice president, Thomas Whittle; secretary, H. C. Lacey; treasurer, the Tract Society, and business agent, F. W. Paap.⁴⁹

At the Union Conference Council held on August 4–10, 1904, it was voted “that Townsville be made the centre of the North Australia Mission field, and that a tract and book depository be established there.”⁵⁰ Then on October 17, 1904, a North Queensland Mission was separated from the Queensland Conference.⁵¹ The boundary line was the Tropic of Capricorn.⁵² The headquarters were located on Eyre Street, North Ward, Townsville.⁵³ Pastor Gustav Wantzlick was invited to come from New Zealand to take charge of the mission.⁵⁴ His wife, Emma L. B. Hill, was released from her position as the Queensland Conference State Tract Society secretary to take charge of tract society work in North Queensland.⁵⁵

Conditions were challenging. In Wantzlick’s words:

I have just returned to Townsville after an extended tour overland from Mackay to St. Lawrence, on my bicycle, covering nearly six hundred miles, holding meetings and working all the off-lying settlements and stations, which are reached by coach only once a week. In striking out into these interior highways and byways, I find the service of a bicycle indispensable in saving both time and money. The expense of coach fares saved in this trip represents £6.⁵⁶

As a mission organization, North Queensland came under the direct supervision of the Australasian Union Conference. The division between north and south did not last long, however. The conference and the mission were reunited on the recommendation of the Australasian Union Conference and voted “with hearty approval” at the Queensland camp meeting and conference held at Toowoomba during September 17–27, 1907.⁵⁷ T. H. Craddock, who had been working in North Queensland, was elected as president of the combined conference.⁵⁸

At the Australasian Union Conference Session held at Avondale October 2–16, 1918, it was decided to again separate north and south Queensland. However because the church had commenced its work in Papua in 1908, plans were made to form a North Queensland-Papua Mission. The recommendation was as follows:

Whereas, The territory of the Queensland Conference as now fixed presents almost insurmountable difficulties for aggressive work being undertaken in the northern portion by the Queensland Conference; and

Whereas, This northern section offers favorable opportunity for developing strong work,

We Recommend, That the portion of Queensland to the north of the terminus of Brisbane-Rockhampton railway, together with Papua, be formed into a mission field under the supervision of the Union Conference, to be known as the North Queensland-Papua Mission.⁵⁹

Pastor Albert H. White from Tasmania was chosen as the superintendent of the mission, and the headquarters were in Charters Towers.⁶⁰ In April 1920, Pastor Frederick L. Sharp relieved Pastor White due to Mrs. White's ill health, and the mission headquarters was transferred to Mackay.⁶¹

During the Australasian Union Conference council meetings in April-May 1920, plans and recommendations in article 5 stated that "since it has been found impracticable to operate North Queensland and Papua as one mission field, these two fields be divided, each to operate as a separate unit under the direction of the Australasian Union Conference." An additional recommendation was that the Queensland Conference take over the North Queensland Mission's colporteur and book work.⁶²

By the time of the Australasian Union Conference session in September 1922, The union secretary, W. G. Turner, reported that "owing to the difficulty in operating Papua from Queensland, the organization known as the North Queensland-Papua Mission has been dissolved, the two fields now working as separate missions under the direction of the Australasian Union Conference."⁶³

Due to the growth of the work in North Queensland and the financial constraints of the union, the following year the North Queensland Mission and the Queensland Conference were again reunited. Members above the Tropic of Capricorn were placed on the membership roll of the conference church.⁶⁴

Then, the Queensland Conference and the North Queensland Mission were again separated in 1928. At the Australasian Union Conference Council held in September 1928, the following recommendation was adopted:

Whereas it has been found impracticable to operate the whole of the territory within the Queensland Conference under one organisation, owing to the immense area to be covered,

Voted, that the territory of the Queensland Conference be divided as follows: That all that portion of the State lying north of a line drawn from Yeppoon west to Kunwarara on the Marlborough line, and thence due south to the top of the range just west of Deeford, and thence in a direct line to the South Australian border, be operated as a mission field under the direction of the Executive Committee of the Australasian Union Conference; that a superintendent be appointed to take the oversight of the churches and of the general mission work within this territory, and to engage, as far as possible, in evangelical work; and that all the Queensland territory lying south of the said line be known as the Queensland Conference, to be operated by the local conference executive

committee.⁶⁵

Pastor Alfred C. Chesson was invited to take the superintendency of the North Queensland Mission.⁶⁶ The mission headquarters was located in Sturt Street, Townsville. Later, the headquarters was moved to Armstrong Street, Hermit Park.⁶⁷ Following on from Chesson as superintendents were Roy Thrift, Charles Bird, Gordon F. Branster, W. N. Lock, and H. J. Halliday in 1948.

In 1955, the North Queensland Mission was organized into the North Queensland Conference with Pastor W. J. Richards as president and I. R. Stratford as secretary.⁶⁸

In 1963 land was purchased in Aitkenvale, where the headquarters for the church has remained. The Townsville Adventist School and the conference campground have also been established on the property.⁶⁹

At the Fifteenth Triennial Session of the North Queensland Conference held from April 12 to 15, 1984, a vote was taken to amend the conference constitution and change the boundaries to include the whole of the Northern Territory as well as northern Queensland. The name of the conference was changed to the Northern Australian Conference. Articles 1 and 3 of the adopted constitution read:

Article 1: Name

This organization shall be known as the Northern Australian Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

...

Article 3: Territory

The territory of this Conference shall consist of the following:

- a. All that portion of the State of Queensland north of a straight line parallel with the 22nd degree of latitude commencing at the coast at a point immediately south of the town of St. Lawrence, and running due west between Winton and Muttaborra, and north of Boulia to a point on the border line between the Northern Territory and Queensland.
- b. The Northern Territory
- c. All Islands off the coast of the above name, which are included in the Territory of the Commonwealth of Australia.⁷⁰

Since that time, the matter of amalgamating the Northern Australian Conference with the South Queensland Conference has been deliberated by the conference in session on two occasions: in 1996⁷¹ and 1999.⁷² It was rejected and voted down both times.

Mission and Strategic Plans of the Conference

The Northern Australian Conference is committed to its vision statement, which is for its members to be “experiencing and sharing hope in Jesus Christ.” Through camp meetings, retreats, weeks of prayer, prayer meetings, and small groups, members are trained and encouraged to connect more closely to Jesus day by day.

In 2018, the theme for the Northern Australian Conference was “Driven by Mission.” Mission is driven in established centers through community events, ADRA shops, and lifestyle and message programs. Remote Aboriginal communities are being reached, and baptisms are occurring.

The establishment of Faith FM radio stations in key population areas is assisting in implementing the vision. New radio stations are being commissioned, and the conference is constantly looking for more broadcasting licenses as they become available.

Several challenges remain for the conference:⁷³

Prayer and revival—the most necessary components to the spiritual and numerical growth of the church.

Total Member Involvement (TMI)—an initiative from the General Conference. Many evangelistic activities of the local church revolve around programs rather than individual members. The goal is to increase individual member participation in connecting with people in their sphere of influence and realizing that evangelism is most effective one-on-one.

Training for ministry—the conference is moving members away from the expectation that the pastor is the expert who does all the ministry while the laity looks on. TMI will be far more effective when each person is trained and equipped for ministry. It is the work of the pastor to “equip the saints.” Having every member actively using their God-given gifts and abilities will greatly enhance the fulfillment of the vision to experience and share the hope of Jesus Christ.

Churches’ leadership—churches in the conference generally depend too much on a pastor and are mostly unable to function on their own. However, the New Testament and early Adventist churches experienced growth and vitality when they were not pastor led or dependent. Dependency can absorb the time and attention of the pastor in a myriad of local operational issues, and the mission of the church is negatively impacted.

Pastors reassigned—as churches learn to operate on their own, more pastoral resources can be reassigned to new work areas to plant new churches.

Improved giving practices—encouraging members to return a faithful tithe so that individuals can receive the blessings promised by God and more resources can be directed to fulfilling the mission of the church.

Presidents Since 1955

W. J. Richards (1955–1959); A. R. Mitchell (1960–1963); W. A. Townend (1964–1969); R. H. Abbott (1970–1971); E. Totenhofer (1972–1976); E. Howes (1977–1978); H. G. Harker (1979–1981); R. King (1982–1986); D. E. G. Mitchell (1986–1990); D. Blanch (1991–1998); G. Scott (1999–2000); J. Matthews (2000); Deane Jackson (2001–2008); David Stojcic (2009–2012); P. Brett Townend (2013–2015); Darren Slade (2016–)

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NOTES

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11. *Ibid.*, 45.
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