



Another Angel 11 & Shekinah, 2017.

Photo courtesy of James Ward.

Pacific Yacht Ministries

JAMES WARD

James Ward, Associate Diploma Applied Science (South Bank Institute of TAFE, Qld) is an Australian by birth. Now retired, James worked as a nurse in Australia and Kenya, a paramedic in Victoria and Queensland, and with ADRA in Bougainville. He has been involved in health work with Pacific Yacht Ministries since its inception in 2002. He is married to Michelle (nee Down).

Pacific Yacht Ministries (PYM)¹ was a small, not-for-profit, self-supporting ministry, operated and supported by volunteers, recognized by the South Queensland Conference and South Pacific Division of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.² It operated out of Queensland with its base in Brisbane. It provided transport, logistics and support to health staff employed by the Vanuatu Government Health Service in Northern Vanuatu. PYM was registered as a company and had charitable status.

Development and Growth of Pacific Yacht Ministries

In 2001 Steve Woodward, a keen yachtsman and member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Gladstone, Queensland, Australia, recognized that yachts could be useful for increasing the level of health services to isolated island communities of the South Pacific. Local health services were very limited or non-existent in these remote areas.

In February 2002, a meeting of individuals who were inspired by Woodward's vision was held at the South Queensland Conference Office of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, then at 19 Eagle Terrace, Brisbane, and Pacific Yacht Ministries was born. Initially it was decided that the island nation of Vanuatu would be the starting point for operations, using volunteer professional medical, nursing, and dental staff from Australia and other countries.

The concept called for a provisioned yacht (or yachts) to leave Australian shores soon after the cyclone (hurricane or typhoon) season ended around the end of May. Once in Vanuatu, the volunteers would arrive by air in teams, join the yacht at agreed rendezvous points – usually airfields, and the team would be transported to prearranged work areas. Each team would operate for about two weeks before leaving again by air. There would be a break of two weeks to allow time for the crew to rest, maintenance of the yacht/s, source local provisions, and relocate. As the oncoming cyclone season drew near, for safety reasons, the yacht/s would return to Australia about the end of October or early November.³

Two teams, led by Steve Woodward, operated in 2002 and one team in 2003. Their work was appreciated by local health services and proved the legitimacy of the concept. In 2004, two vessels, using five expatriate teams, operated together for the full season with clinics held in villages across the Provinces of Sanma and Torba. That year also saw a Memorandum of Understanding drawn up between Pacific Yacht Ministries and the Vanuatu government. The government requested that special attention be given to Torba Province. Consisting of the islands of Mere Lava, Merig, Gaua, Vanua Lava, Mota, Mota Lava and Ureparapara, known as the Banks Islands Group and the islands of Toga, Loh, Tegua, Matoma and Hiu, making up the Torres Islands. Torba is the northern most province of the six that make up the nation of Vanuatu. These are the most remote islands in Vanuatu. They have minimal air and sea services and are often neglected by overseas aid.

In addition to Torba province, PYM also worked in two other provinces: Penama, made up of Pentecost, Ambae, and Maéwo Islands; and Sanma, comprising Santo, Aore, Tutuba and Malo Islands. As much as possible, communities were visited on a rotational basis to prevent feelings of favoritism and dependence.

A major change to the way PYM operated came about through a request in 2007. The Manager of the Provincial Health Office, Henry Wetal, asked PYM to help his staff carry out a mass vaccination effort that year.⁴ This was willingly agreed to and in 2007 vaccinations were given to every person who required them—a first for the area. This had never happened before according to a speech of thanks made by Wetal. In providing this service, PYM staff recognized that there were capable island professionals who were limited in the extent of their responsibilities due to lack of transport and logistical support. The availability of adequate cold storage of

vaccines being a prime example.

Post 2008, the primary work of PYM was to provide Vanuatu Provincial Health Service staff with transport and logistical services, supplemented with a small number of overseas volunteer professional staff to provide professional development for local staff.

With no yachts available in 2006, PYM provided land-based teams. In 2009 teams were prepared, but cancelled when the yacht travelling to Vanuatu encountered difficulties and returned to Australia for safety reasons. Again, in 2018 there were no vessels available and so no local teams could be assisted.

Following a request from some people with Torres Strait connections, and the donation of a suitable sailing catamaran, from December 2009 to December 2011 PYM had a volunteer⁵ working in health education to support the work of the Seventh-day Adventist pastor in the Torres Strait, Queensland, Australia. A Memorandum of Understanding was signed by both PYM and Queensland Health in September 2010. Although discussions were progressing well toward forming a working relationship, a shrinking support base in Australia caused PYM management to cancel negotiations in late 2011,⁶ and work ceased in the Torres Strait.⁷

Ongoing Scope and Direction of the Organization

After nearly two decades of service, PYM faced new challenges. By 2018, decreased interest of supporters and donors, and the advanced age of others, made it difficult to keep a full team of support staff based in Australia. A small number of government officials in the supported country made difficulties in the last couple of years. These difficulties lead to a change in direction for PYM. As of 2018, PYM leaders were considering the expansion of PMY's health ministry in a number of ways including facilitating medical student training in tropical medicine, drug rehabilitation among Australia's indigenous communities, health workshops on Torres Straight Islands in Queensland, and the expansion of the Adventist school on Gaua Island in Vanuatu.⁸ By the early months of 2020, additional problems for small organizations within Australia made it very difficult to continue operations.⁹ Sadly, in June, 2020 PYM was deregistered¹⁰ as a charitable organization and operations ceased.

While Pacific Yacht Ministries was never a large organization, it achieved quite amazing results. This was the result of dedicated volunteers who believed in God's abundant blessing of their work. From the beginning of operations in 2002, doors opened, and sailors and team members did not suffer any serious accidents. Competing groups from other organizations followed the lead of Pacific Yacht Ministries by replicating services in some areas.¹¹ Pacific Yacht Ministries worked closely with the Vanuatu Mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, assisting church officials whenever possible. The health work done by PYM did much to break down religious prejudice and to promote good will between the various religious groups encountered. Just weeks before the first medical team entered the Torres Islands, running a clinic on the Island of Loh, a young national worker went there to begin work as a volunteer. Somehow, word of his coming arrived before him. A delegation

from the village approached the commercial aircraft on landing and told the pilot that, if the young man did not leave on the plane on its return flight, he would be killed. Wisely, he left. Today there are two SDA churches on the Torres Islands,¹² with other SDA churches established elsewhere as a direct result of PYM's breaking down barriers. Truly, medical work is the right arm of the Gospel.

List of Chief Executive Officers

Malcolm Potts (2002); James Ward (2003-2004); Nick Brightman (2005-2020)

SOURCES

Annual General Meeting Minutes. April 29, 2007. Pacific Yacht Ministries Archives, currently held by the author – last secretary/treasurer of PYM.

“Approved Self-Supporting Ministries, South Pacific Division.” Unpublished document held in the office of the Division Secretary, South Pacific Division Headquarters, Wahroonga, New South Wales, Australia.

“Concept Document 2002-2003.” Pacific Yacht Ministries Archives, currently held by the author – last secretary/treasurer of PYM.

Directors Minutes. 2011-2020. Pacific Yacht Ministries Archives, currently held by the author – last secretary/treasurer of PYM.

“Launching of the Vanuatu National Oral Health Survey.” Accessed December 9, 2018.

<http://msm.org.au/category/2017-ships-log/>.

1. This article is written from the personal knowledge of the author who has been a director of PYM since its inception and chief executive officer in 2003 and 2004, Secretary 2015 to 2018, and Secretary/Treasurer 2018 to 2020.
2. “Approved Self-Supporting Ministries, South Pacific Division,” held in the office of the Division Secretary, South Pacific Division Headquarters, Wahroonga, New South Wales, Australia.
3. “Concept Document 2002-2003,” Pacific Yacht Ministries Archives, currently held by the author - last secretary/treasurer of PYM.
4. Annual General Meeting Minutes, April 29, 2007, Pacific Yacht Ministries Archives, currently held by the author – last secretary/treasurer of PYM.
5. The author himself.

6. Personal knowledge of the author.
7. Directors Minutes, October 23, 2011, Pacific Yacht Ministries Archives, currently held by the author – last secretary/treasurer of PYM.
8. Directors Minutes, January 7, 2018, Pacific Yacht Ministries Archives, currently held by the author – last secretary/treasurer of PYM.
9. Annual General Meeting of Members, March 29, 2020, Pacific Yacht Ministries Archives, currently held by the author – last secretary-treasurer of PYM.
10. ASIC-Deregistration-Email.docx, April 4, 2020, Pacific Yacht Ministries Archives, currently held by the author – last secretary/treasurer of PYM.
11. Personal knowledge of author.
12. Personal knowledge of author.

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