

Hawkes, Lester Norval (1923–2017) and Freda May (Tiller) (1921–2014)



Lester and Freda Hawkes wedding, January 1945

Photo courtesy of Lyndon Hawkes.

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Lester Norval and Freda May Hawkes were pioneering medical missionaries to Papua New Guinea.

Early Life

Lester Norval Hawkes was born to Colville Hugh Hawkes and Hughina Adelaide (Dunlop) on January 11, 1923 in Warburton, Victoria, Australia. He was the eldest of four children (the others being Colville Hugh 1924, Laurel Averly 1927, and Alvan Edrick 1929).¹ He spent his first years at Warburton, home to Signs Publishing Company and a Sanitarium Health Food factory. At the age of five, a desire to become a missionary was planted in his heart when returned Papua New Guinea missionary Stan Gander showed 'Magic Lantern' pictures in the Mechanics Institute Hall in Warburton. Reflecting on this moment Hawkes said, "...my father told me that as I was preparing for bed that evening I said in my small-boy voice, 'Dad, I'm going to be a missionary when I grow up'."² Reminiscing about his family, he recalled the joy of growing up in a Seventh-day Adventist home, noting that, "we were a close family. Father was quite active in the church."³

At the age of 13, Hawkes left school to work in a factory in South Melbourne where he crushed a finger in the machinery. The incident would prove providential as Lester was soon offered a position in the Sanitarium Health Food (SHF) factory in Warburton. Working on the Weetbix ovens in the Sanitarium Health Food factory was hot, repetitive work however Hawkes discovered a scheme where "...every pound I put in, SHF put in a pound to help study..."⁴ This would eventually provide the means for him to enrol at the Australasian Missionary College (AMC, now called Avondale College of Higher Education), the institution established by the church to train ministers and teachers for service in Australia, New Zealand and the South Pacific Islands.

While attending the Brighton Church Camp in the summer of 1939, Hawkes' local pastor, E.G. Whittaker, came up to him and said, 'You're getting baptized this afternoon.' It was the first he had heard of it, but Lester happily agreed⁵ and began to further consider the training he would need for the mission field. Many friends, including his church pastor, urged him to do the ministerial course at the AMC.⁶

Education and Marriage

Arriving at the AMC in 1941, with World War II raging, Hawkes enrolled in a pre-Nursing and Bible class⁷ which he politely referred to as the 'year 6 Refresher Course.' With prayerful consideration he became convinced that, "...practical knowledge, such as how to treat disease, would open doors that even the best knowledge of ancient languages could never open."⁸ He therefore determined to embrace health care as the foundation of his ministry.

To his relief, Hawkes passed his subjects and transferred to the campus of the Sydney Sanitarium and Hospital (SAH, then affectionately known as the SAN, now called the Sydney Adventist Hospital) in 1942.

Between 1942 and 1945 he studied both nursing and theology. Hawkes was inspired by the words of Ellen G. White who had written, "The Holy Spirit never has, and never will in the future, divorce the medical missionary work from the gospel ministry."⁹ Of particular interest to Hawkes was basic dentistry, a skill he was confident would be well used in the mission field.

His time at the SAN would be memorable for another reason. Passing through the hospital kitchen one day Hawkes noticed Freda Tiller, a classmate who was one of 10 females and four males in the course. Determined to make small talk with the attractive young woman, he discovered that she had a passion for missionary service.¹⁰ It was, Lester recalled, a matter of providence. As work duties allowed, and ever conscious of the strict rules that regulated courtship and marriage, the couple walked in the bush and gullies near the hospital!¹¹

Freda May Tiller was born on February 28, 1921 in Broken Hill, New South Wales, Australia.¹² She was the first of four children of Edith (nee Noble) and Lawrence (Jack) Tiller, Jack being a manager in the mines of Broken Hill Propriety Ltd. In later years two sisters and one brother would join the family, Kathleen, Evalyn and Frederick. As a young girl, Freda moved to Leadville, near Lithgow in New South Wales, where her father continued to work in

the mines. After leaving school in Grade 8, she acquired her first job as a house keeper in Sydney and then worked as an assistant to a doctor.¹³ This work, and her later training as a nurse, would prove invaluable in Papua and New Guinea.

Lester Hawkes and Freda Tiller were married in the Auburn SDA Church, Sydney, in January 15, 1946, soon after their graduation.¹⁴ Hawkes recalled, "Freda looked beautiful dressed in a lovely white wedding dress she had borrowed."¹⁵ Three children followed: Lyndon John, Kenneth Ian and Robyn Down.¹⁶

Missionaries and Ministry

After a short time spent in evangelistic work in Parramatta, the Hawkes accepted an invitation to Aroma Mission Station in Papua where they ministered from September 1946 to September 1948.¹⁷ Lester commented, "So many mission stations in the Pacific had stood empty during the terrible years of war and we were looking forward to resuming the church work as quickly as possible."¹⁸ The young couple were transported on the MV Diari from Port Moresby to Aroma, a tiny medical outpost that was one of only eight mission stations operated by the SDA Church in Papua at the time. Notable for its lack of running water and location right on the beach, Lester would write, "The wind was so constant and the sand so invasive that it didn't take long for us to learn that the first thing to do each morning was to wipe the blown sand from our faces before opening our eyes."¹⁹ Nevertheless, the couple were glad to finally have reached the mission field.

At Aroma, Lester and Freda applied the medical skills they had learned in Australia. The need was great. "Men and women would line up from the crack of dawn to wait for us to treat their complaints. Their conditions were many and varied including grilli, scabies, Malaria, even crocodile and pig bites."²⁰ During this time Hawkes became intrigued about what he referred to as the Papuan Sabbath. Interviewing members of various language groups along the coast he discovered to his amazement that, "in all instances where I could get hold of the older men, they confirmed the fact that in pre-mission days their village also followed the weekly cycle with the seventh day as their 'day of rest' or their 'day to stop nothing.'²¹ Hawkes used this historical fact frequently in sermons to encourage Sabbath keeping.

The period 1948-1953 was a challenging for Hawkes, as he awaited placement in a government funded leper colony. Officially serving as District Director for Central Papua,²² Hawkes recalled being stationed temporarily in 15 different locations.²³ During this time he managed Madana Mission, on the Papuan coast, which was known for snakes and "...millions of mosquitos."²⁴ Subsequently he managed mission stations at Babaguina near Abau, Bena Bena in the Eastern Highlands, Yani, Moruma, Togoba, Madang, Kororo, Bogia, and Kabiufa. At Kabiufa they lived in a bamboo home and assisted with construction of the early buildings of the Adventist High School which eventually become the premier SDA high school in Papua New Guinea.²⁵

Between 1953 and 1956 Hawkes served as superintendent of Omaura mission station in the Eastern Highlands Province, establishing, with Freda, a clinic and the first nurse training school in the remote highlands.²⁶ During

this time Lester was ordained as a pastor in July 1955.²⁷ Life at Omaura involved operating the mission station with its own district and a string of village churches as well as a school of approximately 100 boarding students.²⁸ Freda Hawkes in particular played a pioneering role; Lester acknowledged that she took on a heavy teaching and clinical load. Such was the need that, "With the assistance of the female nursing students, she would sometimes care for hundreds of patients who came to the dispensary each morning."²⁹ With two small children, and pregnant with another, Freda worked tirelessly to establish the nurse training program.

1956 saw the Hawkes family return to Australia where Lester accepted an invitation to serve as pastor on Pitcairn Island, the most remote SDA mission outpost in the world. While serving there from 1956 to 1959, Hawkes experienced a range of miraculous events and mishaps, including divine intervention that saved him from being lost at sea.³⁰ While on Pitcairn Hawkes wrote a number of articles for the Australasian Record including "Pitcairn Boats: On the Crest of a Tidal Wave"³¹ and "Fire Bell Rings Furiously on Pitcairn."³²

After returning from Pitcairn in 1959, Hawkes filled a variety of roles, including as evangelist in the Greater Sydney Conference (April 1959- October 1961) and Departmental Director (Medical Secretary) in the Bismark-Solomons Union Mission (October 1961- December 1969). In this role he proceeded to Uru, on Malaita, after the spearing and killing of medical missionary Brian Dunn, just before Christmas in 1965. Not knowing whether his own life was at risk, Hawkes took on the task of supervising the opening of the new hospital and comforting Dunn's widow with a poignant letter in which he compared Dunn's death to that of Christ.³³

The last dozen or so years of Hawke's ministry continued to be varied. This included stints as minister of Parramatta Church, Greater Sydney Conference (January 1970- September 1972) Medical and Temperance Director, Greater Sydney Conference (October 1972- November 1974); Eastern Highlands President, Papua New Guinea, (December 1974- December 1977); Health, Temperance and Communications Director, Papua New Guinea Union Mission, (January 1978- December 1980); Health and Temperance Director, Greater Sydney Conference (1981-1982).³⁴

Later Life

Lester and Freda Hawkes' later life was characterized by his participation in, and her support of, volunteer service in a variety of ministerial roles. He served as Health Director at Warburton Hospital (1982-1984), pastor of Bangkok Adventist Hospital (1985-1986), and relief pastor of a variety in postings including: Lord Howe Island and Norfolk Island (1987-1992); Blenheim Church, South Zealand Conference (1993), Ayr, North Queensland Conference (1994); Lismore, North New South Wales Conference (1997); Invercargil, South New Zealand Conference (1999) and in various roles on the NSW Central Coast.³⁵

Lester and Freda Hawkes eventually retired in Cooranbong where Lester had begun his ministerial training more than sixty years earlier just a short distance from Ellen G. White's *Sunnyside* home. Freda Hawkes died in

Cooranbong on November 27, 2014.³⁶ Lester Hawkes died on June 11, 2017.³⁷ Both were laid to rest in the Avondale SDA Cemetery.

Legacy

Lester and Freda Hawkes were among the first SDA medical missionaries to return to Papua New Guinea in 1945 after WWII and played a key role in laying the foundation for rapid church growth that would result in Papua New Guinea having one of the highest rates of SDA church members in the world. With cumulative paid and volunteer service exceeding 60 years in some of the most remote areas of the Pacific, Lester and Freda Hawkes were respected for their dedication, humility, and willingness to serve their Lord wherever they were called with a remarkable cultural sensitivity. In numerous roles and publications, Lester encouraged respect for local cultural traditions, warning that insensitivity to local culture "...has had devastating effects on mission work in many parts of the world."³⁸ A critical reading of Hawkes's memoirs, *When God Calls Expect Adventure*, reveals strong synergies between medical missionary work, the social gospel, and modern development work, positioning Lester and Freda Hawkes as pioneers of the modern development agenda.³⁹

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