Bisiatabu, Papua New Guinea

GLYNN LESTER LOCK, AND LINETTE VEITCH

Glynn Lester Lock was born in Mackay, North Queensland. He is third generation missionary to Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, and is now retired after working in primary, secondary, tertiary and aviation education. He was married to Bette-Joy (Rosendahl), now deceased and mother of his two adult children, Joyanne and Kent, for forty-eight years, six of those in the Solomon Islands and PNG. Lock enjoys visiting family, including three grandchildren, and friends, woodwork, caravanning, gardening, volunteering and participating in music. He now lives with his wife, Lorraine, in Swansea, NSW.

Linette Veitch, (nee, and works as, Lock), Ph.D. (University of Technology Sydney) is a semi-retired academic now associated with the World Health Organization Collaborating Centre, University of Technology Sydney. Born in Australia to missionary parents, Lin has spent most of her professional life as a nurse/midwife academic with a major emphasis in curriculum and educational development in Australia, South Pacific and South East Asian countries. Most of her publications come from this area of her work. She is married to Dalton and has two adult children.

Bisiatabu was the first mission station of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Papua New Guinea.

Septimus and Edith Carr

Septimus Walfred Carr was the first Seventh-day Adventist missionary to the country. Carr was born on January 3, 1878, in Nyrock, Sweden, to British parents. By 1899 Carr was in Australia. Carr attended Avondale College from 1901 to 1904, where he completed the normal and missionary courses. He married Edith Mary Guilliard. Their son, Arthur Pattison, was born in Port Moresby on July 9, 1912, and their adopted daughter, Muriel Ivy, on August 13, 1914. Carr was ordained to ministry in November 1910 at Warburton, VIC.

The Carrs were pioneer missionaries for the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Fiji and then in Papua, commencing work there in 1908 and continuing until 1914. A few days after arriving in Port Moresby, Carr with his wife and a
Fijian missionary, Bennie Tavodi, took up residence in a small corrugated iron house in Port Moresby, vacated just in time for them to occupy.

The Beginning of Mission Work in Papua New Guinea

When Carr arrived in Papua, the “Commity Agreement,” also known as the “Spheres of Influence Policy,” was in place. This agreement, made between three or four church organizations, provided that these organizations would not “trespass” in each other’s geographical area of work. This was not government policy, but rather a mutual agreement made between the churches. As church work in Papua could not happen unless land became available to the church pioneers, much of the initial effort focused on securing suitable land. As the dominant church organization around Port Moresby in Papua was the London Missionary Society, Carr had to get “permission” to establish the SDA Church in Papua. Mr. Green, manager of the Koitaki plantation, further inland from Bisiatabu, suggested that Carr might find an interest for the mission among the more remote Koiari people. Carr and Tavodi set out to visit. As early as 1908, on a walking trip through the inland of Papua with Tavodi, Carr was promoting a school at Bisiatabu.

Preliminary work to survey and buy a piece of land was commenced by Carr in 1909, when a government surveyor went with Carr to the Bisiatabu location. By 1910 the land at Bisiatabu was dedicated to God for mission purposes, and Carr reported that the land was being cleared, gardens were being planted, and 12 acres of rubber was also being planted. On July 11, 1910, the vessel Van Waerwyck brought J. E. Fulton to Port Moresby. Fulton was on his way to the union conference meeting. While in Port Moresby he ministered to the missionaries, organized a church of six members with some indigenous visitors from further inland, and celebrated Communion. On the same vessel came four mules and stock saddles. The mules, along with horses, were used to carry supplies up to Bisiatabu, as there was no road for part of the way. Arthur N. Lawson joined the staff in 1911. Lawson arrived in Papua as a bachelor but married Miss E. Gordon on December 10, 1912, at Bisiatabu. In 1911 F. L. Chaney, a mission builder, reported that eight hundred rubber trees had been planted. Faole, a Papuan from Bageanumu village, later a powerful and dynamic church worker, helped establish the rubber plantation. A house for Tavodi at Bisiatabu was dedicated on October 4, 1913, funded by a Sabbath School offering on September 27, 1913. Correspondence flowed between Carr and the Australian government until February 5, 1914, when a private lease was finally granted to Carr for agricultural, school, and general mission purposes. This private lease was later transferred to the Australasian Conference Association, Limited, of New South Wales, the legal entity for holding property in the Australasian Union Conference.

The Difficulties and Progress

Growth at Bisiatabu was slow. After land was secured, indigenous Papuan laborers came from nearby and further inland to clear the land at Bisiatabu. For some of the day these workers attended school learning basic literacy and numeracy. Usually after 12 months of work and school the workers left, and a new cohort came. Carr reported that one small boy progressed well both in school and spiritually and had requested baptism, the first baptism in Papua. The Carrs reported that a previous student, Vaore, was visiting Bisiatabu. While away in his village, he had been ridiculed, but remained true. One contributing factor to slow progress was the problem of language. The Lawsons reported that in 1914 three different languages were being used at Bisiatabu. As well as being remote from Port Moresby, with a difficult road and track to negotiate to get to Bisiatabu, the early missionaries had to deal with bigger issues. Carr reported that by 1914 two separate attempts had been made on the lives of the men at Bisiatabu by the devil.

Intercessory prayer was the weapon used to rebuff the attack on each occasion. Sometime in 1915 Lawson was requested by the chief gaoler in Port Moresby to visit and minister to a man convicted of the murder of a man near Bisiatabu. Lawson was invited to pray for him on the day of his execution. On October 9, 1918, the Fijian missionary Bennie Tavodi suffered a fatal snakebite while working in his garden. As life ebbed away, Bennie pleaded with the men who surrounded him to individually yield their lives to the Lord. The climate at Bisiatabu was cooler and wetter than on the coast at Port Moresby. As a result the gardens at Bisiatabu were more productive, with a greater range of crops. Carr reported that £40 of fruit had been sold in Port Moresby over a period of time, yielding some income for the school.

In June 1913 Carr and Lawson left Bisiatabu to cross the Owen Stanley Range to the government station at Kokoda. Their trek provided opportunity to visit many of the tribes and villages along the way and commence working with the villagers. Some of the workers from Bisiatabu had come from Efogi and Kagi. On returning to their villages, they had taken the opportunity to instruct the people in what they knew of the story of Jesus, including the Sabbath. As the missionaries walked the track to Kokoda they came upon villagers who were keeping Sabbath as best they knew. The influence of Bisiatabu was beginning to spread. The Carrs served in Papua until 1914, then served briefly in North Queensland before serving again in the Pacific.

In early 1918 Captain G. F. Jones sailed into Port Moresby harbor. A message was sent to Lawson at Bisiatabu that Jones had arrived with the mission ship Melanesia. Lawson quickly made his way to Port Moresby to meet Jones, and after meeting with Jones, the mission staff decided to “work more assiduously” for the people in the future. The tenth session of the Australasian Union Conference convened in 1918 with C. H. Watson as president. A. W. Anderson reported that the Sabbath School membership in Papua had grown from eight to twenty scholars, slow
growth for the first ten years. Concurrently, a letter written by Jones indicated plans to press inland from Bisiatabu up the Owen Stanley Range and expressed optimism for the trip to open up villages inland of Bisiatabu. H. M. Blunden wrote that “the School at Bisiatabu is showing more promise, as the Koiari young people are attending more regularly due to Jones’s ability to work with the people, and he has to some degree won them over.”

When attending the eleventh session of the Australasian Union Conference, Jones told stories of progress—miracles that helped to break down barriers and bring relief to sufferers. By 1922 Jones reported that about twenty young Koiari men were in school at Bisiatabu.

A New Wave of Missionaries to Papua

On January 20, 1923, Gerald Peacock and his wife sailed to Papua aboard the ship *Mataram*. A new wave of missionaries were on their way. In 1924 William and Marguerite Lock, with four children and Nurse Heise, arrived in Papua. The Locks spent a few weeks at Bisiatabu preparing to move inland to Efogi, where previously Carr, Lawson, and Jones had visited and a few young men from Efogi had come to school at Bisiatabu. Writing in 1926, Lock reported that a new girls dormitory and a new church had been built. Now sixty boys and girls were attending Bisiatabu school, where the Peacocks were busy at work. A man from down the coast, previously met by Carr, had arrived at Bisiatabu and was making good progress, and the staff had hopes that this could be the opening to a new center of interest. Eleven more people had been baptized.

Work continued at Bisiatabu until the outbreak of World War II, when the expatriate missionaries’ wives and children were evacuated and the men were conscripted into the army. Lester Lock, who had just entered the workforce in Papua in 1940, recalled that when presenting to the enlisting officer, he asked who would care for the rubber plantation at Bisiatabu. Lock was immediately put on leave without pay and sent back to care for the plantation.

After the war Bisiatabu again held a central position in mission activity. E. A. Boehm and his family were posted there. The caretaker, L. Webster, commented that Boehm had done a fine job in rehabilitating Bisiatabu. The 1947 Second Quarter Sabbath School Offering given at Bisiatabu amounted to £3 17s 4d, indicative of the commitment of a congregation of between eighty and one hundred people, including children and students. Webster commented on it as “an exceptional liberal offering to the cause of missions.”

Conclusion

The first Adventist convert, Taitu, a Koiari person, was baptized at Bisiatabu in 1914, a full six years after Carr and Tavodi had arrived. The next baptism, in 1920, was of Baigani, who came from a village near Efogi. Just before Lock took his family to Efogi in 1924, he baptized a further 11 people into the fellowship of the Seventh-day Adventist church. By 2018 church membership for the Central Papua Conference, in which Bisiatabu is located, stood at 62,064, while membership for the Papua New Guinea Union Mission was 333,854. J. E. Fulton organized the first church of six members in 1910; in 2018 there were 127 and 273 companies in the Central Papua Conference.

Bisiatabu holds a special place in the life of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Papua New Guinea as the place where it first commenced operations in the country.

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NOTES


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