Australian Union Conference, South Pacific Division

BARRY OLIVER

Barry Oliver, Ph.D., retired in 2015 as president of the South Pacific Division of Seventh-day Adventists, Sydney, Australia. An Australian by birth Oliver has served the Church as a pastor, evangelist, college teacher, and administrator. In retirement, he is a conjoint associate professor at Avondale College of Higher Education. He has authored over 106 significant publications and 192 magazine articles. He is married to Julie with three adult sons and three grandchildren.

The Australian Union Conference (AUC) is a constituent of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists and is one of four union conferences in the South Pacific Division (SPD) of the General Conference. Its headquarters are located at 289 Maroondah Highway, Ringwood, Victoria, Australia. The AUC purchased the adjoining properties at 291 Maroondah Highway, Ringwood in March 2013 and 287 Maroondah Highway, Ringwood in 2016, allowing for additional facilities and a secure investment for the future.

The unincorporated activities of the AUC are governed by a constitution which is based on the model union conference constitution of the SPD. Its real and intellectual property is held in trust by the Australasian Conference office, Ringwood, VIC, Australia. Photo courtesy of Michael Worker.
The Australian Union Conference Executive Committee has transferred most of its functions to a corporation—Seventh-day Adventist Church (Australian Union Conference) Limited, registered on January 1, 2005—which acts as trustee for the conference and oversees the day-to-day operations of the conference itself. The operation of the Mamarapha College for indigenous Australians is overseen by Mamarapha College Limited which became an affiliated entity of the AUC in harmony with the AUC Constitution on January 1, 2012. The Adventist Development and Relief Agency Australia Limited oversees the operation of the Adventist Development and Relief Agency in Australia (ADRA Australia) and was registered on June 8, 2004, before transition from the SPD on January 1, 2009. The Headquarters Office of ADRA Australia remains for the time being at 146 Fox Valley Road, Wahroonga, New South Wales, Australia. All three incorporated entities are public companies limited by guarantee and subject to the appropriate regulations.

**Current Territory and Statistics**

The territory of the AUC is “Australia, including Christmas Island, Cocos Island, Lord Howe Island, Norfolk Island, and Tasmania; comprising the Greater Sydney, North New South Wales, Northern Australian, South Australian, South New South Wales, South Queensland, Tasmanian, Victorian, and Western Australian Conferences.”

In the 2018 Annual Statistical Report of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, the Australian Union Conference was listed as having nine constituent conferences, which in turn had a total of 429 church congregations and 106 companies. Church membership at the end of 2017 was 61,197. The Union and its conference had 4918 active employees. The total tithe receipts for the Union in 2016 were US$57,842,612. Its tithe and offerings per capita were US$976.44.

**Institutions and Services of the Australian Union Conference**

Mamarapha College, a tertiary Bible College for indigenous Australians, opened at the beginning of 1997 under the name Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Ministries (ATSIM) Bible College. Sixteen students graduated in its first year of operation. Following the transfer of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Ministries from the SPD to the AUC, the College has been owned and operated by the AUC. It is located at 23 School Road, Karragullen, Western Australia. ATSIM Bible College changed its name to Mamarapha College in 2003. Mamarapha College Limited was incorporated on January 1, 2012. Established as a boarding academy in 1964, the Lilydale Academy was originally owned and operated by the Trans Commonwealth Union Conference. With a change of name from Trans Commonwealth Union to Trans Australian Union in 1977, it was operated by that entity until reorganization of the union conferences in the SPD in 2000 when it came under the administration of the AUC. It remained so until January 1, 2014, when it was transferred to the Victorian Conference as a day school. It is now operating as Edinburgh College following the amalgamation by the Victorian College of Lilydale Academy and Edinburgh College. It is located at 33 – 61 Edinburgh Road, Lilydale, Victoria, 3140, Australia.

Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) Australia headquarters remain at 146 Fox Valley Road, Wahroonga, New South Wales 2076, Australia, in the SPD complex, even though the administration of ADRA Australia transferred from the SPD to the AUC on January 1, 2009. In 2017, ADRA Australia Limited became the administrative agency for Open Heart International previously administered by the Sydney Adventist Hospital, Wahroonga, Australia.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church established Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ministries (ATSIM) in 1980 to provide national coordination for its work among Australia’s indigenous population. At that time ATSIM was overseen by the SPD. Since the transfer of ATSIM from the SPD to the AUC in 2000, the AUC has provided both administrative and departmental support to its nine local Conferences that administer the Church at the regional level. The work of ATSIM covers the whole expanse of Australia including the Torres Strait Islands. Good News is a magazine produced quarterly by ATSIM for Indigenous Australians. It includes news features, personal life stories, health and lifestyle articles, photos from across Australia, and devotional articles.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church in Australia provides accounting services to the conferences in Australia including payroll services. The AUC also operates a Resource Centre providing a comprehensive range of resources for the local church.

**The Origins of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Australia**

In 1885, Melbourne, Victoria, was chosen as the location for the initial activities of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Australia. The first missionaries, all from the United States, were Stephen N. Haskell, John 0. Corliss and family, Mendel C. Israel and family, a printer named Henry Scott, and William Arnold. During the first evangelistic series of meetings which concluded on January 10, 1886, the first Seventh-day Adventist Church in Australia was organized at North Fitzroy with 28 members.
The first camp meeting was conducted at Middle Brighton in 1894. It was also a workers’ meeting. Quoting from *The Bible Echo*: “The camp-meeting which is just now closing at Middle Brighton, a suburb of Melbourne, is the first meeting of the kind ever held by Seventh-day Adventists in Australia. And it has indeed been a refreshing season. Including the workers’ meeting, it has been in progress since Dec. 29 [1893], or for a period of about three weeks . . . Sr. White's talks have been most excellent, as they always are. She urges the people to prepare for the end and says she has not come to Australia to fold her hands, or to give a peace-and-safety cry.”

**Significant Events in the History of the Organization of the Australian Union Conference**

As early as 1888 it was reported that work in Victoria was self-supporting with “the tithes from the churches meet[ing] the expenses of all employed in that colony.” On the basis of the financial strength and the availability of local human resources, the Australian Conference was organized in September 1888. Attending the session were twenty-two lay delegates representing the churches at Adelaide, Ballarat, Hobart, Melbourne, and the company at Wychitella, as well as four ministers as delegates-at-large. A constitution as used by all conferences was adopted, with some alterations. The elected officers were G. C. Tenney, president, and Stephen McCullagh, secretary, with the treasury managed by the Echo Publishing House. At its formation, the Australian Conference had as its territory the entire country of Australia—the territory that in 2018 is the territory of the Australian Union Conference.

Subsequent to the formation of the Australian Conference in 1888, a number of organizational changes occurred in rapid succession. An Australasian Union Conference was organized during the time of the Australian camp meeting that met January 15-25, 1894. It comprised District No. 7 of the General Conference Districts, and included the conferences of Australia and, what is now, New Zealand. The stated object of the union was “to unify and extend the work of the third angel's message, under the general direction of the General Conference, in the Australasian field.” It was anticipated that as the work expanded additional conferences would be organized.

Arthur Daniells described the further steps taken to organize the conferences in Australia. He wrote: “At the beginning of 1894 it was felt that the Australian Conference had more territory than it could well manage, so the colonies of Queensland and West Australia were separated from the Conference and placed under the care of the Union Conference as Mission Fields. Near the close of 1895 another change was made. New South Wales was separated from the Australian Conference by the organization of the New South Wales Conference. At that time the name of the Conference was changed from the Australian to the Central Australian Conference.” On October 29, 1899, the Queensland Conference was organized, and on November 25, 1899, the South Australian Conference was organized. On January 1, 1900, Tasmania became a mission field under the care of the Australasian Union Conference. What had been known as the Central Australian Conference was renamed the Victorian Conference. It now comprised only the colony of Victoria.

Until 1949, the Australasian Union Conference, also designated as the Australasian Division, operated as a collection of conferences and missions. In 1949, four unions were organized within the territory of the Australasian Division, which also was known as the Australasian Inter-Union Conference. The four new unions were the Central Pacific Union Mission with headquarters in Suva, Fiji; the Coral Sea Union Mission with headquarters in Lae, Papua New Guinea; the Trans-Commonwealth Union Conference with headquarters in Melbourne, Victoria; and the Trans-Tasman Union Conference with headquarters in Gordon, New South Wales. The conferences in Australia were divided between the Trans-Tasman Union and the Trans Commonwealth Union. The Trans Commonwealth Union contained South New South Wales, Victoria, Tasmania, South Australia and Western Australia. The Trans-Tasman Union encompassed Greater Sydney, North New South Wales, Queensland, and North Queensland. It also included the North New Zealand Conference and the South New Zealand Conference.

By 1953, it was decided that the territory of the Coral Sea Union Mission would be better developed by being formed into two union conference territories. As a result, the Bismarck-Solomons Union Mission was created with headquarters at Rabaul. This meant that there were now five union conferences in the Australasian Division.

At the end of 1971, the Division's mission territories were again reorganized into three union missions effective April 1, 1972. The new union missions were Papua New Guinea Union Mission with headquarters in Lae, Papua New Guinea; Western Pacific Union Mission with headquarters in Honiara, British Solomon Islands; and Central Pacific Union Mission with headquarters in Suva, Fiji. In December 1972, an action was taken to transfer the headquarters of the new Central Pacific Union Mission from Suva, Fiji to Auckland, New Zealand. The transfer of the union headquarters was completed by January 1974. Meanwhile, the territories of the Trans-Tasman Union and the Trans Commonwealth Union remained the same throughout the period of 1949-2000. One name change was made in 1876 when the Trans Commonwealth Union became the Trans Australia Union in 1976.

In 2000, a major reorganization of the unions in the South Pacific Division occurred at the Division Session. The number of unions in the division was reduced from five to four. The action of the South Pacific Division Session on October 31, 2000, brought all nine local Australian conferences under the leadership of the new Australian Union Conference. Initially, the Australian Union Conference Administrative Office was located in shared facilities with the local Victorian Conference. The AUC moved to its current location in August 2004.
Mission and Strategic Plans of the Australian Union Conference

The Mission Statement of the Australian Union Conference focuses the union’s activities on “facilitat[ing] effective leadership, provid[ing] administrative support, and deliver[ing] quality resources and services to enhance the ministry of [its] conferences and institutions.” The AUC fulfills this mission through a broad range of programs including a lay training center and the provision of leadership resources for both constituent conferences and outreach to Australia’s indigenous people. Its Resource Centre supports not only the AUC’s constituent organizations, but also other ministries beyond the territory of the AUC. Youth evangelism is a particular area of focus, encompassing a formal educational system, a Pathfinder program, and a teen leadership development training program. The AUC’s “Seeds of Hope” brand is developing resources specifically for children. In 2016, as a service for the Adventist Church worldwide, the AUC released a motion picture drama called “Tell the World,” depicting the historical development of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The AUC also hosts a discipleship website.

The Australian Union Conference is active in the broader community. It advocates with the government over issues of religious freedom, marriage, and family in Australia. It gave considerable input into the royal Commission on Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

As the AUC continues its ministry in Australia, it is faced with many issues in common with church entities in other developed countries including church revitalization, secular views and government definitions of marriage and family, funding, ordination issues, and youth engagement. However, the AUC focus on discipleship as the core of its mission holds promise for the success of its endeavors in outreach to urban communities, health ministry, youth engagement.

List of Executive Officers

Presidents: Chester G. Stanley (October 2000-September 2015), Jorge L. Muñoz-Larrondo (September 2015-)
Secretaries: Kingsley R. Wood (October 2000-December 2003), Kenneth L. Vogel (January 2004-May 2017), Michael A. Worker (May 2017-)
Treasurers: Kingsley R. Wood (October 2000-September 2015), J. Francois Keet (September 2015-December 2016), Peter W. Cameron (January 2017-)

SOURCES


Australian Union Conference Constitution. Article IX Section 3. a. iii. and Article XII Sections 1 and 2.


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“Meetings Were Continued in the Tent . . .” *Bible Echo and Signs of the Times*, February 1886.

“Organization in Australia.” *Bible Echo and Signs of the Times*, October, 1888.


NOTES

1. The author acknowledges the assistance of Peter Brewin, a retired church administrator, in compiling this article. Also contributing were Rose-lee Power, Ron Evans, Harold Harker, Michael A. Worker, Lorraine Atchia, and Sue Marshall.


3. Australian Union Conference Constitution, Article IX Section 3. a. iii, and Article XII Sections 1 and 2.


9. Ibid. A current statistical overview of the Union at any time may be accessed at http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Statistics/Forms/AllItems.aspx?RootFolder=%2fStatistics%2fASR&FolderCTID=0x01200095DE8DF0F0A49904B9D6521132.


16. 
17. An online catalogue may be accessed at http://resources.adventist.org.au/.


19. Ibid.

20. “Meetings Were Continued in the Tent…,” Bible Echo and Signs of the Times, February 1886, 32; M. C. Israel, “The First Seventh-day Adventist Church in Australia….,” Bible Echo and Signs of the Times, May 1886, 80.


23. “Organization in Australia,” Bible Echo and Signs of the Times, October 1888, 152.


25. Ibid.


29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.


32. Ibid.


34. Ibid.

35. Ibid.


40. Michael A. Worker, Secretary of the Australian Union Conference, email to author, September 26, 2018.

41. Ibid.

42. List provided by Michael A. Worker, Secretary of the Australian Union Conference, email to author, September 26, 2018.