



Aore's school sign with church in the background, 2018.

Photo courtesy of David D. Rogers.

# Aore Adventist Academy, Vanuatu

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## DAVID ROGERS

David Rogers, M.Ed. (Avondale College, Cooranbong, Australia) retired in 2018 from the South Queensland Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Australia. David (an Australian) served God in Adventist Education as a teacher, university lecturer and school principal. Twelve of his seventeen years of Mission service were spent at Aore Adventist Academy, Vanuatu. In retirement, he assists Aore on a voluntary basis with its ongoing maintenance needs. He is married to Danielle, with three adult children.

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Aore Adventist Academy is a Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) boarding secondary school on Aore, a small island near Luganville, the capital of Espiritu Santo, Vanuatu.

## Developments That Led to the Establishment of the School

The first Seventh-day Adventist missionaries in Vanuatu, known as the New Hebrides prior to its independence in 1980, commenced work on the island of Malekula in 1912.<sup>1</sup> Over time the initial resistance eased. In the mid-1920s the mission's leaders felt that they should start a training school for students from the several islands that had been evangelized, and found a suitable property on Aore Island, off the southern coast of Espiritu Santo. It was purchased for £600.<sup>2</sup> The site was chosen largely because of the harbor that offered a safe anchorage for the mission's boats, with a marine workshop soon being established.

## Founding of the School

The new school commenced in 1927 and was originally named the New Hebrides Training School, comprising an elementary school and ministerial training school. The first head teacher was J. Ross James, who was also the New Hebrides Mission superintendent.<sup>3</sup> Bush was cleared by the staff and students for gardens, and the first of several coconut plantations were established. Within a few years a sawmill had been set up, a residence for expatriate staff built, and a schoolhouse and several houses for New Hebridean staff members constructed of local materials.<sup>4</sup> By the 1930s the school's industries were operating efficiently, a permanent classroom overlooking the sea had been built for the school's 70 to 80 students, and the general aspect of the campus found to be "delightful."<sup>5</sup> A medical clinic was also established on the campus, and later a hospital to serve the medical needs of the people from surrounding islands.<sup>6</sup>

By 1935 Aore was training young New Hebrideans to serve on islands up and down the archipelago. Gerald Peacock, superintendent of the New Hebrides Mission, reported "taking 12 native teachers down to Port Vila on our mission ship and putting them on board another ship bound for Tanna, so that they might strengthen and extend the work there." He added that the new teachers were "men from Tanna, Atchin, and Ambrym who have been at the Aore Training School. . . . Their vision is the mission field and the extension of the kingdom of God."<sup>7</sup>

## Subsequent History of the School

World War II impacted the mission's operations on Aore. A U.S. anti-aircraft battery and troops were based on the school grounds.<sup>8</sup> The expatriate staff members on Aore were evacuated in 1942, but returned to resume their work in 1943, finding that the New Hebridean staff had kept the school operating. When the U.S. forces left, SDA missionaries were able to obtain army surplus timber, which was used to build local staff members' houses and a new marine workshop. A new church was built in the center of the campus, facing the sea, using some of the same materials, while ex-World War II Quonset huts were set up to serve as dormitories.<sup>9</sup> The headquarters for the New Hebrides Mission of the SDA Church were moved from Atchin, Malekula, to Aore in 1945.<sup>10</sup> It remained as the site for mission headquarters, sharing the campus with the school until 1962.<sup>11</sup>

During the 1950s the training school was renamed Parker Missionary School in honor of Cavin H. Parker, who had been the first SDA missionary in the New Hebrides and the principal of the school between 1932 and 1934. In the 1960s significant building work was undertaken, with an eight-room classroom block built of concrete blocks completed.<sup>12</sup> The school's enrollment increased significantly in the late 1960s and early 1970s, partly because of higher numbers of girls seeking an education.<sup>13</sup> This led to a shortage of student accommodation, with the boys and girls being housed in the old, leaking Quonset huts. Increased student numbers also exacerbated a water shortage. These needs were reported in the *Australasian Record* and an appeal published for MV societies across the division to give to a special offering to build new dormitories on Aore.<sup>14</sup>

In 1974 Parker Missionary School was renamed Aore Adventist High School. The Western Pacific Union Mission (WPUM) set in motion plans to upgrade the school's facilities using volunteers from Australia and local labor.<sup>15</sup> The first wing of a new dormitory and ablution block for the girls was completed in 1975.<sup>16</sup> The following year an extensive rainwater storage system was installed, which significantly helped the school with its drinking water supply.<sup>17</sup> A new boys dormitory was completed in 1978, and the second wing of the new girls dormitory in 1979, allowing the school's administration to finally dismantle the last leaking Quonset hut. A new library and science lab were added in 1980, lengthening the main school building under one roof, with a veranda running full length along the back.<sup>18</sup> Several Australian teachers assisted overseas volunteers and local labor with these projects.<sup>19</sup>

In 1980 the New Hebrides gained its independence from France and Great Britain, the two colonial powers that had jointly administered the New Hebrides as a condominium. Many on the northern islands were unhappy with the outcome of the first nationwide election, and a local chief named Jimmy Stevens led an armed rebellion to claim Santo and its surrounding islands as the independent state of Vemarana. Many refugees from Santo fled to Aore to shelter on the school campus until they could find transport to safer regions.<sup>20</sup> Aore was included in the territory claimed by the rebels, but the school community supported the newly elected government in the capital, Port Vila, which led to threats of reprisals by the rebels. Because of the difficulty of obtaining supplies, the school struggled to operate, but remained open.<sup>21</sup> The rebels were defeated several months later by troops from Papua New Guinea.

By the mid-1980s Aore Adventist High School was well established on a spacious campus with a main classroom block, good dormitories, a church, dining hall, a clinic, and staff houses. In addition, the school had a large coconut plantation, extensive gardens, and a herd of dairy cattle, with milk being supplied to the dining hall and sold. There were several tractors for farm work and several boats to care for the school's transport needs. The workshop and slipway were transferred from the mission's control to the school's, allowing access for maintenance work, although insufficient funds often limited actual maintenance work done.

Aore's principal was an expatriate Australian, and the teaching staff consisted of several Australians working alongside Solomon Island and Ni-Vanuatu teachers. The latter brought a very good understanding of local culture, and the Australians were able to contribute a level of technical expertise in the area of maintenance,

with each subgroup complementing the contribution of the others.<sup>22</sup> Enrollment in forms 1 to 4 stood at about 250 students, who came mainly from SDA villages in the country. Students who did well academically were able to transfer to either Betikama Adventist High School in the Solomon Islands or to Fulton College in Fiji for their senior high school and college education.

WPUM administrators recognized in the early 1980s that Aore needed to have its capabilities upgraded to offer grade 12.<sup>23</sup> Pacific Adventist College (PAC) was being built in Papua New Guinea,<sup>24</sup> and it required grade 12 entrance. However, it was not until 1994 that Aore graduated its first grade 12 class.<sup>25</sup>

During the 1990s the school maintained its SDA philosophy of education, running academic and spiritual programs along with a meaningful “work line” program. The latter involved students working with staff members for several afternoons per week and on Sunday mornings on a wide range of practical tasks around the dormitories, kitchen, farm, and workshop. This work scheme, for many decades an integral part of the program of most boarding mission schools in the South Pacific, helped limit a school’s expenses and afforded students an opportunity to acquire useful life skills which often led to employment opportunities.<sup>26</sup> Thus, students continued to graduate from Aore equipped with appropriate academic and Bible-based learning, and Adventist values and life skills.

By the year 2000, however, the situation at Aore had started to change. In the preceding decade, with the help of foreign aid, the Vanuatu government built many new secondary schools.<sup>27</sup> The country was also divided into six provinces, and students were expected to remain within their home provinces, precluding many of the students from SDA villages on more distant islands from traveling to Aore. At the same time, increasing numbers of students from local non-SDA “feeder schools” were allocated to Aore, presenting its teaching and pastoral team with good opportunities for evangelism, but altering the tone of the school somewhat.<sup>28</sup>

At the same time there were a number of changes in the position of principal for different reasons, and this impacted Aore’s operations. Some less-experienced principals struggled to manage effectively the farm and school’s industries, on which the school depended for part of its income. The price of fuel rose, increasing the school’s costs. It also became more difficult in an isolated location to retain new graduates, as some preferred to transfer to Port Vila to work where there were more SDA young people.<sup>29</sup> Staff turnover impacted on the quality of teaching programs, and some years of disappointing results followed.

The school’s “work line” program lost some of its effectiveness, as the technical skill base of a changing staff limited practical learning opportunities.<sup>30</sup> Also, some teachers were less willing to commit to working with students during the afternoons after classes ended, recognizing a need for more class preparation time.<sup>31</sup>

As parents became aware of some of the difficulties that the school was facing, enrollments declined, affecting operating budgets. One of several areas to have its spending reduced was maintenance, which impacted the school’s aging buildings, plant, and machinery. Aore was struggling financially, and there was some pressure to close the school. The Ni-Vanuatu principal at the time, Simon Luke, and the officers of the Vanuatu Mission

resisted that pressure.<sup>32</sup>

In late 2006 the Vanuatu Mission, with the support of Trans Pacific Union Mission, took the unusual step of appointing back to Aore for a four-year term a previous Australian principal with practical skills, David Rogers. He was tasked with rebuilding the school's infrastructure, returning the school's industries to profitability, and improving the school's academic results.<sup>33</sup> He was greatly assisted in the area of finances by the Ni-Vanuatu business manager, Lottie Paul, who had worked in the business office for 20 years. Some donations were received toward a new campus generator and two new farm tractors from a sister institution, Avondale High School, and some SDA businesspeople in Australia. The staff also worked with the principal to strengthen the school academically and repair some of the infrastructure. External academic results improved gradually from year to year, student enrollments increased, and industries such as the school's barge and marine slipway started to return a good income. Volunteers from Australia also played a key role in helping to rebuild different parts of the school's infrastructure, including the Aore wharf.<sup>34</sup>

However, from 2012 Aore started to struggle again, mainly because of a lack of continuity of leadership. The mission was unable to fill some teaching positions at Aore, which made it harder for the teachers who were there. In 2019 some improvement has been indicated in the year's final results, but Aore as a boarding school faces competition from some more recently established day schools, whose teachers have less demands made on their time.

## Historic Role of the School

Aore's first intake of students in 1927 included a 14-year-old boy named Sam Dick (the son of a head-hunting cannibal from Malekula), who became an evangelist, serving on many of the country's 65 inhabited islands for more than six decades.<sup>35</sup> To better connect with local villagers, he learned to speak 13 different languages. He ended his years of formal church employment at Aore as the church pastor and boys preceptor in the late 1970s and early 1980s, but continued to minister on nearby Malo island until nearly the turn of the century.<sup>36</sup>

While Dick was one of the longest serving Aore alumni, there have been hundreds of others who have served as part of the mission's overall effort in Vanuatu as parents, deacons, elders, teachers and pastors. Simon Luke, an ex-Aore student, previous Aore principal, and general secretary of the mission, observed that "Aore has been producing local leaders in churches across the mission for many decades. Where young people from an area have not had the opportunity of a Christian education at Aore, the local church leadership is weak . . . but elders who were educated at Aore run their local churches much more capably. I have seen this, moving around the churches up and down Vanuatu."<sup>37</sup>

Nos Mailalong, the mission president, explained that "for many decades Aore was the mission's only training school. The school developed young people who are well rounded, not only in academics, because of a strong work program and strong spiritual program. We are what we are today, as the Vanuatu Mission, because of

what we received from Aore. . . . That is where I found the truth and decided to become a pastor. The majority of the mission's workers over the years have benefited from being trained at Aore.<sup>38</sup>

Much of the growth of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Vanuatu in recent decades (with Adventists now constituting 8.1 percent of the overall population) can be attributed in many ways to the influence of the New Hebrides Training School that the mission started operating on Aore in 1927. Additionally, given that Aore is one of the oldest continuously operating schools in Vanuatu and one of only seven English-speaking secondary schools until the mid-1980s, approximately 15 percent of older, educated English-speaking people in the country received an education and learned SDA values at Aore. This indicates a significant impact on the development of the nation of Vanuatu, with graduates being commonly found in positions of responsibility in government departments and financial institutions as well as in private business.

## What Remains of Aore's Mission

Aore has fulfilled its original mission over several generations. However, its role in the Vanuatu Mission of the SDA Church has changed over time, as the school has gone from being the mission's "flagship" training institution to being one of several SDA high schools. Students from any of these schools can travel overseas to train to serve God as teachers, ministers, or office staff. The above notwithstanding, church members who learn as students at Aore to be involved in local church leadership continue to play significant roles in churches around the country, so the "training school" continues to contribute to this aspect of the ongoing mission of the Adventist Church.

There is a growing need across the country for schools to offer technical and vocational training in addition to academic classes. Many who attend high school don't find formal employment when they leave school, so practical knowledge and skills acquired at school are worthwhile, as Aore has already proved over decades with its "work line" program. With its boats, workshop, slipway, manual arts block, farm and related machinery, Aore has the physical assets to be a leader in this area of education. The principal attended Ministry of Education meetings in Port Vila late in 2019 exploring these possibilities. If Aore can move into this area to meet a growing need in the country, it will continue to find a relevance in the education sector that will complement the school's spiritual mission.<sup>39</sup>

## Principals of Aore Adventist Academy

New Hebrides Training School: J. Ross James, 1927–1928; Donald Nicholson, 1929–1931; Calvin H. Parker, 1932–1934; George Englebrecht, 1935–1936; J.C.H. Perry, 1937–1945; unknown, 1946–1947; A. Thompson, 1948–1949.

Parker Missionary School: Unknown, 1950–1951; A. R. Hiscox, 1952–1952; M. P. Cozens, 1953–1958; Don Powell, 1959–1962; unknown, 1963; Neil Hughes, 1964–1970; G.W. Harrington, 1971–1972; Brian V. Hamilton, 1972–1974.

Aore Adventist High School: Adrian Smith, 1975; Colin Crawford, 1976–1977; Dale Cowley, 1978–1980; David Iredale, 1981–1983; Alan French, 1984; David Rogers, 1985–1986; Jean Reynaud, 1987–1989.

Aore Adventist Academy: Unknown, 1990–1991; Titus Rore, 1992–1994; Charles Viva, 1995; Dalong James, 1996–1998; Kenny Elisha, 1999; Simon Luke, 2000–2004; unknown, 2005; Ridely Manasseh, 2006; David Rogers, 2007–2010; Jeffesen Trief, 2011–2012; Branson Gideon, 2013–2014; Gilrick Joshua, 2015; Branson Gideon, 2016–2017; Ellen Toa, 2018; Fred Otiman, 2019.

The postal address of the institution: Aore Adventist Academy, Post Office Box 7, Santo, Vanuatu

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Moe, Rex. "Back to Aore." *Australasian Record*, October 16, 1982.

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Townend, Robina. "God's Angels in Santo." *Australasian Record*, January 12, 1981.

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## NOTES

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2. *Ibid.*, 107.
3. J. R. James, "Aore, New Hebrides, the Site of Our New Training School," *Australasian Record*, March 7, 1927, 3, 4; A. H. Weil, "A letter to Record Readers," *Australasian Record*, March 12, 1928, 3.
4. Sam Dick, multiple conversations with the author, Aore, Vanuatu, 1979–1990.
5. Andrew Stewart, "Through the New Hebrides, Part 1," *Australasian Record*, July 27, 1931, 3.
6. R. Frame, "Central Pacific Circuit," *Australasian Record*, August 14, 1961, 2.
7. G. Peacock, "Survey of the New Hebrides," *Australasian Record*, July 15, 1935, 3.
8. Charlie Tucker, interviews with the author, Aore, Vanuatu, June 1983.
9. Algy Gallagher, missionary to the New Hebrides and builder of the church on Aore, conversation with the writer, Launceston, Tasmania, late 1970s.
10. "New Hebrides Mission," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1945), 71.
11. "New Hebrides Mission," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1962), 79.
12. Ron Taylor, "The People Who Sat in Darkness," *Australasian Record*, July 11, 1966, 3, 4.
13. Dick.
14. Dean Giles, "MV Offering Project—Aore Adventist High School," *Australasian Record*, October 7, 1974, 8, 9.
15. Rex Moe, "Back to Aore," *Australasian Record*, October 16, 1982, 6.
16. F. Skeers, "Fly-'n'-Build Project," *Australasian Record*, May 5, 1975 12.
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18. Dale Cowley, "Aore Moves to the Future," *Australasian Record*, March 6, 1981, 8, 9.
19. Personal knowledge of the author working on Aore from 1979 to 1986.
20. Robina Townend, "God's Angels in Santo," *Australasian Record*, January 12, 1981, 2.

21. Personal knowledge of the author working on Aore from 1979 to 1986.
22. Ibid.
23. Moe, 6.
24. Laurie Draper, phone interview, June 7, 2019.
25. Colin Wilson (science teacher at Aore from 1993 to 1996), phone interview, December 26, 2019.
26. Personal knowledge of the author working on Aore from 1979 to 1986.
27. Titus Rore, conversations with the author, Aore, 1994.
28. Joses Seth (previous Vanuatu Mission education director), recorded interview with the author, Port Vila, April 13, 2017.
29. Nos Mailalong (Vanuatu Mission president), recorded interview, Port Vila, Vanuatu, April 11, 2017.
30. Personal knowledge of the author gained from "Fly and Build" visits between 1987 and 2006.
31. Joses Seth (previous Vanuatu Mission Education Director), recorded interview with the author, Port Vila, April 13, 2017.
32. Simon Luke (previous Aore principal and general secretary of the Vanuatu Mission), recorded interview with the author, Port Vila, Vanuatu, April 10, 2017.
33. Joses Seth (previous Vanuatu Mission Education Director), recorded interview with the author, Port Vila, April 13, 2017.
34. Personal knowledge of the author, who returned to Aore as principal from 2007 to 2010.
35. Sam Dick, multiple conversations with the author, Aore, Vanuatu, 1979-1990.
36. Personal knowledge of the author from working in Vanuatu from 1979 to 1986 and returning in subsequent years to assist with maintenance.
37. Simon Luke (previous Aore Principal and General Secretary of the Vanuatu Mission), recorded interview, Port Vila, Vanuatu, April 10, 2017.
38. Nos Mailalong (Vanuatu Mission President), recorded interview, Port Vila, Vanuatu, April 11, 2017.
39. Fred Otiman (Aore principal), interview with the author, Aore, December 12, 2019.

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