

A CHANGING CHURCH: ADVENTISM IN PAPUA-NEW GUINEA IN THE 1980s AND 1990s

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Although Adventism experienced an astonishing rate of upward mobility in the New Guinea Highlands, especially the Southern Highlands, during this period, much of the rest of PNG Adventism, especially in the villages, remained poor in income, lifestyle, and level of education. When these saw the difference between their goods and those of the missionaries and other Caucasians present, they were attracted to cargo cults, which expected that “cargo” would be miraculously delivered to them. It seems that this longing was one of the reasons the people were attracted to Adventism, with its preaching that Jesus would return soon and they would then live in “mansions” and walk on streets of gold. How could such a church be pastored and led?

MINISTERIAL TRAINING

The first national pastors had been trained through working with missionaries and established pastors in an apprenticeship relationship. As the membership, and thus the demand for pastors, expanded, a post-grade 8 training was introduced at Jones Missionary College (later called Kambubu High School) and at Kabiufa High School. Sonoma College, with a three-year diploma available to students who had completed grade 10 in high school, was added in 1968. However, since the brighter students had many scholarship opportunities at the government university, teachers college, and business colleges, this had left Sonoma often admitting students with very poor grade 10 grades. This remained the case until its standards were raised in the early 1980s. Desperate to attract better quality pastors, the Division arranged for PNG students to complete diplomas in theology and teaching at Fulton Missionary College in Fiji in the 1970s and early 1980s. The PNG urban churches were already sorely in need of graduate pastors to minister in city congregations, so the administration sent some to Avondale College in Australia, but found that they did not return to PNG from there, and at Philippines Union College, which also proved unsuccessful. Since PNG had gained political independence from Australia in 1975, the Adventist Church in the new country sorely needed to have local graduates available to take over leadership there. Consequently, they opened a new university college (Pacific Adventist College) outside Port Moresby, with a government charter, in 1984. This soon changed its name to Pacific Adventist University.

However, the church leadership realized that their new university, and also Sonoma College, were not suitable to prepare pastors for village churches – their graduates would not be willing to take such positions or suitable to evangelize there. Consequently, Omaura was launched as a training college for village pastors who had completed grade 6. Its purpose was to provide low-salary pastors for village churches – pastors who would be content to serve at that level. In

the Highlands such pastors served 8-12 churches each, and lacked transport. That is, PNG had instituted a system with several levels of pastors and different salary levels. From the beginning there were inevitably some tensions between the different levels. In 1986 Sonoma enrolled far more ministerial students than PAC – at 60% of the cost.

These varied initiatives soon faced a shortage of funds, partly because increases in tithe receipts lagged behind growth. This was because so many of the converts were poor villagers, and partly because of the need to employ the new more highly paid graduates. This resulted in the firing of old pastoral workers who had never been properly trained, but who were the ones who had really carried Adventism to the villages. Sonoma graduates had become too used to such conveniences as toilets, lights, and eating at a table to be willing to take village postings. The church tried to replace the fired workers with lay training programs.

Many of the available pastors were younger with experience – not the older ones who were the candidates for leadership, but the younger ones from the field, because there were few available who had been recent high school graduates. The more remote Missions diverted the few available high school graduates to business and education. The number of ministerial students grew slowly because the good students who had completed grade 12 in high school were eligible for scholarships to government universities (plus pocket money, book allowance, and fare home annually), while the tuition at PAC in 1986 was K1000, with none of the other benefits. The availability of sponsorships from the conferences and missions therefore became crucial: in 1986, 44 of the 101 students at PAC had one. Because most growth was in villages, some missions were not sure they needed graduate pastors – they were more interested in Omaura graduates.

Theology staff in all institutions were conservative in 1986. The Division did not want liberalism there. This made their tone very different from that of Avondale, in Australia. There were also no PNG national faculty members in 1986, although there were two Polynesians. In fact, both PAC and Sonoma College had severe problems finding national staff. PAC had a Fijian, who had been bright while studying at Fulton college but who then failed when he enrolled at Avondale. Later he taught at Fulton, where he proved to be an excellent preacher. He was moved to PAC because it needed a national so severely, and no others were on the horizon. However, he was withdrawn from there when he lost credibility with the students.

Although the PNG culture emphasizes conformity rather than initiative, students gradually learned to ask questions – but then the Union employers (especially the expatriates) saw them as "big heads." That is, a colonial mentality continued among the expatriates.

There was considerable concern because so few high school graduates were coming to PAC 1986: the number of students enrolled was far fewer than had been hoped, and it had declined rather than grown with time. The university was opened without adequate planning and preparation, and there had been no systematic estimate of the likely enrolment. The Division chose PNG as the site of the university because it had the highest membership, but most members there were illiterate – the bulk of educated islanders were Polynesians from the

Central Pacific. Most of the students from PNG had completed only grade 10, a diploma, and had experience in the field. Most of those with grade 12 accepted scholarships to government universities. Too few completed Grade 12 at Kabiufa High School, which was the only one of the five Adventist high schools in PNG whose curriculum extended to grade 12, to fill PAC's needs – it began that year with 24 with grade 12, but this number fell to 15-17. At that time PAC had only 3 courses – a very limited offering. So its outlook for students was poor.

One PNG national, Aaron Lopa, taught theology at Sonoma College. He had completed a 2-year ministerial course (one year each at Kabiufa and Sonoma) after grade 10, finishing in 1968. He was bright – after a 3-year program, he was called back to teach at Sonoma. After 4 years there he was sent to complete both a BA and then an MA in the Philippines (1975-9). He then served for one year as university chaplain at the government university in Port Moresby, and then returned to Sonoma College in 1981, where he became head of the department in 1985. In the 1990s he was sent to complete a doctorate, and then brought back to teach at PAU. Another national, Kemba, had two MSc's in Applied Plant Science from two UK universities, and taught agriculture and ran the farm at Sonoma. That is, Sonoma had two of the best educated PNG nationals working for the church.

PAC graduates cost 6 times Omaura grads, and they also required better housing, etc. PAC had 50 staff for 100 students, while the 180 Advs at the univ had only one chaplain!

PNG had earlier had lots of "salt and soap" missionaries – who were not on any payroll. The Union got rid of dozens some years earlier – because the system was not designed for such people! It had also fired large numbers of the cheapest on wage-scale pastors in recent years. (More than 100 were retrenched in 1984-6.) With fewer workers, it then needed better ones! It dropped a total of 193 workers in 1980-5 during a period of great growth. It was only saved from dropping another 100 of 825 in 1986 because of intervention by the Division. Wages were increasing, but tithe much more slowly. It hoped to maintain current levels of staffing during the next four years – but membership increased fast, at a rate of 8,000 per year. The PNG missions were suffering because PAC was taking lines. The Union let many of the uneducated go because it was hiring the better educated – but the former pastors are the bigger soul-winners in the villages. I was told they could not afford to send more students to PAC because this would wreck the finances because of the increased cost.

THE SWITCH TO NATIONAL LEADERSHIP

In 1986 the church was finally preparing nationals for leadership positions. This was very late compared to other post-colonial countries. The South Pacific Division tried to move rapidly, but many felt this was too fast because the leading national candidates were without qualifications and leadership experience.

Adventists lagged behind other denominations, such as the United Church, in this. The latter had national teachers with MA degrees, and their Principal was a national. But Avondale, the Adventist college in Australia, had only fairly recently begun to award BA degrees, because many

Australian Adventists regarded education as sinful, and this concept had been brought, in turn, to PNG. Consequently, several theology teachers at Sonoma were still without degrees. Walter Scragg, then president of the SPD, understood the need for an educated faculty because of his experience in Africa – but only when the right men were available. Much, then, would depend on the vigor of the training program.

The fact that there were many Catholics in the PNG government and that the Catholic Church has not yet developed local leadership there helped to keep Adventists politically safe in spite of their slow progress. The fact that the government was having to call back expatriate specialists because the community lacked such human resources also reduced the pressure on Adventists.

Even though the PNG Adventist Church expected that nationals would gain more say, in 1986 the whites were still making the policies. A huge problem here was that the vast majority of nationals who had been selected and supported for further education by the church had left church employ soon after graduating. They had been attracted by higher salaries or fired because of moral lapses.

In 1986 the PNG Union Secretary was Pastor Hibo, a national, former president of the mission based in Port Moresby, and the first national to be represented among the Union's officers. Many nationals commented that they were happy to finally have a representative in such a position, but they often added that they would have preferred to have him as president. As in Africa, the white leadership had failed to recognize the need for advance manpower planning: they should have begun this 20 years earlier. In 1986 they could have turned to Aaron Lopa, who had an MA, but this would have left Sonoma College, as well as PAC, without a national teaching in the ministerial program. Hibo had only completed grade 7 at school, then a year of teacher training followed by a year of theology at Sonoma College. Colin Winch, the expatriate Union President, had wanted Hibo as President with Winch as Secretary, but the nominating committee reversed those positions. Hibo was struggling in the role of Secretary, which required a lot of letter-writing, for he wrote poorly. Consequently, most of his work was done by his expatriate assistant.

Two nationals had unexpectedly served terms as Mission presidents in PNG, one in the 1960s, the other the 1970s. A development course taught at Sonoma in the 1970s prepared the way for several national Mission Presidents. By 1986, six of the ten missions were led by nationals. All were older, from a less-educated generation, that is, from Jones Missionary College and Kabiufa post-grade 8 training, before Sonoma College had been founded in 1968 for students who had completed grade 10.

Adventists in PNG continued to need an expatriate presence to provide necessary skills, especially in the treasury. By 1985 all missions had elected national treasurers, which created problems because these treasurers lacked needed skills. Some were so poor that they failed the PAC entry exam for the accounting program. Although it was only a certificate program, this excelled that offered by the UPNG, and attracted 50% of high school graduates. It was already

clear that the majority were not bound for church employment, but the department saw value in producing committed, successful laypersons.

In 1986 none of the local treasurers could yet complete his own balance sheet. A greater problem was their reluctance to pursue bad debts owed by their “one-talk”, or kin. Most had problems keeping within their budgets, overdrew their accounts, forcing the Union to come to the rescue. Some schools also lost heavily because of bad management: for example, Kabiufa lost K60,000 on its farm in 1985. Similarly, the official statistics of the various missions were typically in a mess because of unqualified persons placed in positions. Historically, the expatriate leaders had been important in securing funds from friends for new buildings and to repair other ones. Consequently, many of the nationals rightly feared that the nationalization of the Adventist leadership in PNG would mean that the flow of cargo coming from Australia and New Zealand would then dry up. However, it was becoming increasingly difficult to attract expatriates to fill positions in PNG because of increasing danger of personal violence to women.

The Adventist localization program was several years late, but by 1986 it was moving at last. By that year the total number of expatriate workers had declined to 160, and these were expected to fall rapidly to below 100. The initial plan, under which nationals were selected as secretaries, failed because they were typically weak in education and administrative skills. Consequently, a new plan, where presidents would be nationals, underpinned by expatriate secretaries, was developed. The hope was that the presidents would look good while being trained further from below.

However, the nationals could not see what was ahead of them. Church policies there still discriminated on the basis of race. The Government was more careful to avoid discrimination: there were already three Adventists teaching at the University of PNG. Sonoma students complained to me that policies applying to nationals were drawn up at the Division headquarters in Wahroonga, Sydney, where the nationals on the committee were old, conservative yes-men – who had been chosen to fit that model.

SCHOOL PROBLEMS

The Adventist high schools were important in helping to create the positive image of the church in PNG, in evangelism, in preparing Adventists to fill important positions in the society. Their quality therefore became increasingly important.

In 1985, Kambubu High School (formerly Jones Missionary College) was ranked 30th of the 110 high schools in PNG. This placed it a little ahead of Kabiufa and Mt Diamond, two other Adventist high schools. However, the expatriate principal felt it still had far to go, especially in English. Seven of its 19 teachers then were expatriates and 12 nationals. The latter were slowly being upgraded – at PAC if they could pass the English entrance test, and for the others – the majority – at Goroka Teachers’ College. But some of the teachers were without teacher training, and two had only primary training. A major problem was high turnover among teachers, especially the expatriates; but this was true too of the nationals because the whole country was short-staffed.

A lot of the teachers become discouraged because of poor housing, isolation, etc., and dropped out, increasing the shortage of teachers.

Other key problems included a shortage of school administrators, which persuaded the church to accept anyone available, whether or not qualified, and a pattern of single expatriate teachers becoming sexually involved with students – but only singles were willing to come at this time.

Of all the churches active in PNG, Adventists alone remained separate from the government-run system. The localization of Adventist primary school heads had been so rapid that it negatively impacted the teaching of English. Historically the Adventist church had paid teachers only half of what they could earn from the government. When they asked for more, they were told they were not committed, which angered them. Large numbers of them transferred to the higher-paying schools.

Only two of the 13 entering education students at PAC in 1986 were from PNG because of the availability of scholarships and other opportunities elsewhere.

Of the 60 students (often with low grade 10 results) admitted to teachers' college at Sonoma in 1984, only 24 completed the year. Consequently, the standards were raised, which resulted in a plunge in the number of students enrolling to ten in 1985 and then 8 in 1986. All of these passed the year, but the changes caused a financial crisis for the school.

Standards at the Adventist high schools had been falling, partly with a decline in the quality and number of teachers, partly with a decline of the standards in church-run primary schools and in their number also as government standards were raised. In 1986 the Adventist schools were educating only about 10% of the children from Adventist families. Of the others, 50% attended government schools and 40% boarding schools sponsored by other churches. Most of the latter in particular were lost to Adventism. It was almost impossible for many churches to finance their schools, especially as most were built in rural areas – since independence in 1975 there has been a steady shift of the population from the villages to the towns. Adventists had listened to Ellen White's warnings against urban living, and were thus not at all ready for the changed patterns. Many of the church-run primary schools closed down because the parents could not afford the tuition, especially as teachers' salary increases. The youth are often unable to withstand the temptations met at government schools, such as betelnut, drinking, smoking, movies, dancing, Sabbath sports. In contrast, the Adventist schools tended to be isolated, away from temptations. Many of the Adventist primary schools stopped at grade 4. A lot of Adventist youth dropped out after grade 6 and succumbed to temptations.

The number of Adventist schools peaked at 107 in 1977; In 1985 there were only 85. Meanwhile, the financial appropriations from the Division ceased keeping pace with growth, and the schools and church administrative units were increasingly pressed to become self-supporting. However, given the high proportion of subsistence adherents, this was well nigh impossible.

CITY CHURCHES

The PAC theology department had to use Port Moresby churches for its practical training program. However, the pastors there felt inadequate to teach PAC students – worse because some were already ordained. The problem was compounded because the head elders were educated – often government employees – and they controlled the churches.

There were a total of nine churches in Port Moresby plus the equivalent of another at the university – all were jammed, doing well evangelistically. Problems emerged because the laity were better educated than their pastors, and therefore tended to override them. The laity were so active that the pastors had to fight for the pulpit. (Most pastors had one church each here.) The president of the Mission there in 1986, and Pastor Hibo, his predecessor, had not even been to Ombura – that is, they had not had any post-primary education.

City pastors needed quick upgrading because they could not cater to the educated members there. Yet it seems that the church leaders did not anticipate the need.

OLD CULTURAL NORMS CONTINUE

The expatriate church leaders regarded the nepotism and obligations inherent to the One Talk system as the most serious cultural problem to the Adventist Western-style organizational system. When kin had financial or material needs, the locals felt obliged by their cultural norms to help them. If they controlled funds in their job, then, according to the norms, these were available.

POLYGAMY

The local culture expected that “big men” would have multiple wives. Consequentially, many converts had wives they had married before conversion. The rules of the Adventist church, which were based on the practices eventually adopted in Africa in the 1930s, forced such families to break up before the man could be baptized. Adventist policy pressured the converts to act rapidly to achieve the demanded result: it was felt that it was essential that the world see that Adventists have standards that they enforce.

Converts who were slow to separate could attend church services, but initially neither party was eligible for baptism. In this the Adventist policy was more strict than some other denominations. Those affected were high status people, many of whom were now eager to become Adventists, especially in the Highlands where polygamy was widely practised. This was a very emotional issue, for if a wife was put aside, there were problems concerning the children, and the wife was treated as a loose woman. Many would-be converts were not baptized because the presence of children made them unwilling and unable to split up. Opinions among pastors tended to vary according to their age and origins. The older ones, especially those in the Highlands, were most insistent, for the old missionaries had hammered the policy; the younger ones were more sympathetic, especially those from the coastal regions and the islands, where

polygamy was no longer practiced. Many of them now saw the policy as a problem concerning how women were treated.

Some Adventists who had become “big men” had also taken additional wives even though they were already baptized, but were then ostracized by the church. Church leaders were afraid that if the church altered practices to be kinder to the polygamously married awaiting baptism, the men who had added wives after baptism could then take advantage of this to return to the church. It is a problem to change practices after 50 years – so the church instead hoped that the practice would die out. However, many pastors and leading laypersons wished the church would accept existing polygamous families. They felt that the church policy was based on a failure to understand the local culture, and dictated by Western culture, for the Bible has many polygamous marriages – they saw the policy as mistaken, and that it therefore should not be perpetuated. But then how would the families who had been forced to break up react?

The practice has evolved over time: Adventists will now baptize a polygamously married woman because she is married to only one husband; however, because the husband has multiple wives, he cannot be baptized. “We tell the men to attend church services, without being baptized – say that God understands the situation. I used to tell them to put all but one wife away – to care for them in a separate house, especially if they loved them. But now I think that instruction is most unfair to the woman – and I never saw what I advocated done.”

THE STATUS OF WOMEN

There were no women studying theology at PAC in 1986. However, 16 of the 42 studying education and five of the 30 in accounting were women. There were five women faculty members, all married to other faculty, and none were department heads. Melanesia sees the education of women as a poor investment – Adventists seemed to agree to a large extent. There were no women lay elders in churches, and the sexes were segregated while in church. Yet the university students said they would like to have women pastors, but saw this as a minority view. However, PNG now has women pastors, and this has been instituted with little opposition. There were no women school administrators in 1986, even in primary schools.

Sonoma College had occasionally turned out women ministerial graduates – one was employed in the union in child evangelism, but most married and did not pastor. In 1985 there were suddenly 5 women graduating, three of whom found positions in schools or at the Union. None had ever served as a pastor in a church. They would have been seen as in severe moral danger. Sonoma locks up its women students at night to protect them. There are many women teachers, but they were not yet in Principal positions. It was assumed they would cease work once they married. One woman is the head of the publishing department in the Mission in Rabaul. The fact that women were choosing to study theology suggested that changes were occurring that would result in the appointment of women as pastors – which proved to be the case. Women were already in high places in government and university positions.

MARRIAGE

The Adventist Church in PNG recognizes both civil and religious marriages; also customary - marriages (where the parents agree, there is a feast, then bride price or sister exchange – that is, a woman replacement mechanism where no one got rich.) However, there are also a lot of couples who choose to live together without customary exchanges, which the participants claim is marriage; however, this was not recognized by the church. In Fiji couples with children often wanted to be baptised but the church insisted that they first be legally married if not already so. When they proved to be not legally married, the church insisted that this precede baptism.

Adventist males pay a bride-price if they marry non-Adventists, but if the wife is from an Adventist family the church disfellowshipped them. The Church encouraged its members to marry Adventist women from elsewhere. A lot of Adventist women are left over. The church rejected the traditional bride price system because it saw it as having been commercialized. However, because the youth department now recognized that a lot of couples were moving in together as this became common in society, it now promoted church weddings, which are not part of the culture. There had been a spate of expulsions of ministerial students from PAC for pre-marital sex.

HOMOSEXUALITY

This is part of the ritual life in some parts of PNG – it has been institutionalized in myths. Most of the PAC staff are not aware of the literature.

Two students were terminated at Mt Diamond High School in 1986 because they were involved in a same-sex relationship. They will end up in a village, because once terminated they will be rejected by government high schools because of the competition for places. I was also told of two such youth involved with one another in Port Moresby. It was assumed that in the end they would be lost to the church.

SINGLE MEN

Gibson had earlier had no opportunity to serve the church in PNG because he was a single male. However, single female office workers are common. In 1986, late in life, after having made a glowing reputation in government circles, he was finally working at PAC. Paul Cavanagh was also there as an admired single faculty member in anthropology – younger than Gibson, he was the first single male sent there. But he also faced discrimination – the dregs in housing (an expatriate given a national's house!), urged to go home and get a wife. Although teaching theology, he had not been ordained – yet "they get more out of me because I have more time for my work", and he teaches a great variety and number of courses.

LOSS OF EDUCATED WORKERS

Salaries for nationals at PAC were only a fifth to a quarter of expatriates. –consequently, for example, they could not afford to return to Fiji. The Church explained that if it raised their salaries it would also have to raise those of all nationals, which would be impossible to afford. But this encouraged the best to leave church work, for both government and industry pay more. That is, some laity earn far more. This situation was slowing the process towards local leadership. Some of the best educated workers left to go to jobs outside the church. There were also problems because of racial differences in pay, and in the quality of homes – and what they can earn outside. Students object to what they see as discriminatory practices in the race-based streams.

A woman librarian at PAC expressed discontent because of discrimination in salary and benefits: she earns only K3,000 gross when she could earn K11,000 in government positions. And some staff show a continuing colonial mentality in interpersonal relations. At Kabiufa, 3 single teachers had to share a house, while a white woman had a house to herself.

The vast majority sent on for further education by the church had then left church employ – they were attracted by higher salaries or fired for moral reasons.

The segregation crisis has in part grown from mission policy, whose segregated housing created artificial barriers and therefore divisions in minds. But in society too, where expatriates are seen as experts, as big men, not to be questioned, so that nationals have learned to respond with inferiority, thinking that they cannot make a useful contribution. Though not propagated by the church, some of its actions have fed such ideas. Consequently, few nationals attempted to contribute at staff meetings.

At Kambubu High School, there was a strong social divide based on race among the staff. There had been many complaints because of differences in housing and pay, so that the administration was considering ending housing distinctions. The nationals had expressed wishes for gas stoves, refrigerators, etc. The salaries for national teachers were about half those paid in the government – but church school housing was better and subsidized, with also an equipment subsidy. These plus sustentation following retirement could help to equalize. But the nationals there also complain about a social divide there – and compare it to government and private companies, where all the staff eat together and exchange stories.

National teachers had been complaining bitterly re salaries: incidents occurred between 1979 and 1983 in Kambubu, Sonoma, and Kabiufa. Such was the level of discontent and the attraction of other opportunities that only three of the twenty teachers sent for upgrading to Fulton (diploma level) were still working for the church.

CATHOLICS

The general attitude at PAC was that the bold anti-Catholic preaching, which was common among Adventist evangelists, is wrong and should be kinder. Several stated that Adventists should treat Catholics as friends, and show that it is their system that is wrong! Evangelists and older pastors like to hit Catholics hard in sermons focusing on the mark of beast, priests sleeping with nuns, etc. The PAC Religion faculty were preparing a statement on Sunday observance and the mark of the beast saying these and negative remarks about other religious groups should not be preached in public, but only mentioned in face-to-face situations. Some Adventist evangelists – and also visiting evangelists like John Carter – liked to thump Catholics. Sonoma grads were also in this mold.

GENERAL PROBLEMS

Adventists faced a huge shortage of churches – in 1985, fewer than half of the organized churches had permanent buildings.

It was increasingly difficult to get expatriates to serve in PNG – they had been scared off by stories of “rascals” (youth gangs) from missionaries here. Some made it in PNG who could not make it at home, but nevertheless turnover was rapid. The differences in salaries and benefits between expatriates and nationals embarrassed some.

PAC was westernizing its students – rather than automatically being at all church meetings, they had learned to choose – for example, some now hike on Sabbath afternoons, and national women are wearing jeans and slacks, dress which would not be accepted in the churches. Students are also learning to be more demanding – but they can be punished for this in jobs they obtain and in whether they gain permission to finish the second half of their degrees.

Adventism is weakening in the areas where it was first established, such as Mussau and Manus as the older generation is dying out. The church was focusing on where it was expanding, leaving the work in the original areas neglected. This was especially true in Mussau, where Adventism made its first major break-through in 1933. The majority of the youth there had become “skin 7-days”.

The division had provided 67% of total budget (K321k) in 1980, but by 1984 this had declined to 59% (K290k). The Adventist Church in PNG was under considerable pressure to become self-supporting.