

In the Wake of the *Pitcairn*— Establishing Adventism in the South Pacific Islands

by Alexander S. Currie

Adventist history in the South Pacific is “partly a lesson in oceanography.”¹

Oceania covers one-third of the earth’s surface but has less than 1 percent of its population. It is a “watery continent dotted with thousands of scattered bits of land,” the home of less than six million people.² Seventh-day Adventist concern for Pacific people is first observed when James White and John Loughborough “sent a friendly letter and a box of literature” to Pitcairn Island in 1876.³ John I. Tay, an American Adventist layman, read a book concerning the “Bounty mutineers,” worked his passage to Tahiti, and found a ship to take him to Pitcairn.⁴ On 18 October, 1886, Tay landed on Pitcairn, and spent five weeks instructing people in the beliefs of Adventists. When he left the island, most had been converted, and everyone was worshipping on Saturday.

Returning to California, Tay aroused Adventist interest in Pitcairn Island, and the General Conference voted to build a ship to facilitate missionary travel in the South Seas. A 100-foot schooner named *Pitcairn* was dedicated and set sail on 20 October, 1890.⁵ The ship arrived at Pitcairn on 25 November, and after three weeks of intensive instruction 82 adults were baptized and

the first Seventh-day Adventist church was organized in the Pacific.⁶ H. L. Shapiro comments that “the entire community was baptized, and a rich fare of theology was easily digested by the communicants.”⁷ When the mission ship sailed for Tahiti on 17 December three islanders, James R. McCoy, his sister Mary Anne, and Haywood Christian, were on board as the first indigenous Adventist missionaries in the South Pacific.⁸ Their presence enabled American Adventist missionaries to have a greater impact, particularly on Norfolk Island, where Jane Quintal, McCoy’s sister, opened her home for Gates to preach the first Adventist sermon. James McCoy’s missionary experience contributed in giving him a new sense of purpose, direction, and leadership.⁹ When the mission ship returned to Pitcairn in 1892, having visited the major Polynesian Islands, Norfolk Island, Australia, and New Zealand, the leader declared:

We need a training school on Pitcairn... These young people can do a great work in the South Pacific. They can go as missionaries to other islands, but they need training. And for that they need a teacher.¹⁰

Gates began a school on Pitcairn in 1892 with a curriculum that concentrated on Bible, history, and grammar. During the 1890s the *Pitcairn* made six voyages to the South Seas carrying successive waves of American and national missionaries to the Pacific Islands.¹¹

People movements in the South Pacific witnessed thousands accepting Christianity, and the need for indigenous Christian ministry high-

Alexander S. Currie, senior pastor of the Wahroonga church, near Sydney, Australian Adventism’s largest congregation, graduated from Andrews University with both an M. A. and Ed.D. Twelve of his 20 years as a minister and an educator, were devoted to theological education in Australia, New Guinea, and Fiji.

lighted the necessity for theological education. Such education evolved slowly. Missionaries, including Seventh-day Adventists, initially utilised the home as the centre for theological training. Eventually schools with an emphasis on theology were established in most Pacific countries. Early Adventist theological educational methods and approaches paralleled that of most Pacific Protestant churches.

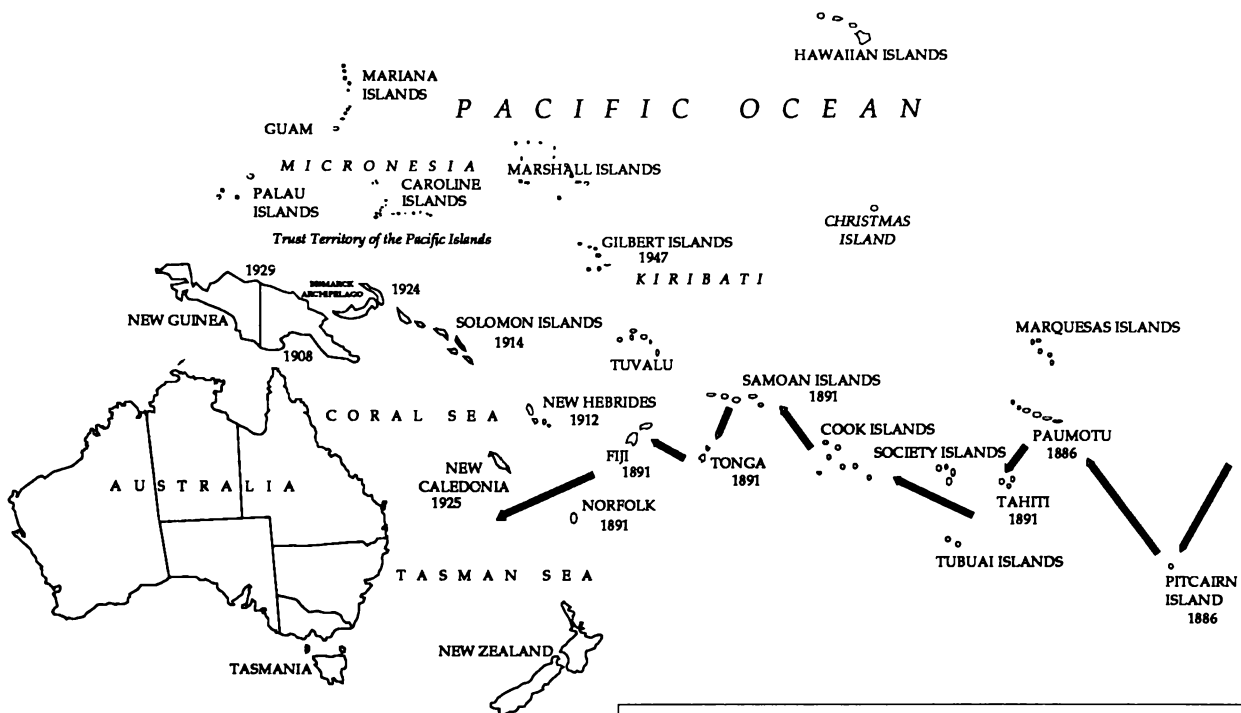
Like many other mission organizations, Adventists developed Australia and New Zealand as home bases for Pacific operations.

The spread of Adventism across the Pacific in only 22 years is remarkable, particularly in view of the fact that the Australasian Union Conference took over the superintendency for mission advancement in 1901 with a membership of only

3,000.¹² We must recognize, however, that consolidation of Adventism in much of Melanesia and all of Micronesia did not occur until after the second world war.

It is not surprising therefore that Adventism in the Pacific, with limited financial and human resources, took time to establish itself in some Pacific cultures. The Adventist church in the United States possessed far greater resources than the Australasian church, and when the Pacific region was given to the Australasian church in 1901 it experienced this loss. The *Pitcairn* that had plied the Pacific for 10 years no longer serviced the small missionary force with literature, supplies, or human resources. This situation had its psychological impact on expatriate missionaries as well as new converts. The question was “Is

Advancement of Seventh-day Adventist Missions in the South Pacific Islands



Note: While the movement of 19th century Protestant missions tended to expand outward in all directions from centers such as Samoa and the Society Islands, Adventism in the late 19th century moved east to west, from Pitcairn Island toward Australia and New Zealand.

Adventism going to survive in the Pacific without its own transportation link?" Survive it did. However, there was obviously a period of adjustment and perhaps waning of influence experienced by those on the defunct *Pitcairn* route.

Due to the smallness of Oceania's islands, the vast distances separating them, and "their comparatively sparse populations, mission stations tend to be more isolated from the rest of the world than are those even in 'darkest Africa.'" ¹³ Therefore, most denominations, except the Anglican church, educated their converts for church work in their own cultural context. Like other denominations, Seventh-day Adventists prepared indigenous converts for church work in their own island context. Very few Seventh-day Adventists ventured outside their familiar cultural environment for education; those who did attended Healdsburg College in California or Avondale College in New South Wales.

Adventist theological education followed the east-west pattern established by the London Missionary Society and Methodists, except in the Western Pacific where Seventh-day Adventists advanced in the following order: Papua (1908), New Hebrides (1912), Solomon Islands (1914), Bougainville (1924), New Caledonia (1925), New Guinea (1929), Gilbert and Ellis (1947).

Pioneer Adventists invested heavily in personnel and financial resources to establish educational foundations during this period for what has become one of the largest independent school systems in Oceania. In 1918 missionaries had established a small chain of "missionary schools" for training indigenous gospel workers for the Pacific. This chain developed into a system that in 1984 operated 198 primary schools, 15 high schools, and three colleges. In 1984 a total of 14,468 students were attending these schools. ¹⁴ Bible remains the essential core of the curriculum for Pacific Adventist education, which has educated thousands of Pacific Islanders. Children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren of those educated have occupied and occupy important government, private, and church positions. Investment in theological education therefore has reaped beneficial dividends for families and the church.

By 1918 most island clusters from Pitcairn to Papua New Guinea boasted at least one Protestant training school. These schools provided a general education, often with an industrial and agricultural bias, but curricula emphasis was theological. ¹⁵ The purpose of the schools was not merely to provide general education but to produce students who could preach and teach in their own cultural environment and serve as missionaries abroad. Between 1892 and 1918 Adventists opened schools in all major island groups between Pitcairn Island and Fiji, as well as a home school in the Solomons, and a small one in Papua. Their curriculum of general education, practical industrial skills, and theology, was much like other Protestant schools except for doctrinal differences. With Adventist interest in healthful living, health education was emphasized, particularly on Pitcairn. Centralized theological education for most Protestant churches did not emerge until after the second world war. ¹⁶

By 1918 most Christian villages had their own pastor-teachers who were usually nonordained

Many early Pacific traders and the occasional missionary lived somewhat dissolute lives. Adventists sailed into the region proclaiming abstinence from alcohol and smoking, and advocating a healthy, balanced life-style.

congregational leaders. The pastor-teacher became a highly respected village leader. Exact statistics are elusive for 1918, but estimates would suggest that between five and six thousand indigenous spiritual leaders served their Pacific churches with less than half a percent of that number ordained. ¹⁷

Many early Pacific traders and the occasional missionary lived somewhat dissolute lives. ¹⁸ Adventists sailed into the region proclaiming abstinence from alcohol and smoking, and advocating a healthy, balanced life-style. This harmonious integration of the physical, mental, social, and spiritual became the hallmark of Adventist education and life-style. ¹⁹ Part of that life-style,

unfortunately, meant Westernization, evidenced by early photographs of male converts living in tropical conditions dressed in heavy woollen suits. Nevertheless, a result of early Adventist education throughout the Pacific is the clean living and healthy life-style practiced by most Pacific Adventists today.

Although Adventists were the first missionar-

ies to take Christianity to Pitcairn Island, Atchin,²⁰ and the first to enter portions of Papua New Guinea,²¹ they recognize with gratitude and respect all Christian missionaries for other denominations who pioneered the major portion of the Pacific for Christ. These men and women, expatriate and indigenous, achieved great success.

It appears Adventists institutionalized too

Adventists Lead South Pacific Governments

by Raymond L. Coombe

At least 20 Seventh-day Adventists in the South Pacific are politicians and members of the national parliament, with several holding important ministries in the cabinet. Scores are serving in local provincial governments, one as a Premier. Many more hold important responsibilities in high positions of the public civil service. While I know of no Adventists in federal or state politics in Australia or New Zealand, in the recently independent island nations of the South Pacific Adventists are participating in a sense of national pride and a growing consciousness of social and civic responsibility.

Why have so many Adventists entered public life? One reason is the high ratio of membership to population. For the island territories as a whole the ratio is down to 1 in 42, going as low as one in nine for the Western Solomon Islands Mission.

Another reason for the prominence of Adventists in government is the strong emphasis given to education in the 100 years since Adventists founded a training school on Pitcairn Island. Many of the brightest and most promising graduates from post-secondary tertiary institutions, such as Fulton and Sonoma Colleges, and from secondary schools, did not stay in denominational employment for long, but found employment and wider experience "outside the work," including standing for elective office.

Thirdly, Adventist involvement in health and temperance, education, women's affairs, Adventist Development and Relief and youth programs have meant that members have had the kind of experience that allows them to rise quickly to the top of service departments in the island governments.

In 1986, the president of the South Pacific Division, Walter Scragg, decided the church should sponsor seminars in the three Union Mission territories for Adventists in

government. Almost 70 Adventists in government and politics attended three seminars. The first was held in Suva, Fiji. The second seminar was conducted in Honiara, capital of the Solomon Islands, and the third in Port Moresby for Papua New Guinea. Another series of seminars is now planned for 1989. Adventists at these seminars indicated a keen sense of commitment and individual responsibility. They made it clear that they want the church to be more vocal on moral and ethical issues which face these developing countries. While the level of commitment to the church varies among Adventist politicians, many are involved in the church, and some are zealously evangelistic.

In the Cook Islands two Adventists are prominent members of Parliament, one being the Minister of Education and Public Service, and the other the leader of the House. Manuela Puna has been Clerk of Parliament in the Cook Islands since 1980, a position of considerable importance in the British parliamentary system inherited from New Zealand. Recently, Manuela gave advice on introducing a bill controlling the sale, advertising, and use of tobacco and helped to steer it successfully through the parliament.

Another faithful Adventist, Maine Brown, is the Executive Officer for the Cook Island Government. He frequently travels with the Prime Minister as an executive secretary. Sometimes there is a problem with Sabbath observance, but now the Prime Minister understands his situation and they usually locate the nearest Adventist church before Sabbath and he is allowed freedom from all engagements. The Prime Minister also tells hosts that Maine Brown does not take alcohol, tea, or coffee. "Unfortunately," says Maine, "it is embarrassing to come across other Adventists who compromise their principles."

Tonga as a kingdom with the feudal system of nobility, does not afford much opportunity for Adventist involvement as in the independent democracies. However, several church members now fill important public service positions, including Deputy Collector of Customs, a superintendent for planning and training in the Ministry of Police, and the aide-de-camp for the palace.

Although Seventh-day Adventists hold no political of-

Raymond L. Coombe is the director of the public affairs and religious liberty department of the South Pacific Division.

early in some countries, failing to establish a theologically educated indigenous following. Where Adventists depended on medical institutions such as those in the Cook Islands, Samoa, and medical activities in Tonga, this appears to have delayed church growth and theological education. Where Adventists translated and printed literature, learned the vernacular, and established schools,

theological education flourished. Countries where Adventist missionaries instructed theologically, equipping nationals for witnessing and missionary work, appear to have rooted in Adventism quickly. Examples include Pitcairn, Fiji, and the Solomons. Exceptions include Papua.

John Garrett observes that "diffusion of Christianity has been largely by the contacts of Island-

Adventist from Tonga, led a rebellion in 1979. Although Adventists were not generally involved, many church members in the north were somewhat sympathetic and disenchanted with the government in the south, led by a former Anglican priest, Father Walter Lini. Subsequently, while in prison, Jimmy Stevens received Bible studies and has counselled all his former followers to accept the Seventh-day Adventist mission. Although the church continues to maintain strict neutrality, before the November 1987 election, a whole new political party called the New People's Party was formed, consisting primarily of young Seventh-day Adventists. Interestingly enough, in the outcome of the election, five Adventists who actually gained seats in the National Parliament represented three different political parties. Only one is in the governing Vanuaku Party, the other four are in the opposition. Many others are involved in local government authorities.

Adventist from Tonga, led a rebellion in 1979. Although Adventists were not generally involved, many church members in the north were somewhat sympathetic and disenchanted with the government in the south, led by a former Anglican priest, Father Walter Lini. Subsequently, while in prison, Jimmy Stevens received Bible studies and has counselled all his former followers to accept the Seventh-day Adventist mission. Although the church continues to maintain strict neutrality, before the November 1987 election, a whole new political party called the New People's Party was formed, consisting primarily of young Seventh-day Adventists. Interestingly enough, in the outcome of the election, five Adventists who actually gained seats in the National Parliament represented three different political parties. Only one is in the governing Vanuaku Party, the other four are in the opposition. Many others are involved in local government authorities.

Adventist from Tonga, led a rebellion in 1979. Although Adventists were not generally involved, many church members in the north were somewhat sympathetic and disenchanted with the government in the south, led by a former Anglican priest, Father Walter Lini. Subsequently, while in prison, Jimmy Stevens received Bible studies and has counselled all his former followers to accept the Seventh-day Adventist mission. Although the church continues to maintain strict neutrality, before the November 1987 election, a whole new political party called the New People's Party was formed, consisting primarily of young Seventh-day Adventists. Interestingly enough, in the outcome of the election, five Adventists who actually gained seats in the National Parliament represented three different political parties. Only one is in the governing Vanuaku Party, the other four are in the opposition. Many others are involved in local government authorities.

Adventist from Tonga, led a rebellion in 1979. Although Adventists were not generally involved, many church members in the north were somewhat sympathetic and disenchanted with the government in the south, led by a former Anglican priest, Father Walter Lini. Subsequently, while in prison, Jimmy Stevens received Bible studies and has counselled all his former followers to accept the Seventh-day Adventist mission. Although the church continues to maintain strict neutrality, before the November 1987 election, a whole new political party called the New People's Party was formed, consisting primarily of young Seventh-day Adventists. Interestingly enough, in the outcome of the election, five Adventists who actually gained seats in the National Parliament represented three different political parties. Only one is in the governing Vanuaku Party, the other four are in the opposition. Many others are involved in local government authorities.

Adventist from Tonga, led a rebellion in 1979. Although Adventists were not generally involved, many church members in the north were somewhat sympathetic and disenchanted with the government in the south, led by a former Anglican priest, Father Walter Lini. Subsequently, while in prison, Jimmy Stevens received Bible studies and has counselled all his former followers to accept the Seventh-day Adventist mission. Although the church continues to maintain strict neutrality, before the November 1987 election, a whole new political party called the New People's Party was formed, consisting primarily of young Seventh-day Adventists. Interestingly enough, in the outcome of the election, five Adventists who actually gained seats in the National Parliament represented three different political parties. Only one is in the governing Vanuaku Party, the other four are in the opposition. Many others are involved in local government authorities.

Adventist from Tonga, led a rebellion in 1979. Although Adventists were not generally involved, many church members in the north were somewhat sympathetic and disenchanted with the government in the south, led by a former Anglican priest, Father Walter Lini. Subsequently, while in prison, Jimmy Stevens received Bible studies and has counselled all his former followers to accept the Seventh-day Adventist mission. Although the church continues to maintain strict neutrality, before the November 1987 election, a whole new political party called the New People's Party was formed, consisting primarily of young Seventh-day Adventists. Interestingly enough, in the outcome of the election, five Adventists who actually gained seats in the National Parliament represented three different political parties. Only one is in the governing Vanuaku Party, the other four are in the opposition. Many others are involved in local government authorities.

Adventist from Tonga, led a rebellion in 1979. Although Adventists were not generally involved, many church members in the north were somewhat sympathetic and disenchanted with the government in the south, led by a former Anglican priest, Father Walter Lini. Subsequently, while in prison, Jimmy Stevens received Bible studies and has counselled all his former followers to accept the Seventh-day Adventist mission. Although the church continues to maintain strict neutrality, before the November 1987 election, a whole new political party called the New People's Party was formed, consisting primarily of young Seventh-day Adventists. Interestingly enough, in the outcome of the election, five Adventists who actually gained seats in the National Parliament represented three different political parties. Only one is in the governing Vanuaku Party, the other four are in the opposition. Many others are involved in local government authorities.

Adventist from Tonga, led a rebellion in 1979. Although Adventists were not generally involved, many church members in the north were somewhat sympathetic and disenchanted with the government in the south, led by a former Anglican priest, Father Walter Lini. Subsequently, while in prison, Jimmy Stevens received Bible studies and has counselled all his former followers to accept the Seventh-day Adventist mission. Although the church continues to maintain strict neutrality, before the November 1987 election, a whole new political party called the New People's Party was formed, consisting primarily of young Seventh-day Adventists. Interestingly enough, in the outcome of the election, five Adventists who actually gained seats in the National Parliament represented three different political parties. Only one is in the governing Vanuaku Party, the other four are in the opposition. Many others are involved in local government authorities.

Adventist from Tonga, led a rebellion in 1979. Although Adventists were not generally involved, many church members in the north were somewhat sympathetic and disenchanted with the government in the south, led by a former Anglican priest, Father Walter Lini. Subsequently, while in prison, Jimmy Stevens received Bible studies and has counselled all his former followers to accept the Seventh-day Adventist mission. Although the church continues to maintain strict neutrality, before the November 1987 election, a whole new political party called the New People's Party was formed, consisting primarily of young Seventh-day Adventists. Interestingly enough, in the outcome of the election, five Adventists who actually gained seats in the National Parliament represented three different political parties. Only one is in the governing Vanuaku Party, the other four are in the opposition. Many others are involved in local government authorities.

Adventist from Tonga, led a rebellion in 1979. Although Adventists were not generally involved, many church members in the north were somewhat sympathetic and disenchanted with the government in the south, led by a former Anglican priest, Father Walter Lini. Subsequently, while in prison, Jimmy Stevens received Bible studies and has counselled all his former followers to accept the Seventh-day Adventist mission. Although the church continues to maintain strict neutrality, before the November 1987 election, a whole new political party called the New People's Party was formed, consisting primarily of young Seventh-day Adventists. Interestingly enough, in the outcome of the election, five Adventists who actually gained seats in the National Parliament represented three different political parties. Only one is in the governing Vanuaku Party, the other four are in the opposition. Many others are involved in local government authorities.

ers with Islanders in everyday life.”²² The chapel at Pacific Theological College is dedicated to Pacific Island missionaries who witnessed for God and their churches in foreign island territories.²³ More than 1,000 missionaries plus their wives and

families are recorded. Hundreds more left their own tribes to evangelize other tribes.

By 1987, 97 years after the first indigenous Pacific Island ministers were appointed, there were 146,125 adult baptized members.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. John Garrett, *To Live Among the Stars* (Suva, Fiji: W. C. C. Publications, 1982), p. xi. Garrett uses this phrase to refer to Pacific Christian history.
2. William L. Needham and Susan R. Seldomridge, *Status of Christianity Profile Oceania* (Lausanne: International Congress on World Evangelization, July 1974), p. 1.
3. Arthur Whitefield Spalding, *Origin and History of Seventh-day Adventists* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1962), vol. 2, p. 316.
4. Arthur S. Maxwell, *Under the Southern Cross* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Publishing Association, 1966), p. 97; E. H. Gates, *In Coral Isles* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1923), p. 14.
5. *Review and Herald* (14 October 1890), p. 636.
6. E. H. Gates, *Pitcairn Log*, pp. 54-62; *Review and Herald* (3 March 1891), pp. 139-141.
7. Harry L. Shapiro, *The Heritage of the Bounty* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1936), p. 129.
8. *Review and Herald* (3 March 1891), p. 141.
9. Robert B. Nicolson, *The Pitcairners* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1965), p. 171.
10. Alta H. Christensen, *Heirs of Exile...The Story of Pitcairn Island Paradise of the Pacific* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1955), p. 240.
11. Spalding, *Origin and History*, vol. 2, pp. 316, 317; Christensen, *Heirs of Exile*, pp. 185-240; Norman A. Ferris, *The Story of Pitcairn Island* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1957), pp. 99-107; Gates, *In Coral Isles*, pp. 14-59; A. G. Steward, *Trophies From Cannibal Isles* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1956), pp. 23-36; *Pitcairn Log*, pp. 153-191.
12. *SDA Encyclopedia*, rev. ed., s.v. "Australasian Division."
13. Yorke Allen, *A Seminary Survey* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1960), p. 130.
14. Australasian Union Conference *Record* (13 July 1985), Supplement.
15. Forman, "Theological Education," p. 156.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 156, 157.
17. Charles W. Forman, "The South Pacific Style in the Christian Ministry," *Missiology: An International Review*, 2(1974): 421-435.
18. John Garrett, *To Live Among the Stars*, pp. 16, 21, 36, 43, 108, 125, 141-143, 150-151, 208, 216-217, 231, 270-271, 281, 296.
19. E. M. Cadwallader, *Principles of Education in the Writings of Ellen G. White* (Payson, Ariz.: Leaves of Autumn Books, n.d.); Raymond S. Moore, *Adventist Education at the Crossroads* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1976).
20. *SDA Encyclopedia*, rev. ed., s.v. "New Hebrides." Norman and Alma Wiles, graduates of Avondale College, pioneered Atchin.
21. *Ibid.*, s.v. "Papua New Guinea." Emira and Mussau Islands are examples. Chapman, "Seventh-day Adventist Education." Forman, *Island Church*, p. 53, cites Adventists as "the first mission to station workers in some areas" of the Solomons.
22. Garrett, *To Live Among the Stars*, p. xi.
23. Charles W. Forman "The Missionary Force of the Pacific Island Churches," *International Review of Missions*, 59 (1970): 215-226.