13
From Missions to Aboriginal Churches

The Uniting Church in Australia and Aboriginal Missions

W.H. Edwards
B.A. Clarke

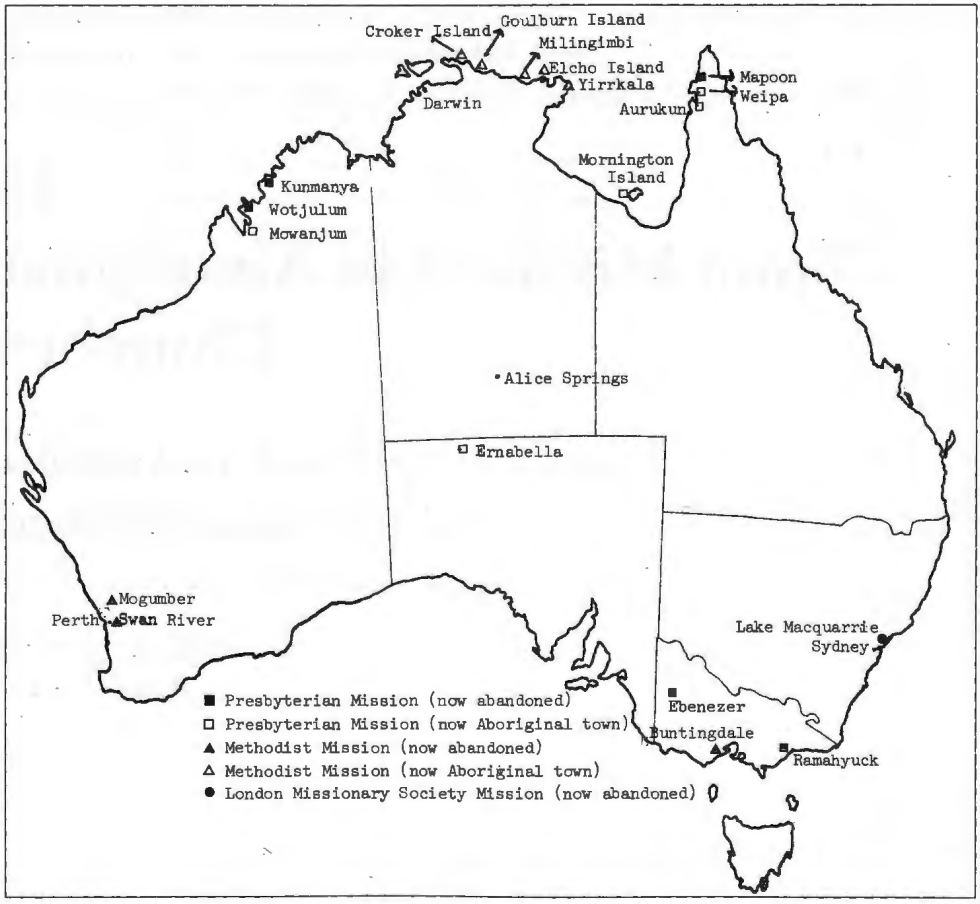
Introduction

The Uniting Church in Australia was inaugurated in Sydney on the 22nd June, 1977 following negotiations between the Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational churches. The purpose of this article is to provide an outline of the history of the involvement of these churches in mission work with Aboriginal people. While it is impossible to give a detailed survey of work undertaken over 150 years throughout Australia, some reference is made to all of the mission enterprises conducted by these churches while more detailed attention is given to those areas in which the authors have had personal experience. The historical survey of mission work leads to an outline of the emergence of Aboriginal churches in recent years and of the structures established for the support and development of these churches.

It is convenient to divide the history of Aboriginal missions into three periods. The early period covers the decades from the appointment of the first clergyman designated specifically to work with Aborigines in 1821 until approximately 1880. The middle period covers the half-century from 1880 until 1930, and the final period from 1930 until the present.

The Early Period 1821-80

An evangelical revival in England during the Eighteenth Century contributed to the rise of the modern missionary movement and the establishment of several missionary societies. The movement was allied to humanitarian movements such as the Anti-Slavery League. These developments occurred during the period of early European



1. Aboriginal Missions established by Churches now in the Uniting Church in Australia

settlement in Australia and yet, as Bollen (1977) shows, the Australian Aborigines were almost entirely neglected by the missionary movement for the first 33 years of settlement. One significant feature of the early period was the dependence on missionary societies in England.

As the history of the missions established during this early period are outlined elsewhere in this volume, they are dealt with very summarily here.

The Wesleyan Missionary Society, founded in England in 1813, responded to appeals from New South Wales, by appointing the first missionary to Aborigines, William Walker, in 1821, to work in the Sydney region. The leader of the Wesleyans in Australia, Joseph Orton, urged the commencement of work in the Port Phillip region. The Wesleyan Missionary Society sent out Benjamin Hurst and Francis Tuckfield to establish Buntingdale Mission, near Geelong, in 1839. The other WMS venture during this period was carried on by the Rev. John Smithies in the Swan River colony in Western Australia from 1840 to 1855.

The London Missionary Society founded in England in 1795 as an interdenominational organization was active in the Pacific islands. It became

increasingly associated with the Congregational Church. The Society appointed the Rev. Lancelot Threlkeld, who had worked in Tahiti, to establish a mission at Lake Macquarrie, north of Sydney, in 1825. Threlkeld provided one of the earliest descriptions of Aboriginal customs and of an Aboriginal language.

The first missionary appointed by the Presbyterian Church to work with Aborigines, the Rev. W. Ridley, itinerated in New South Wales and southern Queensland from 1881. He published a grammar of the Kamilaroi language. Victorian church people called for assistance from the Moravian Church in Germany to establish a mission at Lake Boga in 1851. The Moravians were associated with the Presbyterian Church in the establishment of Ebenezer Mission in the Wimmera region in 1859, and Ramahyuck Mission in Gippsland in 1863. These two missions continued to operate until the early 1900s.

None of these early missions survived as centres of Aboriginal population. Woolmington wrote of this period that "There can be no doubt that the Christian missions to the Australian Aborigines in the first half century of white settlement failed to achieve their aims" (1974:1). Bollen (1977:280) referred to "limited interest, modest undertakings, ungenerous financing and early withdrawal". Although there is a tendency to accuse early missionaries of neglecting Aboriginal languages and of not seeking to understand local customs, this accusation is unjust to some in view of their efforts to learn regional dialects, in spite of a general lack of interest in them. Their efforts to achieve long-term positive effects were hindered by the hostility and example of other Europeans, the effects of disease and alcohol, the problems of culture clash, government policies and the pressure on land. The Wesleyan, Orton, expressed the frustration arising from these problems in the early years. Commenting on the Government disposing of land he wrote:

> no reserve whatever of land is made for the provision of the natives... The result of which is that the natives who remain in the neighbourhood of the settled districts become pilfering — starving — obtrusive mendicants, and after enduring incalculable deprivations, abuses and miseries will gradually pine away — die away — and become extinct, leaving only an eternal momento of a blot upon the justice, equity and benevolence of our Christian Government, for no adequate provision is made for them. (Cannon 1982:120)

The Middle Period 1880-1930

Despite the apparent failure of the early missions, concern for justice and feelings of benevolence persisted amongst some Christians and governments were encouraged to reserve lands for the establishment of missions during the next period. Following the decline in Aboriginal populations in settled areas of Australia, churches turned their attention to those people living in remote regions. Their isolation gave hope that there would be more time before the ravaging effects of extensive contact with whites reached them. Church people hoped that during this time the influence of the Christian faith and social and industrial training would prepare them for, and enable them to cope with, this contact. Whereas in the early period the main

initiative came from missionary societies in England, there were now church structures in Australia to take up the challenge of providing this influence and training, although some still looked to England and Germany for suitable recruits for the work. The Congregational Union, heavily involved in missionary activity in the Pacific Islands, did not establish Aboriginal missions in this or the following period. The Methodist Church, after a long absence from the field of Aboriginal mission endeavour, became involved again towards the end of the period. The Presbyterian Church, with its two missions in Victoria persisting into the early decades of the period, continued its involvement with the establishment of missions in Queensland and Western Australia.

The Federal Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Australia first met in Sydney in 1886 and resolved to engage in mission work in Queensland. Early negotiations with the government of Queensland broke down. In 1890 the Foreign Mission Committee, based in Victoria, sent a deputation to Queensland. One of the features of the Presbyterian work, from the beginnings in Victoria through to its establishment of Ernabella Mission in 1937, is the network provided throughout by the movement of staff from one area to another. The Rev. F.A. Hagenauer who had come from Germany to work at Ebenezer and transferred to Ramahyuck, occupied himself during some unaccustomed leave by joining this deputation. His advice provided a link between the work in Victoria and the new work in Queensland. Following a favourable response from the government, a letter was sent to the Moravian Mission Board in Germany requesting them to send missionaries to open a mission on a reserve of 100 square miles which had been proclaimed by the government. Mapoon Mission was established in 1891 on the west coast of Cape York by the Rev. J.G. Ward, an English Moravian, and the Rev. Nicholas Hey, a German Moravian. Ward died in 1895, having become ill on an inland expedition. Hey was to remain at Mapoon until 1919. While his writings reflect the attitudes of the time with references to savages, superstitions and the need to replace 'bad' customs with 'good' ones based on Christian religion, he stressed the need to learn first from Aboriginal people and to understand their language. On being asked how he had won their confidence he replied: "By first learning at the footstool from the natives and then being guided by what I had learned" (Bleakley 1961:111). He wrote in 1931 that only a Christian native, knowing the reason behind customs, "can say whether a particular custom is or is not consistent with the principles of our Christian religion" (Hey 1931:21).

The Queensland Government supported the establishment of the mission as a means of reducing the devastating effects of the pearling and bêche-de-mer industries on Aborigines. In its early years it faced strenuous opposition from those engaged in these industries because the mission restricted the recruitment of labour. Cottages, a bush church and a boathouse and jetty were erected and Hey sought to develop agricultural and cattle industries which would provide employment and enable the people to become independent and self-supporting. In 1901 the mission was declared to be an Industrial School so that neglected children from other areas could be placed there. A training farm for boys was established 24 kilometres from Mapoon under a Samoan man. Dormitories were built to accommodate these children and this set a pattern for the Gulf missions. The Ward Memorial Church was built and the first couple baptized. An early convert, Mamoos, worked closely with the missionaries for thirty years. Mapoon increasingly became a settlement for

people of mixed descent. People trained there went out to work as seamen, gardeners and stockmen.

By 1906 it was reported that there were 400 people in contact with the mission. Approximately 180 were permanent residents. The title given to a book written by a brother of the Rev. Ward, and published in 1908, *The Miracle of Mapoon*, indicates that the missionaries were optimistic, in contrast to the pessimism that surrounded many similar ventures. By 1930 there had been 400 baptisms and there were 60 communicant members of the church at Mapoon. Following the Second World War there were increasing problems related to water supply, communications, limited employment and the unsuitability of the soil for development.

These problems were exacerbated when mining leases were granted in the region in 1957 and 1965 to enable the development of bauxite deposits. Attempts were made to encourage the people to move to other missions. In 1960 a decision was made to establish New Mapoon settlement at Bamaga on the tip of Cape York. Queensland government authorities destroyed mission buildings to discourage people from returning.

The Rev. E. Brown trained with Hey at Mapoon and in 1898 moved a few kilometres south to establish Weipa Mission on the Embley River. He remained there until 1918. Aboriginal men from Mapoon assisted in the establishment of the new mission. The development of Weipa was similar to that of Mapoon. A village, was constructed, a bark church built and later replaced by a substantial building in 1905, dormitories were established for children and attempts were made to establish gardens and a cattle industry. Weipa had been built at the site of valuable bauxite deposits and following the granting of mining leases the Port of Weipa was opened in 1963. The mission was now situated next to a township with promises of employment for the people in the new mining industry. The mission was re-sited and new houses built. The changes were in accord with the then current policy of assimilation.

Presbyterian influence in the area was extended further by the establishment of Aurukun Mission near the Archer River to the south of Weipa. The Queensland government extended the North Queensland Aboriginal Reserve to over 4,000 square miles to provide land for this mission. The model established at Mapoon was followed again at Aurukun. The work at Aurukun is associated particularly with the service of the Rev. Bill McKenzie who arrived there in 1923 and his wife, Geraldine, who joined him in 1925. They remained at Aurukun until retirement in 1965. Bill McKenzie continued the agricultural enterprises begun by Richter while Geraldine McKenzie was responsible for the supervision of dormitories, clinic and school.

Traditional foods were available in abundance in the area around Aurukun and this allowed the people to range over their land. Although missionaries have been accused of rounding up Aborigines and attempting to confine them to their mission stations, the McKenzies encouraged the people to retain links with the land and to learn skills while at Aurukun, which they could use when they returned to the bush. In their earlier years they visited people in the bush on horse patrols, taking medicines and sharing the Christian story with the people. Bill McKenzie began learning the local Wikmunkan dialect and completed a draft of the Gospel of Mark in that language. His use of the vernacular was complicated by the fact that there were several Wik dialects in the region and speakers of other dialects resented the focus on one dialect. In addition the Queensland government required that education

be conducted in English. Amongst the converts at Aurukun were a couple, Uki and Archibald, who in 1933 felt called to evangelize people living in the Kendall and Holroyd Rivers region, south of Aurukun. In 1935 Bill McKenzie expressed concern at the growth of Aurukun and proposed encouraging people to remain in their own areas through establishing outstations. Financial support to enable this development was, however, not forthcoming. Since the Second World War the need for trained teachers, sisters, mechanics and tradespeople had increased. Aboriginal church Elders worked with the ordained missionary in the administration of the church.

In 1973 the Presbyterian Board of Ecumenical Mission and Relations adopted as policy the objective of transferring missions to Aborigines as Aboriginal communities, legally incorporated and administered by their own councils (BOEMAR 1974:1). The government of Queensland intimated that this would contravene the Act relating to Aboriginal affairs and that control must remain with mission authorities or be transferred to the government. In 1975, the Queensland government passed The Aurukun Associates Act granting mining leases over Aurukun land to a consortium. The church, conscious that it had not opposed the developments at Mapoon and Weipa with sufficient vigour, clashed with the government.

The fourth Presbyterian mission in North Queensland was established on Mornington Island in the Wellesley group in the Gulf of Carpentaria in 1914. The Rev. Robert Hall, who had worked at other missions, was asked to undertake this work. He was killed four years later by a visitor from the mainland whose request for tobacco had been refused. The Rev. R. Wilson, who had worked at Aurukun, was transferred from Kunmunya Mission in Western Australia to replace him and he remained for 21 years. The pattern of the other missions was followed with the erection of a village, church building and dormitories and the development of gardens and a cattle industry. The first baptisms took place in 1927. Mornington Island was involved in the policy conflicts between the Queensland government and the Board of Missions and the church withdrew from its administrative role at Mornington Island and Aurukun in 1978.

The other mission to be established by the Presbyterian church during this period was in Western Australia. The Western Australian Presbyterian Assembly was constituted in 1901 and a mission committee appointed, with a recommendation that it follow the example set in Queensland. After a failed attempt to found a medical mission in the Kimberley region in 1910, the Rev. R.H. Wilson was transferred from Queensland to seek a suitable site at Walcott Inlet in 1911. He reported unfavourably on the area.

Wilson volunteered to undertake another search and selected a site at a small inlet named Port George IV. This site was approved and work commenced in October, 1912. Contact was made with the Worora people who lived in the area. Remoteness, navigational conditions, heat, insects and other difficulties tested the endurance of Mr. and Mrs. Wilson and their assistant, G.B. Segrott. Wilson needed leave for health reasons and was temporarily relieved by Mr. J.R.B. Love. Love found the site unsatisfactory and in 1915 moved to a new site named Kunmunya.

Closure of the mission was considered during the 1920s as harsh conditions hindered development. The challenge was met by Love, who had completed his studies for ordination after the War and worked at Mapoon since 1922. In 1927 he transferred to Kunmunya to renew friendships and to continue research into the language and culture which he had begun during his previous stay. His ministry of

13 years was based on respect for the people and their culture. Whereas some missionaries had denigrated Aboriginal languages as pagan, Love wrote that "Even the humble Australian native can contribute to this continual growth in meaning that the Bible experiences with each new translation" (Love 1936:50). Rather than ridicule traditional rituals he sensed a link between them and Christian sacraments. He wrote that "I had been witnessing rites akin to the most sacred observances of the Christian faith" (Love 1936:219). By 1929 he had translated the Gospel of Mark into Worora. He insisted on calling people by their local names rather than using English names. A new Church was dedicated in 1928 and in 1929 the first people were baptized. Among them were Njimandum, Ruby and their two children, Mungulu and Elkin. Njimandum worked closely with Love as a Christian leader, and his son, Alan Mungulu, carried on this position.

Love responded to a further challenge and provided another link between the Presbyterian missions by transferring to Ernabella where he was Superintendent from 1941 to 1945. Problems of isolation, communications and lack of employment led to a move from Kunmunya to Wotjulum on Walcott Inlet. Ngarinjin and Wunambul people joined the Worora at Wotjulum. It was hoped that proximity to mining development at Cockatoo Island would provide opportunities for employment through gardening and stock work. Hopes were not fulfilled and after consultation with the people, a cattle station was purchased near Derby township and a move made to the new mission named Mowanjum in 1956. This opened up new opportunities for education and employment. The people had been prepared for this through the work of Love and others. The community had strong leaders as Love had consulted with them consistently during his time at Kunmunya. The 1960s was a period of development in the North-West of Western Australia and the people of Mowanjum shared in the prosperity. However, development also brought social problems to the mission. In line with the new policy of the Board of Missions Mowanjum Community was incorporated in 1972 and administration transferred to a council, the church providing support and advice as requested. The purchase of a cattle station, re-named Pantitjan, in 1973, provided a centre nearer to peoples' traditional land (Edwards 1973:73).

The belated return of the Methodists to the field of Aboriginal missions was pioneered by the Rev. James Watson, who had also engaged in pioneering work in Papua in 1916. The Methodist Church was asked by the Commonwealth Government and leaders of other churches to commence work in Arnhem Land and Watson surveyed the region in 1915. Later he was to pose the question "Strange that the Methodist Church should have neglected such an interesting people all these years. I wonder why?" (Quoted in McKenzie 1976:6) His question still awaits a convincing answer. Methodist missionary motivations of offering salvation and civilisation lost their focus in the face of drastic population decline. Perhaps only a genuine policy of assimilation could have made the endeavour successful, yet European attitudes towards Aborigines precluded any real assimilation. The population loss under the destructive impact of settlers left no pagan societies to redeem and civilise, and the sad survivors were objects of charity rather than of mission. It was only when missiologists began to disengage Christian salvation from European values that the churches were freed from their role as agents of the civilising process.

The presence of strong Aboriginal societies in remote Arnhem Land provided another opportunity for the Methodists to engage in Mission. The changes in

missiological thinking were reflected in their work during this period. Watson crossed from the mainland to Goulburn Island to select a site for a mission and returned in 1916 to commence work. Years later, Nangolomin, John Godawa and other men shared with one of the writers the dismay of the people at the choice of Mudbalk as the site of the mission. It was an important ceremonial ground. The Rev. Lazarus Lamilami was a boy at the time of early mission contact. Later he recounted the strict regime of the mission under Watson (Lamilami 1974:92). Watson was assisted during the first few months by Mosesi Mansio from Rotuma Island. Mansio, the first in a line of Pacific Islanders who played a crucial role in the Methodist missions in Arnhem Land, died in November 1916. The Rev. George Goldsmith was Superintendent from 1930 to 1937. Changes in policy during his term were indicated by the closing of the children's dormitories.

Watson had returned south after a term of three years but retained an interest in, and encouraged expansion of, the work in Arnhem Land. He was asked to make another survey. An attempt to commence work on Elcho Island in 1921 was thwarted by plans for mining development. Watson turned his attention to a site on Milingimbi Island and established a mission there in 1923. He was succeeded at Milingimbi in 1926 by the Rev. T.T. Webb, who remained until 1939. His arrival led to radical changes in mission policies. At first he viewed Aboriginal life as harsh and crude and he set out to help people to adopt the values and settled life style of western Christianity. He believed that a sedentary life on a mission would provide sanctuary, regular food supplies, medical treatment, cleanliness and ordered home life (Webb 1934:35). He was concerned about the lack of Aboriginal concepts which could be rendered comparable with biblical ones such as the Kingdom of God (Webb 1929:7). In these matters he was similar to most of his contemporaries. However, his writings reveal a deepening respect for the sophistication of Aboriginal culture, and for the logic underlying their social structure. Similar to his Presbyterian contemporary Love, he gathered information about social organisation, totemic beliefs, rituals, and other customs of the people, and shared his insights through articles (Webb 1928a and 1928b). He came to understand the reasons for nomadic subsistence strategies and encouraged people to maintain these strategies along with periods of training in gardening, animal husbandry, carpentry and craft work at the mission. In his researches he sought the advice of the American anthropologist, W. Lloyd Warner. Webb advocated a patient approach based on gaining the confidence of the people, implanting new ideas and stimulating new desires. Change should be based on an appreciation of Aboriginal people, their culture and intellect. "In endeavouring to do this, we must enable the Aborigine to understand in what ways the new is superior to the old... In short, we must secure, not merely the consent of his will, but the approval of his intelligence" (Webb 1934:34).

In contrast to the earlier period, most of the missions established between 1880 and 1930 survive today as centres of Aboriginal population. The two exceptions, Mapoon and Kunmunya, had their populations transferred to new sites.

The Late Period 1930-1980

The Methodist Church, having had no involvement until late in the middle period followed up this renewed interest by establishing more missions in Arnhem Land after 1930. In contrast, the Presbyterian effort was expended mainly in maintaining

the enterprises established between 1896 and 1914. The only new initiative was the founding of Ernabella Mission in the far north west of South Australia in 1937. An Adelaide surgeon, Dr. Charles Duguid, was disturbed by reports of injustices to Aborigines and, having travelled through the Pitjantjatjara and nearby regions, persuaded the Presbyterian Assembly to purchase the lease of a sheep station to provide a buffer between people living in traditional lands and the encroaching white settlement. Rev. Love gave advice on the basis of his experience at Kunmunya. Duguid was aware that where missions had followed a policy of seeking to eradicate traditional customs, Aborigines had suffered. He wrote of Ernabella that "There was to be no compulsion nor imposition of our way of life on the Aborigines, nor deliberate interference with tribal custom... only people trained in some particular skill should be on the mission staff, and... they must learn the tribal language" (Duguid 1972:115).

The sheep industry was retained to provide opportunities for employment. A traditional method of spinning was adapted to wool as the basis for a craft industry. It has provided employment for women for many years. Emphasis was placed on medical services and a school was opened in 1940. In line with the mission's policy, Pitjantjatjara literacy was basic to the school curriculum. Gospels, hymns and a catechism were translated. A bush shelter was erected to serve as a church in 1944. The first converts were from the group of young people educated in the school. The same group also provided the core of the choir which sang the translated hymns and remains a significant feature of the Pitjantjatjara church. In 1950 it was reported that "Choir is attended by 80 to 90 young folk." Bible studies based on the Pitjantjatjara translations were well attended. The work of seeking converts was not rushed and solid foundations were laid over fifteen years of translation, teaching and example. In 1950 a group of young people, intrigued by Christian rituals, attended a staff Communion Service. In November 1952, 20 young people made their confession of faith and were baptized. A new church building was dedicated on the same day. From the beginning these new church members were active participants in church services and conducted their own services when absent from Ernabella. This initial group was followed by a steady stream of candidates for baptism in succeeding years. In 1961 four men were chosen by the church members as leaders to oversee the growing church.

The 1960s was a period of geographical, as well as numerical, expansion of the Pitjantjatjara Church. In 1961 the South Australian government established a settlement on the North-West Aboriginal Reserve to the west of Ernabella. Christian couples were amongst the first people to settle at this new station, Amata. They conducted services and the minister from Ernabella visited monthly to provide teaching and support. In the same year, Fregon was established as a cattle outstation to the south-west of Ernabella. One of the newly elected church leaders moved there to conduct services. In 1968 the government opened a settlement at Indulkana, 190 kilometres south-east of Ernabella. The people at Indulkana requested visits from Ernabella. People who had previous contact with Ernabella conducted services there and, following regular visits by the Ernabella minister, groups were baptized in 1971 and 1972. By 1974 a total of 299 adults and 143 children had been baptized in the whole area. During the 1960s a staff member from Ernabella moved to the Aboriginal community at the railway township of Finke, 300 kilometres to the east, to engage in community development and evangelistic work.

2. Church Service at Kunytjanu homeland community, 1978

3. Bush church at Amata, 1966-1970

In accord with the Presbyterian Mission Board policy the administration of Ernabella and Fregon was transferred to the local communities on the 1st January, 1974. The communities were incorporated respectively as Pukatja Community and Aparawatatja Community. The Mission Board assisted with advice and recruitment of staff as requested by the communities. During the 1970s geographical and numerical expansion of the church continued with the establishment of Mimili Community, on a cattle station purchased for the people between Indulkana and Fregon, and the establishment of homeland communities to the west of Amata, as some people returned to traditional areas such as Pipalyatjara. By 1980 the Pitjantjatjara Parish covered an area of 600 kilometres from east to west. Church membership was approximately 500, and 30 men and women who had been commissioned as Elders over the years carried on most of the oversight of the congregations throughout the region. Over 1,000 people attended Easter conventions held at various centres (Edwards 1978:204).

The expansion of Methodist mission work in Arnhem Land after 1930 was assisted by the Report (1929) of J.W. Bleakley, Chief Protector of Aborigines in Queensland, on Aborigines in The Northern Territory. He recommended that missions be subsidized. In 1931 Arnhem Land was proclaimed an Aboriginal Reserve. In 1932 a group of Japanese fishermen were killed by Aborigines at Caledon Bay on the East coast of Arnhem Land. The Methodist Mission Board protested against a proposed punitive expedition and missionaries became involved in negotiations with the people involved. This led to a request to establish a mission and Webb selected a site on the north-east tip of Arnhem Land. Yirrkala Mission was established under the Rev. Wilbur Chaseling in 1935. He followed Webb's interest in the culture and rituals: "It seemed only reasonable at Yirrkala to preserve the culture, to encourage the revival of old ceremonies, and to stimulate in the people an appreciation of their own social organisation" (Quoted in McKenzie 1976:80). With the assistance of Fijians, gardens were established to provide food and employment. Chaseling in 1936 argued for an itinerant ministry to enable clans to remain in their own territories and for villages to evolve on this basis (Chaseling 1936:36).

Yirrkala became the focus for developments in the cause of Aboriginal land rights in the 1960s when leases were granted to mining companies for the mining of bauxite deposits. The Rev. Edgar Wells, who had worked at Milingimbi from 1949 to 1959 and developed an appreciation of Aboriginal art and spirituality, moved to Yirrkala. To the dismay of Mathaman and other traditional owners in the area he drew attention to the threat to their land. He stood out against his own Mission Board which had co-operated with the Government in approving the development. Wells assisted in the preparation and presentation to Parliament of the famous Bark Petition of 1963. This petition was followed by significant Court actions, which although unsuccessful, were important steps leading to the granting of land rights in the Northern Territory. The involvement of Wells and others led to unreserved support by the church for the principle of land rights and a new commitment to the policy of Aboriginal self-determination. A Fijian agriculturalist, Mr. Jonatani Rika, who arrived in 1965 (and is still at Yirrkala in 1987) and Mr. Keith Hendry, Senior Officer at Yirrkala, assisted people to settle in homeland centres such as Gathalala on Caledon Bay, the home of the Gathu clan.

Harold and Ella Shepherdson, arrived in Darwin in 1927 and moved to Milingimbi in 1928, he to operate a sawmill and she to assist in medical work. He saw the need for better communications and used his engineering skills to maintain pedal radios, build boats and in 1935 built his own aeroplane. The presence of an Air Force Base on Milingimbi presented a threat to the mission and in 1942 Shepherdson moved his sawmill operations to Elcho Island, thus forming the nucleus of a mission which was to have a population of over 1,000 people in later years. Because of the threat of invasion Ella Shepherdson spent several months in a bush camp with Aboriginal women (Shepherdson 1981:67). The Shepherdsons remained at Elcho until 1977, completing 50 years of service in Arnhem Land. A researcher in the 1960s saw Elcho Island as "an example of what can be achieved by an efficient administrative unit, well trained staff (from technical and mission point of view) and communication with Aborigines" (Tatz 1964:49). Tatz wrote of the four Methodist missions as the most productive of all Aboriginal centres in the Northern Territory. From 1950, Shepherdson used aircraft to assist people to settle in homeland areas, and to provide stores, medical and transport services. One of these homeland centres, Lake Evalla developed into a large community.

In contrast to the Presbyterian missions which had remained separate entities under a Federal Mission Board, the Methodist missions of Arnhem Land came under local administration with a Northern District and a Chairman. The Rev. Arthur Ellemor was Chairman from 1943 to 1957, building on foundations laid by T.T. Webb. Under his guidance a Revised Statement of District Policy issued in 1944 proposed a long term policy of developing independent, self-supporting communities and an aim of working through, rather than for the people (Ellemor 1944:6). During the 1950s and 1960s financial support for Aboriginal missions in the Northern Territory increased. It was the period of the assimilation policy under the Minister for Territories, Mr. Paul Hasluck. Some churches refused the offer of funds, preferring to retain autonomy. However the Methodist District gladly accepted the support. The Rev. Gordon Symons, who had commenced service at Yirrkala in 1963, became Chairman of the District. A capable administrator, he gave strong leadership as missions changed from small outposts with a few staff, to large townships with larger staffs. Schools were seen as central to the policy of assimilation and the numbers of teachers increased. Eventually the church found it difficult to recruit sufficient teachers and schools were handed over to the government. The same process took place in health and other services. However educational and industrial projects which had seemed promising under mission direction in the 1960s lost impetus as the government took control and introduced outside contractors and employees, closing opportunities for local residents.

In 1965 a major Commission of the Methodist Overseas Mission Board toured the district and established new directives, based on a policy of vesting more authority in local councils which included Aboriginal people. Each community was to have a Station Council and a Church Council, with Aboriginal people being increasingly involved in administering both. This policy reflected a significant difference between the Methodists and government, the latter viewing the settlements as transient training institutions while the church intended that they should become self-supporting townships, controlled eventually by Aboriginal people. In 1974 another major Commission compiled a report, entitled 'Free to Decide' which advocated empowering Aboriginal people so that they could control the direction,

style and pace of change on their communities. The document responded to the concerns of the people that they were hearing too many voices and wanted to take more responsibility themselves, with white staff working side by side under Aboriginal authority. It advocated a "liberating style of community work" (Clarke 1974). The document marked the end of old missionary relationships and placed a new focus on the commitment of Jesus Christ to the poor. Relationships with the government deteriorated as church staff supported Aboriginal land rights and self determination. Most staff were transferred to the employ of Aboriginal Town Councils with a handful remaining as employees of the church.

The Development of Aboriginal Churches

The Presbyterian and Methodist Mission Boards were relieved of the administration of mission settlements in the 1970s and gave more attention to the development of Aboriginal churches. In the Presbyterian missions, Church Elders had important roles but their remoteness from Presbyteries made it difficult for them to fit into the Presbyterian church structure. It appeared unlikely that local people would be able to meet the educational standards required for entry into the ordained ministry. In 1973 several Elders from Mowanjum, Ernabella and Queensland missions attended a six weeks course at Aurukun and they were given special authority to administer sacraments in their local churches so that they could exercise the full range of ministries. The Church Councils of the Methodist churches in Arnhem Land established in 1965 presided over a remarkable transformation. The road to an ordained Aboriginal ministry began with courses for local preachers in Minjalang (1965) Milingimbi (1966) and Maningrida (1967). The latter was a government settlement established in 1957, with a missionary, the Rev. Gowan Armstrong, stationed there from 1963 to 1972. He was succeeded by a Tongan, the Rev. Mosesi Latu. The Rev. Lazarus Lamilami was ordained to the ministry at Croker Island in 1966 as the first Aboriginal minister of the Methodist Church. The Rev. Philip Magurlnir was the second.

The period following the separation of Town and Church Councils was one of difficulty and confusion with some people finding it hard to adjust to the new policy and practices. Some parishes declined in attendance at worship and in Church membership. However a greater effort in translating the Bible into languages such as Gupapuyngu, Maung and Gumatj laid the foundations for development. Throughout the history of the Arnhem Land missions the response to the Christian message had been limited but growth took place following the changes of the 1960s and 1970s.

The United Church in North Australia had been established in 1955-6 as a co-operative venture of the Presbyterian, Methodist and Congregational churches. In 1972 the Methodist missions were integrated with it. Further co-operation between these churches and the Anglican Church led to the founding of Nungalinya College in Darwin in 1974. Nungalinya first provided extension courses and later residential theological courses for Aboriginal people, as well as organising workshops in community development, language studies and women's studies. Students trained at Nungalinya now serve as ordained ministers in seven Aboriginal churches. A branch of Nungalinya, Wontulp-Bi-Buya College opened in Townsville to serve Queensland communities in 1983. In 1988 there are twelve Aboriginal Ministers serving in The Uniting Church in Australia.

By the mid seventies there was a sense of confusion and lack of direction in Arnhem Land churches (Gondarra 1986:6). The transfer of power from the church led to open criticism of Christianity. Social disruption increased during this period as indicated by increased substance abuse. The Rev. Djiniyini Gondarra returned to this situation at Elcho Island, having been ordained in 1976 following training in Brisbane and Papua New Guinea. He prayed for revival, supported by Aboriginal Christian leaders such as Mr. Rrurrambu Dhurkay. On the 14th March, 1979, he called a group together in prayer. He recalls, "Suddenly we began to feel God's Spirit moving in our hearts ...we began to ask one another what was happening... In the same evening the words just spread like flames of fire" (Gondarra 1986a:9). This led to a remarkable movement, commonly referred to as the Arnhem Land Revival Movement, which has resulted in the baptism of many people in Arnhem Land communities and has had an influence on Aboriginal communities in Western Australia and South Australia.

Leaders of this movement came into contact with Aboriginal Christians in Queensland who shared similar concerns. The Rev. Charles Harris, formerly a Pastor of The Assemblies of God, came under the influence of Pastor Don Brady, an Aborigine working within the Methodist Church in Brisbane. Charles Harris took up work with the Methodist Church at Paddington in Brisbane but felt isolated as an Aborigine in white church structures. In 1981 he had a vision for his people. Its major elements included Aboriginal control of evangelism, and ministry to their people all over Australia. He envisaged Aborigines breaking out of white structures and finding the freedom to respond to the needs of their people in their own way, united in the struggle for justice for their people.

Charles Harris invited Aboriginal Christian leaders from other parts of Australia to a conference at Crystal Creek in Queensland in August, 1982. Their discussions led to a firm conviction that Aboriginal Christians needed a structure of their own and at Crystal Creek they spoke of a National Black Congress. The Congress would be within the Uniting Church in Australia but not confined to Uniting Church members. The Conference asked Harris to visit Aboriginal groups around Australia. Encouraged by an enthusiastic response he called 80 Aboriginal Christians to meet at Galiwin'ku, Elcho Island, in August, 1983. They constituted themselves as The Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress. Charles Harris was elected President. During the following year the Congress sought control of Aboriginal ministry, service and action within The Uniting Church. The Uniting Church National Assembly adopted the charter in May, 1985 by spontaneously singing the doxology (Bos 1986:166). From these beginnings the Congress has rapidly built up its strength in each Synod of The Uniting Church. Previously, the Aboriginal churches in Queensland and Arnhem Land had been part of wider presbyteries, as the regional structures of the new Uniting Church in Australia had been established in 1977. Arnhem Land parishes now formed their own Bethel Presbytery while the former Presbyterian missions of north Queensland were united in Calvary Presbytery.

This outline of the history of Aboriginal mission work by the three churches which came into union as The Uniting Church in Australia provides some glimpses of a long history of hopes and failures, courage and frustrations, folly and wisdom, persistence and pessimism. These enterprises have reached a stage of fulfilment and renewed hope as expressed by Charles Harris in his charge to the first conference of the Congress: "History has been created, God's purpose has been fulfilled. Be

advocates of peace. Let us break down the walls of racism. As we go forward, the gates of hell will not prevail against us" (quoted in Bos 1986:175).

References

Bleakley, J.W. (1961), *The Aborigines of Australia*, Brisbane: The Jacaranda Press.

BOEMAR (1974), The Board Of Ecumenical Mission and Relations. *Into 1974*, Presbyterian Church of Australia.

Bollen, J.D. (1977), 'Early Missionary Societies and the Australian Aborigines' in *Journal of Religious History*, Vol. 9, No. 3, pp. 263-91.

Bos, R. (1986), 'The Congress: A New Movement in Aboriginal Christianity' in *The Cultured Pearl*, edited by Jim Houston, Melbourne: Victoria Council of Churches.

Cannon, M. ed. (1982), *Historical Records of Victoria, Vol. 2A, The Aborigines of Port Phillip 1835-1839*, Melbourne: Victoria Government Printing Office.

Chaseling, W. (1936), Whither the Aborigines, unpublished paper to the Methodist Mission District.

Chaseling, W. (1957), *Yulengor: Nomads of Arnhem Land*, London: The Epworth Press.

Clarke, B.A. (1974), Free To Decide, unpublished document of the United Church of North Australia, Darwin.

Duguid, C. (1972), *Doctor and the Aborigines*, Adelaide: Rigby.

Edwards, W.H. (1973), 'The Changing Climate of Aboriginal Development' in *Interchange*, No. 14, pp. 70-80.

Edwards, W.H. (1978), 'The Gospel and Aboriginal Culture' in *Interchange*, No. 24, pp. 195-204.

Ellemor, A.F. (1944), 'Aboriginal Mission Work in Arnhem Land' in *The Missionary Review*, March, 1944.

Gondarra, D. (1986a), *Let My People Go: Series of Reflections of Aboriginal Theology*, Northern Synod, Uniting Church in Australia.

Gondarra, D. (1986b), 'Overcoming the Captivity of the Western Church Context' in *The Cultured Pearl*, edited by Jim Houston, Melbourne: Victorian Council of Churches.

Gunson, N. ed. (1974), *Australian Reminiscences and Papers of L.E. Threlkeld*, two volumes, Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies.

Hey, J.N. (1931), *A Brief History of the Presbyterian Church's Mission Enterprise among the Australian Aborigines*, Sydney: New Press.

Lamilami, L. (1974), *Lamilami Speaks*, Sydney: Ure Smith.

Love, J.R.B. (1936), *Stone Age Bushmen of Today*, London: Blackie and Son Ltd.

McKenzie, M. (1976), *Mission to Arnhem Land*, Adelaide: Rigby.

McNair, W. and H. Rumley (1981), *Pioneer Mission: The Work of Wesleyan Missionary John Smithies in The Swan River Colony 1840-1855*, Perth: University of Western Australia Press.

Neill, S. (1964), *A History of Christian Missions*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

Neill, S., G.H. Anderson and J. Goodwin (1970), *Concise Dictionary of the Christian World Mission*, London: Lutterworth Press.

Shepherdson, E. (1981), *Half a Century in Arnhem Land*, One Tree Hill: Ella and Harold Shepherdson.

Tatz, C. (1964), Aboriginal Administration in The Northern Territory of Australia, PhD thesis, Department of Anthropology and Sociology, Australian National University.

Webb, T.T. (1928a), 'Ceremonies for Initiation of Boys' in *The Missionary Review*, July, 1928.

Webb, T.T. (1928b), 'Ceremonies for Making Peace' in *The Missionary Review*, September, 1928.

Webb, T.T. (1929), 'The Missionary Task' in *The Missionary Review*, May, 1929.

Webb, T.T. (1934), 'Our Approach to The Aborigines' in *The Missionary Review*, December, 1934.

Wells, A. (1963), *Milingimbi: Ten Years in the Crocodile Islands of Arnhem Land*, Sydney: Angus and Robertson.

Woolmington, J. (1974), 'Early Christian Missions to the Australian Aborigines' in *Historian*, No. 26, October, 1974.