

A Brief History of the Work of the Church in Vanuatu

(known as the New Hebrides until independence in 1980)

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Early History

The earliest European contact with the New Hebrides was by traders, probably French, followed by the English in the early 19th century. The earliest Christian mission contacts were by Pacific Islander London Missionary Society missionaries (Tongan, Samoan and possibly Cook Islands), led by John Williams.

The first New Zealand Presbyterian interest was expressed at the 1862 Southern Presbyterian Assembly which set up the General Assembly Foreign Missions Committee with the New Hebrides as a field for mission. The Northern Presbyterian Church at almost the same time established their Committee on Maori and Foreign Relations, and asked the Presbyterian Church of Scotland to allocate one or more of its people to the care of the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand (Northern).



In June 1868, William Watt went to Tanna in Vanuatu after a short stay in Auckland. He stayed on Tanna until 1910. The New Hebrides was the single focus mission area for the New Zealand Presbyterian Church at that time. In 1867 the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand (Southern) recruited Peter Milne from Edinburgh who arrived in Nguna in 1869. At about the same time, William Watt started working in Vanuatu. After 10 years of faithful service not achieving a single convert, questions were raised about the need to contextualise the gospel message.

In 1891 the first medical missionary was sent to Aneityum. Rev Oscar Michelson, a Norwegian, was at Tongoa for over 50 years. In the same year the New Zealand Presbyterian Women's Missionary Union was formed along with the Ladies Mission Aid Association. Their aims were:

- to promote mission by women among women and children;
- to promote the church's mission schemes.

1900's

By this time, Tanna, Nguna, Tongoa, and Epi had become the principal areas of service for New Zealand Presbyterians. In 1901 the Southern and Northern Presbyterian Churches united and declared the New Hebrides their only mission field, though at that time there was some contact with China. In the 30 years (1901-1930) the number of missionaries grew from 11 to 46. But by 1930 interest in the New Hebrides seemed to be tailing off largely due to the declining population and no new areas for work to compete with the excitement of new opportunities in China and India.

Solid work however did continue, with strong commitment in the 1940s towards the establishment of a New Hebrides church, with indigenous leadership. In 1948 the

Presbyterian Church of the New Hebrides was born allowing the Tangoa Training Institute (TTI), which had been operating for some time as an important leadership training institution, to take on fresh importance. Rev Graham Miller, then Rev Paddy Jansen (from 1958) were key principals during this period.

From Mission to Partnership

The 1950s saw a new era of mission for Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand in the midst of changing politics, growing national aspirations, and a desire for indigenisation impacting upon the church in Vanuatu. The 1953 Assembly reported "we have come to the end of the Foreign Mission era... what we are now doing is not maintaining a mission, but sharing in a system of inter-church aid... helping indigenous churches to assume their own responsibilities."

Thus education became the strong emphasis of the 1950s with increasing cooperation being sought with the British part of the British/French Condominium administration. Navota Farm was an expression of the broad-based view of mission as being for the comprehensive good of the life of the people. Paddy Jansen saw the potential of land near the TTI for training New Hebrideans in land management, with the added possibility that the farm might become profitable for the Presbyterian Church of the New Hebrides.

Towards Independence

The Church was actively involved in the push for independence during the 1970s due to its role in education and relationship with the British Government. The 1975 Assembly set key Church leaders apart for special ministry as political leaders who served as senior members of the new administration as they approached independence in July 1980. This left big gaps in the church's internal leadership, and provided opportunity for younger men and some women to emerge as leaders. Pastor training was at that time localised to provide contextual theological education at Talua Ministry Training Centre.

Today

The Presbyterian Church of Vanuatu is the result of this long history of missionary involvement and partnership. It is by far the largest denomination in Vanuatu with the membership equalling 38% of the population. It is a totally autonomous church with a completely indigenous leadership. The 2002 Assembly of Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand declared that "the relationship between the Presbyterian Church of Vanuatu and the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand be a primary relationship in overseas mission." [paragraph 4.2].