

Friends for LIFE - A story of our friendship with SSEC

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Friendship

What are friends? Friends love one another and are willing to share themselves, their money and resources with one another. They are genuinely warm and concerned for one another. They are not in a leader /follower, superior/ inferior or master /servant relationship, but have one of equality and mutual respect. They support one another but do not control. They give and receive advice but are not put out when it is not accepted. They are not separated when mistakes are made.

Developing such friendships take time and commitment. Do such friendships develop between Anglo-Celts and Solomon Islanders?

I remember with warmth the first 5 years of my life that I spent in the Solomons with my missionary parents. The Islanders gave me the name "Taunifalia," which means, 'free gift' or a 'giving without expecting anything in return'. This is a characteristic of true friendship. Based in Australia, I appreciated why my parents had developed close friendships with Islanders from the stories they told me. Then in my late teenage years I met Justus Ganiferi and then many other Islanders whose lives and relationship with God really challenged me. In 1987 when I returned to the Solomons, I was deeply moved and felt I had come home.

Friends in Queensland

When Florence Young first met South Sea Islanders in Bundaberg in 1882 she was attracted to them and their warm heartedness. Even though, as indentured labour, they were in a master /servant relationship she wanted so much to introduce them to her Lord. In 1885 the first Solomon Islander developed a new and deep relationship with Jesus and then with European Christians. Between 1885 and 1905, 734 Islanders from the Solomons and 1713 from Vanuatu became Christians and were baptised. Europeans valued the contributions and dedication of these South Sea Islanders and they in turn respected the understanding and commitment of the missionaries. In Queensland a friendship between Islanders and European began which has continued. When Peter Ambuofa started the SSE Church in Malu'u in 1894 he and others called out for help from their European friends who eventually came in 1904.



Back in Australia, European missionaries were challenged by the way some Christian South Sea Islanders chose to move out of Bundaberg to work on other Queensland plantations from Cairns to the NSW border, to reach the scattered Pacific Islanders with the Gospel. After they had established small churches they asked for European missionaries to come and help them. At Geraldton, for instance, they paid for and built their own building and prayed for a missionary to come to help. In 1895 missionaries encouraged Islanders to engage in a wider world and introduced a group of Islanders to a member of the British and Foreign Bible Society. He told them about the many Bibles that had been issued and the number of languages in which they were printed. The speaker found a very appreciative audience in these Island Christians, to whom the Bible was their only book.

In 1896, Europeans encouraged some Islanders to join with them to pray daily for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit worldwide. This was a new experience and at first the Islanders held back because of their limited ideas about the world. But gradually this united prayer brought great blessing to them all and in 1907 a deep work of the Holy Spirit swept through many plantations from Cairns to south of Bundaberg. While Australia was rejecting the Islanders, the Holy Spirit was preparing them for a new joint venture with Europeans in the Solomons. Even though it was a joint effort the missionaries felt that South Sea Island Christians showed so much faith and earnestness that it often put

them to shame. They showed a faithful service characterised by an intense love for Christ, prayerfulness, Bible reading and the singing of hymns.

There was special evening meeting at Easter 1905 at Isis in Queensland when Florence Young was present with a number of Islanders. She described a strange sense of the Holy Spirit being on them all and that they were all conscious of an atmosphere being charged with divine power. Instead of a lesson on the Second Coming, the sense of God's presence was so strong that they could only let go everything in utter abandonment to the control of the Holy Spirit. There followed an hour of intense prayer, and while they were still on their knees, God's message came. Another hour was spent in eager reception of this lesson and in prayer. The 4 missionaries and 13 South Sea Islanders spent the next day waiting on God and experienced great liberty. The burden of prayer throughout the day was for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit. It was prayer such as she had never heard before from the Islanders - literally praying in the Holy Spirit. (Pearls p161-2)



Friends, help us!

Some Solomon Islanders left the comfort zone of Queensland with a deep conviction that they needed to return home to either Malaita or Guadalcanal to pass on the good news of a God who cared. Most knew that they could return to possible death or, at the very least, rejection from their families. They arrived back with only an Authorised version of the Bible, sometimes a few other books, but always a message of hope. They longed for the support and friendship of their Christian European brothers and sisters and sent back letters with the recruiters from about 1892 till 1902 asking for help from missionaries in Queensland.

When Islanders still in Queensland heard of the difficulties that had been experienced in the Solomons, one of them confessed that he did not feel strong enough to witness and needed God

to keep him strong. He asked for the filling of the Holy Spirit so that he could serve God in the Solomons.

Missionaries responded to the cry for help and entered the Solomons in 1905. A partnership continued between the Nationals who had been converted in Queensland and the missionaries. In 1907 the nationals helped establish the Christian villages which were linked to the 36 outstations on Malaita and the 8 on Guadalcanal, while the 8 European missionaries established the 3 main mission stations. One of these was One Pusu, which became the key training centre. The Europeans also provided a ship called the *Evangel* which became a lifeline linking Christians together along the shores of many islands. Converted Nationals wanted the blessing of this constant contact and established Christian villages along the coast.

By 1914 there were 14 Europeans living on 6 stations, and 51 Nationals working on outstations. The missionaries concentrated on helping the Islanders to become a literate society instead of only an oral one. They taught Islanders to read and understand the Bible and published much written material such as translations of the NT into local languages and basic booklets such as *The Bible made Easy* and *Bible Outlines*. Meanwhile the Nationals became expert fishers of men and learned how to depend on the word of God. Some of them walked for miles with pictures of the crucifixion to show to clusters of their wild relatives who listened to them in their mountain homes.

Missionaries valued the natural gift of learning languages that many Solomon Islanders had. Islanders used this gift to help bring the gospel to people of other languages and help missionaries translate the Scripture into their own language. The European missionaries saw themselves as the gatekeepers of Christian knowledge and the ones who determined who was baptised and then received into the full fellowship of SSEC. They felt the need to do this until the church formally became SSEC in 1964. They produced a list of those baptised that we still have in the SSEM archives which are currently housed nearby supervised by the Centre for the History of Christian Thought and Experience at Macquarie Uni.

Friends under colonialism

The British brought the Solomon Islands under colonial rule in 1893. Up to then there had been tribal law. Afterwards there was a nation-wide law. Many Nationals appreciated the 'peace' that resulted, but found themselves considered as part of Britain's burden to bring Western enlightenment and profitable enterprise to third world countries. They were now considered as inferiors in their own country and many Europeans seemed unable or uninterested to find out from them the full nature of their culture.

The missionary, Northcote Deck, was a man of his times. He believed he brought enlightenment to the Islanders. He wrote in the mission magazine, *Not in Vain*, in 1914, that he thought that Nationals were unlearned and ignorant men, born of a race untutored and untrained. He felt that the older men had little aptitude for learning, having never learned before, nor had they, as a people, any of that philosophical subtlety possessed by Eastern nations. He concluded that "not having free access to God's Word (for they could read so little), that for years to come they would need guidance and instruction in the pathways of faith". Forming true friendships was a real challenge under these circumstances!



Could Europeans and Nationals really understand one another's background? In 1991 Michael Maileau described how European missionaries had taught him to think of God as being a distant spiritual being that could only be reached by 'a faith bridge'. He was aware of spiritual realms inhabited by evil spirits and was challenged by his unconverted cousin who used to talk to them. He learnt to relate more intimately with the Holy Spirit and talk with Him.

World War 11 dramatically brought the wider world to the doorstep of the Solomons. The impact of the Japanese and Americans in 1942-6 encouraged the Nationals to desire to be treated as 'adults' and given greater independence. After the war, a number of Malaitan tribal chiefs, wanting to re-assert their traditional rights and control over their people, started a movement called Marching Rule. The British Government took this to be rebellion and imprisoned the leaders for a few years. By inspired negotiation, a British government official helped break the deadlock and aided both groups to move forward together. This dramatic change in attitude of the SSEC leaders baffled the missionaries and heralded the need for a change in the nature of relationships between Nationals and Europeans. One national, looking back at Marching Rule saw the hand of God leading, guiding and protecting. He saw it was good, because otherwise the Islanders would have stayed as they were and remained undeveloped.

In 1959, when Festo Kivengere visited the Solomons from Africa, he recognised that the missionaries and Island leaders tended to separate into two camps instead of developing a fuller degree of cooperation between them. In 1957 the SSEM Council in Australia proposed a change. They wrote "the aim of the mission is to bring into being churches, which from the outset, are self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating." SSEC did become such a church in 1964. Then 14 years later the Solomon Islands became an independent nation. The Islanders were now responsible for their government and law and order. They were no longer in a superior/ inferior relationship with Europeans.



Friends through revival

After the formation of SSEC both missionaries and Islanders felt dryness and the need to pray for revival. It came in 1970, and swept through the Solomons. Among other things it helped to break down some of the invisible barriers that there had been between the Islanders and Europeans.

Revival brought radical changes to relationships. Various new manifestations such as speaking in tongues, laying on of hands and evidence of strong emotionalism and prophecy were a challenge to some missionaries. At first, they struggled with these changes, and found they did not like the nature of the new singing and the shouting, or felt that nationals were

trying to force God. Justus Ganiferi wanted the missionaries to come and stand beside him, and asked, "Why are you missionaries standing away while this is going on?"

Some missionaries recognised a oneness growing between them and Island leaders that they had never known before. They delighted in the terrific spirit of prayer amongst the Islanders. And saw that the singing and prayer were manifestations that could hardly be stopped. During this time National leaders, with a spirit of discernment, sought the Lord's blessing on different missionaries and their future service. The whole experience prompted George Strachan to ask "Who knows what God is doing and is going to do with SSEC?"

In the years following revival, there was a greater recognition of the need for mutual support between members of SSEC and Europeans. Europeans continued to provide teachers and resources to the Island church, but our Island friends recognised the great need in Australia and New Zealand for a spiritual transformation. They spent many days and nights on their prayer mountains praying earnestly for revival in Australia and we have been greatly blessed as a consequence. As the old mission magazine said 'Their labour was not in vain in the Lord'.

Friends in the world

In 1999 conflict again enveloped the entire Solomon Islands nation, and Malaita and Guadalcanal in particular. Like in World War 11, lives were lost and the peace of the islands was totally disrupted. The Solomon Island government had to ask for help from the Australian government who then sent a military/police force called RAMSI to help restore law and order. This challenges us to keep our friendship fresh and living.

On the mission scene, when South Sea Evangelical Mission (SSEM) changed its name to South Pacific Partners and then became incorporated into Pioneers, SSEM was not deserting their SSEC friends or turning their backs on them. There is now a new season in which the former SSEM has focused on the more extensive global ministry that is Pioneers rather than one that is limited to the Pacific. But they still value the deep fellowship of their SSEC friends and gifts that God has given them. Together we want to become more involved in engaging a wider world.



Starting in Queensland, both Europeans and Solomon Islanders have looked at the regions beyond and have desired to launch out. But when we have launched out we have found that we need one another to accomplish the broader vision. The Wontok relationships that mean so much to Melanesians can be great strength. But they can be a weakness by restricting the friendships that can develop with people from other tribes, islands or nations. The establishment of 'Friends of SSEC' has been a way of acknowledging the need for developing informal friendship links between people in the Solomon Islands, Australia and New Zealand.

There is always a real challenge for friendships to cross tribal and national boundaries. We all need to take seriously what it says in Proverbs 18:24 that "A friend sticks closer than a brother." In Christ we are one family and we need to be friends. In 2005 none of us knows what God is going to do with us in the future. But we do know from Jer 29:11 that the Lord has plans to prosper us, and our nations and our friendship, and to give us a hope and a future.

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