

# A Cruise into Missions History

I first visited Vanuatu in 1996. This was to promote the Theological Education by Extension (TEE) program of the Christian Leaders' Training College where Marilyn and I were serving. One day as I walked along the waterfront promenade in the capital city of Port Vila I said to myself, "*someday I would like to bring Marilyn to this place*". From there I wrote a postcard to our girls, telling them how a big white passenger ship had just sailed into the harbour. Even though Marilyn went later to Port Vila alone for ministry, I was still hoping that we could visit there together.



While at CLTC Marilyn wrote two TEE courses on missions called '**Launch Out**' and '**The Deep-Sea Canoe**'. Both aimed to mobilise the churches of the South Pacific to remember their unique missions' heritage and once again take up the challenge of cross-cultural missions. Always capturing our imagination was the story of how the first Polynesian missionaries and their families came to Papua via the Loyalty Islands. There, in 1872 they picked up eight Loyalty Islander families to join them in this new work of the London Missionary Society (LMS).

So when we decided to go on a cruise for our 30<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary, we selected a week-long P&O cruise on the Pacific Dawn which went to Port Vila via the Loyalty Islands (now a province of New Caledonia). The cruise had one other port of call and that was Noumea, the capital city of New Caledonia. That we thought would add to the adventure as neither of us had ever visited this French-speaking part of Melanesia.



Looking back on the cruise, we can only thank God for the way he went before us. Noumea was the first surprise. During a bus tour of the city we drove past a very old church which the tour guide told us was a Protestant church. This made us curious and we walked back there from the ship just at sunset. When we arrived we saw lights on in the church hall so went over to investigate. Some ladies came out to greet us. After I explained in French who we were and what we were looking for, we were invited in for 'a cup of tea'!



It turned out to be an old LMS church and this was a meeting of the women's fellowship! We were very warmly received and along with our bowls of tea came cakes then later some chicken, taro and banana. The ladies were thrilled that Marilyn was a missionary lady and asked if they could sing her a song.

Dressed in their flowing islands dresses, they sang in the language of the island of Mare in the Loyalty Islands. They gave Marilyn a beautiful islands bouquet and after chatting for some time I read some Bible verses in French and Marilyn gave a short talk and prayed with translation. This indeed was a divine appointment which took us totally by surprise.

This reminded us of our years in Papua New Guinea as members of a big church in Lae. It so happens that the membership of that church were mostly Papuans who had come from the coastal areas where the early Polynesian missionaries first came. We were always greatly moved by the singing of 'peroveta' or 'prophet songs' that the early Polynesian missionaries used to teach truths from the Bible. Some of these are still sung in the original Cook Islands and Samoan languages.

The next morning our cruise ship anchored in Santal Bay in Lifou in the Loyalty Islands. We were keen to find out where the LMS ship, *John Williams*, would have collected the new missionaries to go to Papua in 1872. After snorkelling in the morning, we found a big cross at the market but no-one seemed to know anything about the LMS. So we found a quiet spot under a coconut tree to pray and give thanks for the spread of the Gospel throughout the South Pacific Islands. Later we found out that we were very close to where they had set sail.



We had both been reading missions books on our cruise. In 1996, I had given Marilyn '*Polynesian Missions to Melanesia*'. This is a collection of stories of how Polynesian missionaries from Samoa, Cook Islands and Tonga took the Gospel to New Caledonia and Papua New Guinea as early as the 1840s. On the front cover of the book is a drawing of a deep-sea canoe and on the back a drawing of the LMS mission ship *John Williams*.



I had been re-reading a book called '*John Geddie – Hero of the New Hebrides*' given to me by my minister on leaving Canada thirty years ago. The Geddie family, from Canada, were the first missionaries to the New Hebrides, now called Vanuatu, arriving in 1848. They were dropped off by the LMS ship *John Williams*, named after the missionary who had been martyred 9 years earlier on a nearby island. How thrilling and humbling it was for us to now be in these very places.

After sailing from Lifou, the next morning we arrived in Port Vila. We snorkelled in the morning, then went to the main market where we had another divine appointment. While eating at the back of the market where ladies were serving a hot meal, a man greeted us and sat with us. Jerry turned out to be a city councillor and communications engineer. He was also a committed Christian, family man and elder in a local church.



He came to meet us as he said not many cruise passengers came to the main market to have a meal. When he found out that we had been missionaries in PNG, he offered to show us around. He called a member of his church who was a bus driver and took us to some points of interest. This included a squatter settlement, near his church, where he was helping the local people to start a business project.



To conclude our tour, he took us several hundred meters down the road to the water's edge. From here we could see Erakor Island where he said were the graves of the wife and three sons of one of the early missionaries from Canada. As we stood looking out to the island, I felt my adventure cruise with Marilyn into missions history had reached its fulfilment. Now it was time to get back to the ship and begin our voyage home to Australia.