

Catechists and Church Workers in the Church of Bougainville

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In the past the Church in Bougainville relied very much on the work of the catechists.¹ This prepared the Church of today for the involvement of many lay people in the mission of the community of the faithful. The laity takes its rightful place in the Bougainville Church.

When the first missionaries, Fr. Karl Flaus SM and Fr. Eugene Englert SM, came to this region, they were accompanied by two Samoan catechists and their families. The first Mass was offered on 28 March 1899 (Holy Thursday).

Five weeks after their arrival (on the 3rd of May) the catechists Mr. Sakaio (Sataua) and Mr. Mikaele Taginoa (Safotu) opened the first school at Poporang with students from Choiseul, the Shortlands and Bougainville.

Bishop Pierre Broyer SM came to Poporang on the 31st July 1899 for his first visit to the Prefecture. He brought along with him five more Samoan catechists and one Wallisian catechist.

The Northern Solomons became a Prefecture Apostolic on the 21st of January 1904 with Fr. Forestier SM as first Prefect Apostolic. What is at present the Diocese of Gizo in the Western Solomons was part of the new Prefecture. On 31 May 1930 the Northern Solomons became a Vicariate with Thomas Wade SM as the Vicar Apostolic. He was ordained in Sydney, in St. Patrick Church, on the feast of Christ the King, 26 October 1930.

On 15 November 1966 all the Vicariates Apostolic in Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands became Dioceses and Bishop Leo Lemay SM who had been Vicar Apostolic of the North Solomons became Bishop of the Diocese of Bougainville.

Kieta:

In 1901 the Marist Fathers Peter Meyer and Eugene Englert arrived in Kieta. The first mass was celebrated by Fr. Meyer on Pokpok Island on the 7th of August 1901. With three Samoan catechists, Fr. Meyer established in 1902 the first school on Bougainville Island at Makaki Point. The establishment of this school was possible because three

¹ Note by the editor: This article continues the discussion begun by the article *The Contribution of Local Catechists to the Marist Mission in Melanesia* in *Forum Novum* 8-9 (2007).

Samoan catechists: Kario, Lino and Kalepo and their wives began teaching there. These three catechists continued their great work until Sr. M. Ignace and Sr. M. Boniface arrived in Kieta in 1904. Students were recruited from as far as Pororan and Buka for Poporang and Kieta.²

Buin:

In 1903 Fr. Jean-Baptiste Perpezat went to Buin and built his house at Kangu. He contracted malaria and became seriously ill. Returning to Poporang he died after a few days.

In 1905 a second attempt was made to start the work in the Buin area. A house was built, this time on the plain. Fathers Jean Rausch (after a couple of years he started the station of Koromira) and Francois Allotte were placed in charge. Mats spread on the earth served as chairs and tables. They began at once to study the language. At this time the natives were mistrustful of the white man. The Father's kindness soon won their confidence. This greatly assisted the Missionaries in their work of pacifying the large district in their care, where some fifty villages were continually at war with their neighbors.³ Did some of the students from the school at Poporang come with them?

For 1908 (See: 'Buin in the South', in *Marist Missions North Solomons*):

"The first two sisters came with three Buin girls who had been at school with the Sisters at Poporang. at the end of the first year there were twenty girls in the Sister's school and a hundred boys in the Fathers' school, but not one child was baptized. Progress was slow in the teaching of prayer and Catechism. It was difficult to accustom the children to rules. They were taught reading, writing, sewing and gardening.

Often they quarreled, beat each other and ran back to the bush. The Sisters had difficulty in contacting the women. While those of Kieta enjoyed a certain amount of liberty, it was customary for Buin women to remain hidden. Women of the Solomons are the slaves of their husbands, who often beat them. When the men were asked to bring their wives to church the men replied that women had no souls, and therefore did not need to go to church! The Sisters visited the bush villages to try to win the women's hearts. As each house was hidden by a little thicket of leaves the work was not easy. It would be impossible to describe the indifference, the

² *Catholic Diocese of Bougainville Centenary*, p. 11.

³ *Marist Missions North Solomons*, the chapter on 'Buin in the South', and also *In Memoriam*, for 17 May.

inattention of these unfortunate women to all that concerned religion. Grace, however, worked gradually in their souls. The first Baptisms gave great happiness to the Missionaries. **In 1909 there were ten schools in the Buin villages in charge of Catechists.** Here and there the natives built chapels and houses hoping that a Missionary would visit them. In 1922 the Buin Mission Station was transferred to the bush, first to Muguai”.

For 1910, Buka Island (see: *Marist Missions North Solomons*):

“Buka is now almost entirely Catholic – 6,000- though it was not until 1910 that Father Forestier, the first Prefect Apostolic of the North Solomons, could appoint two priests, Father Flaus and Father Binois, to establish a station there. The work was begun at Burunotui where the missionaries found themselves among a tribe of cannibals who indulged in savage orgies, killing and devouring their enemies. (In parts of Buka the natives point out certain stones which mark the spot where victims were put to death). **The pioneer priests took with them nine young men from Kieta as catechists.** Their presbytery was built in native fashion out of trees and vines from the forest. At the end of 1910 the newly-opened Mission school for boys had 46 pupils. In June, 1919, Burunotui Mission was transferred to the bush to be nearer the native population.”

Mrs. Alina Longa, Catholic Family Life Coordinator since 2001 for the Diocese of Bougainville, recalls that her grandparents, Paul Bini and Pauline Hasei very often talked about their baptism and wedding at Burunotui (they were baptized by Father Paul Montauban who arrived at the end of 1915 or the beginning of 1916 after Fr. Flaus had left for Australia. They worked in their area (Haku) and village as catechists to train people to say their prayers and prepare them for receiving the sacraments of baptism and confession and first communion. Their first daughter Elizabeth Biasa was born in 1919 after they returned to their village.

During the First World War the Germans lost control over German New Guinea when the Australians took over during the War and became the new administrators after the War. They opened Bougainville to the Methodists who arrived shortly afterwards. They taught in English only and looked down on the Catholic schools as their teachers (catechists and priests) were not fluent in English. The new administration was Australian and spoke English. Therefore the Marist missionaries asked for English speaking Marists to be sent to teach in English at Burenotui. Fr. Wade was ordained in 1922 and in 1923 he arrived in Bougainville.

In *Marist Missions North Solomons* we read in the chapter on Buka Island the following comments:

“Father Wade, later Bishop Wade, arriving from America in 1923, founded the first **general school for catechists** at Burunotui. Previously the Fathers in each station used to train their own catechists. Father Wade was particularly successful with the native boys. He won their hearts immediately by his sympathetic kindness. From 60 to 70 lads from different parts of the islands trained there. They learnt Catechism, Gregorian Chant, reading, writing and arithmetic. The course extended over three years. Successful candidates departed to work as **catechists** in their own villages. Some even volunteered to go to the wild men of the interior. Wherever these boys were placed they conducted the village schools. They called the people to the small chapel to be found in each village, and led morning and evening prayers. They summoned the priest to dying people, baptized infants and the aged who were in danger of death. They were in fact, the Missionaries’ greatest asset. For five years Father Wade built up and consolidated this work. He was then moved to Lemanmanu. After two years in that district he was summoned to Sydney. To his surprise and dismay he was appointed the first Vicar Apostolic of the North Solomons. He was consecrated at St. Patrick’s church, Sydney, on the feast of Christ the King, 1930, by the Apostolic Delegate, Archbishop Cattaneo.”

Fr. John Conley was the second American Marist to arrive in the Bougainville Mission in 1926. After three years in the Buin district at Turiboiru, he was the next 11 years on Buka, first at Burunotui and then at Lemanmanu. In 1939 he began the mission on Nissan.

In 1929 Father Charles Emmet McHardy SM (New Zealand) arrived in Bougainville. He started a **catechist** school at Tunuru for the Kieta Area. He left in 1932 because of ill health (tuberculosis) and died in 1933 in the Home of Compassion in Wellington (New Zealand) at the age of 29.

After Bishop Wade was ordained bishop on 26 October 1930 he returned to Bougainville. A printery was set up at Tarlena. **Catechist training schools** were established at Tarlena and Asitavi. Catechists were also still trained locally in their own parishes.

In 1932 a training school for the initial preparation of young men for the diocesan priesthood (minor seminary) was opened at Chabai in the North of Bougainville by Father James McConville. Two years later Dr. Hennessey came with Bishop Wade from Boston, by permission of Cardinal O’Connel to take over this work. The number of boys

increased to 80. A larger school was built. Dr. Hennessey was loved by all at Chabai, a delightful personality. He exercised a wonderful influence over the students. In 1942 three Marist Brothers continued his work with Brother John, who as principal had begun a similar work at Guadalcanal. Dr. Hennessey, at Bishop Wade's request, assisted in Lemmananu Parish. He was there when the Japanese invaded Buka (*Marist Missions North Solomons*).

In *Melanesian Stories* by Br. Lawrence McCane fms, we read in chapter 5, p. 36:

“Brother Augustine (Mannes) and Donatus (Fitzgerald) reached Chabai at the northern end of Bougainville Island in August 1941, while Brother John (Roberts) needing to finalize matters at Marau, arrived two months later, on 14th October 1941. On arrival, Augustine and Donatus were greeted by the founder of the school, Dr. Hennessy, a remarkable American priest who had established the school five years previously.⁴ Chabai was a **catechetical boarding school, with a curriculum of basic English and Mathematics, religion and practical subjects.** It was well organized, with a good balance of lessons, free time and manual work in the school's extensive food gardens. The school had an enrolment of about 100; it was well regarded and the young men were happy there.”

Tarlana was founded in 1932. The district had been prepared for the new mission station by Father Chaize. The school and convent were opened by the Missionary Sisters. Within a year a dozen pupils attended school. By 1934 there were 35 pupils. Tarlana became the Central Mission station of Buka, the Bishop's place of residence. (see *Marist Missions North Solomons*).

When in the early efforts missionaries moved up the coast of Bougainville island and established themselves on Buka Island, one of the first things they did was to open a catechist school at Burunotui on the North West Coast. This was in 1910. When Fr. Thomas Wade arrived in the mission in 1923 he took over the catechist school and was in charge until 1928. In 1928 he became parish priest in Lemmananu and after two years he was named Vicar Apostolic of the North Solomons in 1930.

Some figures from 1941 from *Marist Missions North Solomons*: Bishop Wade has a staff of 28 Fathers, 8 Lay Brothers, 3 Marist Teaching Brothers, 24 Missionary Sisters of the Society of Mary, 4

⁴ Fr. John McConville had started the school in 1932. Dr Hennessy took over from him after he arrived from Boston.

Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange, and 8 nurses of the Marist Medical mission. He has 500 catechists throughout the Vicariate. There are twenty-two mission stations. At the close of 1941 over 59,000 natives had been baptized.

Throughout the years there were catechist schools in Burunotui, Tunuru, Asitavi, Tarlena, Patupatuai and since the early sixties in Mabiri.

The Second Vatican Council had a great influence on the Church in Bougainville. Besides liturgical changes and attempts of inculturation, the role of laity in the administration of the 'mission stations' was addressed. And immediately we saw the establishment of Parish Councils.

I remember when I spoke of Parish Councils and established the first council at Holy Cross, Piano, one of the catechists told me :” Nau yu subim wok i stap long solde bilong yu long solde bilong mipela” (“Now you put the work that is on your shoulder on our shoulders”).

In 1972 the Self-study took place in the Church in Papua New Guinea. It was organised on the level of the Bishops Conference and the result of this meeting was: “Yumi Yet I Sios” (“We are the Church”). This had a great influence on the development of the Church in Bougainville. The laity was given more responsibility in the Church. The Parish Councils were strengthened, and slowly the idea of Small Christian Communities (“Liklik Kristen Komuniti” or L.K.K.) was developed.

Fr. Günther Koller did a lot of work in this area by creating an awareness, discussing the LKK in priests meetings and trying it out in his parish.

The idea of Liklik Kristen Komuniti caught on and at a Priest Assembly in 1978 the Diocese opted for the pastoral approach of Liklik Kristen Komuniti. Also the term “catechist” was replaced by the term “church worker” who would be involved in various “ministries” in parish and LKK.

The catechist school in Mabiri was started in the early sixties and was developed by Fr. Joe Lamarre. It was first at the beach, but later on it was moved inland a few kilometres. He invited young men and married couples to be trained as catechists. He had a program of three solid years. The aim of the training was to make them teachers of the faith in the villages and to be of assistance to the priest in the villages. Fr. Lamarre tried to bring the Sisters of Nazareth to the catechist school to work with the wives of the catechists, but this didn't eventuate.

In 1973 Fr. Ben Hiss, a Bougainvillean priest, took over the catechist school and gave short inservice courses for catechists who had been trained in the last ten years. Also older catechists who trained in Tarlena or Patupatuai attended.

As the idea of Small Christian Community developed and the laity took more responsibility in the mission of the Church, there was a need for specialized training of church workers engaged in various ministries.

A new team went to the Catechists school; Fr. Harry Moore SM, Sr. Emma SMSM and Sr. Kathleen SMSM. The name of catechist school was changed into "Ministri Skul".

For several years short courses were offered to train church workers in various ministries. By now the ministry of leadership in Parish Council, minister of Communion, ministry of prayer leader, music ministry, and ministry of faith instruction were already very common.

We did not need catechists in the primary schools any more as their teachers were being trained to give Religious Instruction and prepare the children for first communion and confession and also in higher grades for confirmation. This was seen as an integral part of the work of a teacher.

The old style catechist had been a great help to the priests and had been essential in implanting the faith. They worked in the villages as well on the mission stations. They taught catechism, prepared children for first confession and first communion, made sure young people got married, started the singing in church, were leaders of morning and evening prayers, of rosary and other devotions. The catechist accompanied the priest wherever the priest went for a pastoral visit. The catechist informed the priest of what was happening in the village and in the parish. The catechists of old were a great support to the priests and they deserve a lot of respect for the service they gave.

A new time had come and we had to adapt our pastoral approach to the new times. From now on we wanted the church workers to specialize and minister only one ministry.

Our Sunday services without priest ('lotu komunio' or 'lotu baibel') became a team effort: prayer leader, readers, someone who would lead the signing, Eucharistic minister and someone to instruct the people and explain the readings. Others would help in preparing the church and the altar. No one was to double ministries.

In the late seventies and eighties the Diocese was alive with many courses given on parish or area level to prepare volunteers for various ministries. The Lumko method and materials were widely used.

The Buka pastoral team was very active in the Buka area and in all parishes.

In former days catechists received a stipend when they came for the monthly meeting and in service on the first Friday of the month. It was not a payment but a sign of appreciation.

When Bishop Gregory Singkai became bishop in 1974 he was a great promoter of “Yumi yet i Sios”. He supported the involvement of the laity very much. In Papua New Guinea the Diocese of Bougainville became known as the Diocese of the laity. He also propagated the idea that the catechist is serving the community, so in the first place the community has to look after the catechist and not the bishop. As catechists are only part time involved in their church work, Bishop Gregory decided that no payment would be given, but he encouraged the communities to assist their catechists in whatever way they could.

He also stressed that the service catechists gave was voluntary. And certainly now as people are involved in only one ministry, it is very much part time and voluntary, a service to the community. All this is part of the principle “We are Church”.

At the end of 1981 Bishop Gregory asked Fr. Henk Kronenberg SM to become director of the Ministri Skul. Two Marist Missionary Sisters became part of the team: Sr. Rita Edge and Sr. Jill de Montfort.

The new program was discussed with the bishop and the Ministri Skul Board. As we had officially opted for the approach of Small Christian Communities (Liklik Kristen Komuniti or L.K.K.) as the basis of our pastoral plan, we decided that the Ministri Skul should train people who could establish, lead and animate the Liklik Kristen Komuniti. We devised a course of one year: first four months input at the Ministri Skul, then the candidate would go home for two months and put in practise what he had learned and then return to the Ministri skul for another three months. Parishes got used to shorter courses and we were not sure if an extended course would be received well. Some priests were very much against the idea; others showed support. Religious and the lay people generally supported the idea.

The first course was a success and the request came from the parishes to organize another course. In fact the same course was offered for five years. Participants were women as well as men.

During the first three years of the new program, the sisters trained two lay women to eventually take over the task the sisters had on the staff. In 1985 Agnes Posena and Irene Lokea became full staff members and the sisters withdrew from the Ministri Skul.

In 1987 a series of shorter courses were offered to train for various ministries that had developed in the diocese: prayer leader, reader, minister of communion, minister of the Word, choir ministry, baptismal and marriage ministry, ministry to the sick, bible ministry and counselling.

Also in the later part of 1987 the first Diocesan Assembly was held where the church looked at the future of Bougainville and the pastoral program to be followed. The "Small Christian Community" approach was accepted and various committees set up for the different apostolates of the diocese.

The Ministri Skul was able to offer various courses for the next three years. In 1990 an extended bible course was offered by Fr. Roger McCarrick SM, but soon the Ministri Skul had to close because of the 'crisis'.

The Ministri Skul was closed from mid 1990 until 2000. But all those trained throughout the years did a great job during the crisis in their parishes and villages. As priests were scarce and were hindered in their movements, the church workers kept the faith alive. Some became victims of the crisis and were killed by either party, suspected of spying or of helping the enemy. The Diocese is truly proud of the old catechists and the newly trained church workers who exercised their ministry in very difficult circumstances.

In the year 2000 Fr. Bernard Unabali moved to the Ministri Skul and made preparations to reopen it. In 2001 two Missionary Sisters of the Society of Mary returned to Bougainville and joined Fr. Bernard Unabali on the staff, Sr. Kathleen Mercovich and Sr. Noreen Dunne.

Mid 2001 a young man from Taiof Island, Boniface Sabur went to Rome to study at the Collegio Missionario Mater Ecclesiae at Castelgandolfo. This was to prepare him for a position on the staff of the Ministri Skul. This course is organised by the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples. In July 2004 Boniface Sabur received his Baccalaureat in Missionary Catechesis. Upon return from Rome he and Sr. Rita Nahan of the Sisters of Nazareth attended a course in Basic Christian Communities. In February 2005 Boniface joined the staff of the Ministri Skul.

In February 2006 Sr. Rita Nahan CSN, started her studies at Divine Word University in view of being a teacher at the Ministri Skul.

From time to time others are invited to give some input or speak of their experience. Whenever there are no courses at the Ministri Skul the staff is available to assist church workers in deaneries and parishes.

The courses given at the Ministri Skul are short courses to prepare the church workers for the mission in the church of Bougainville in the present time. Here follows the program for the year 2009:

9 – 27 February: Minista bilong Tok Skul - Explaining the readings at a communion or bible service.

16 - 29 March: Nupela Yut Lida. - Youth Leaders from various deaneries.

17 May – 5 June: Siaman bilong Peris Kaunsel - Chairpersons of Parish Councils.

15 – 26 June: Dineri Marit Laip Tim Kos hap 2 - Course on Marriage given by the Family Life Team. Second course.

13 – 24 July: Jastis na painim bel isi long Bougainville. - Justice and Peace especially for Bougainville.

10 – 28 August: Animators and Leaders of the Small Christian Communities.

14 September – 2 October: Baptais Trena. - Training of those who in the deaneries responsible for training parish baptism ministers (those who prepare parents for the baptism of their child).

19 October – 6 November: Minista bilong Komunio. - New Eucharistic Ministers.

The laity takes its rightful place in the Bougainville church. We are proud of our former catechists and the church workers of today who are in great numbers involved in the mission of the church in hamlets, villages, parishes, deaneries and on diocesan level.

Sources: The following resources were consulted together with the memories of different personnel of the Diocese:

Phyllis V. Campell, *Marist Missions North Solomons*, edited by Amy R. Richardson, Sydney December 1943.

Catholic Diocese of Bougainville: 100 years 1901 - 2001. Publication of the Diocese on the occasion of the celebration of the Centenary.

In Memoriam, edition by Theo Koster SM, Suva, April 2001.

Lawrence McCane fms, *Melanesian Stories: Marist Brothers in Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea.*