

BERNARD THOROGOOD KIRIBATI

Bernard took for himself the missionary calling expressed in John 13:14-15

“I give you a new commandment: love one another; as I have loved you, so you are to love one another. If there is this love among you, then everyone will know that you are my disciples. “

His letter of appointment stated that he was to serve the church in the Cook Islands, to be a colleague with the pastors (local ministers) and to train those who would be pastors. There was much to learn about the village life, the church and its traditions and the language to master. The island people loved the Bible but the Polynesian language was strong on active verbs and concrete nouns but very unfitted for the more abstract words that feature so much in theology such as Salvation.

All public occasions opened with prayer and on one occasion Bernard was requested to offer a prayer of dedication at the opening of the new public toilets by the wharf, something not included in the books of prayer or at theological college. Knowing Bernard it would have been well considered and most appropriate.

In 1964, after ten years' service in the Cook Islands of Aitutaki, Raratonga, Takamoā, Bernard was appointed to Tarawa, a coral reef island part of the former British Colony Gilbert and Ellis Islands and now the Republic of Kiribati. The area of the islands was enormous from Banaba in the west to Phoenix and Line islands in the east and costly to administer. For many years phosphate rock was shipped from the island of Banaba to Geelong for use on Australian farms. Betio was the commercial port and the site of the Battle of Betio in WW2 of the USA against Japan.

His job there was to introduce English into the missionary college for the pastors in order to connect with the Melbourne College of Divinity for external exams. He found the Micronesian way of life more self-reliant and not so adaptable to European ways as Polynesia. Each village had a maneaba, (meeting house) where the elders met as a council. The men preferred the traditional skirt to trousers. The Islanders had never become divorced from their village life; even senior bureaucrats would return to their village on annual leave and sail and fish in the old canoes as their forefathers had done.

During Bernard's time in Kiribati the college chapel was built as a memorial to the missionary who was murdered during the WW2 conflict. Bernard's brother Derek, a civil engineer, prepared the plan and the islanders cut coral blocks the material for the walls, with pandanus thatch on the roof of the octagonal building, which still sits among the palms, with the sound of the rollers crashing on the reef a constant background.

Bernard and family returned to England in the 1970's.