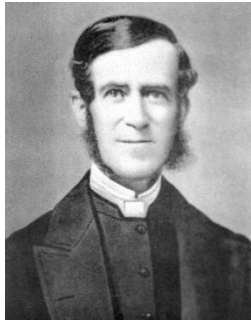


Bellarine
Presbyterian Church



John Geddie (1815-1872)

The Bellarine Highway comes out of Geelong heading for Queenscliff. It passes the Geelong Eastern Cemetery, and a large monument can easily be seen on the left-hand side of the road. It is the monument to John Geddie, pioneer missionary to the New Hebrides (since attaining nationhood in 1980, its name has been Vanuatu).

Geddie was born in Banff in Scotland, but came with his family to Pictou, Nova Scotia, in Canada, when he was very young. He attended Pictou Academy, and was licensed to preach the Gospel by the Presbytery of Pictou in 1837. The only pastorate he held was on Prince Edward Island from 1846 to 1852.

In 1839, Geddie married Charlotte MacDonald, and they had three children. Tragically, two of the children died when their house was burned down in 1846, just before they left for the assigned mission sphere in the New Hebrides. They arrived in 1848 at Anelgauhat on Aneityum, and set up a base there. Aneityum is the southernmost island of the New Hebrides chain. The Geddies were the first foreign missionaries of the Canadian church.

The state of life on the island was very confronting. Geddie reiterated the prayer that Ezekiel had asked many years before: 'Can these bones live?' He drew comfort from the knowledge that the gospel must be preached to every creature; that Christ shall have the heathen for His inheritance and the uttermost parts of the earth for His possession; and that all things are possible with God.

The native religion consisted mainly of fear of the spirits, ghosts, and the sacred men. Geddie's colleague, John Inglis, who arrived in 1852, recorded that the Aneityumese believed in a supreme deity, who created all things, but in practice they feared the ghosts of departed ancestors. The religion comprised mainly placating them through making feasts and offerings. Priests were feared as disease makers. They would obtain a piece of an intended victim's dress or food (e.g., a banana skin), and then burn it with a special, sacred leaf. After the sacred man had prayed, the victim would be afflicted with some kind of disease. Only presents to the sacred man could cure the victim. In addition to such a belief system, there were practices such as infanticide, widow strangulation, and cannibalism.

On 29 March 1851 the only child, a son, of Waihit, a chief on Aneityum, died. Geddie comforted him with the realism and hope of resurrection in 2 Samuel 12:23. Waihit, who was very young in the faith, was strengthened, and used the verse to witness to his heathen neighbours who had been taunting him. Later that year some heathen natives set fire to the Geddies' house, but this proved a turning point. Two disease makers renounced their cult, and on 13 May 1852 thirteen natives were baptized, and so constituted the first Christian church in the New Hebrides. Less than two months later, Rev. John Inglis and his wife, Jessie, arrived to further the cause on Aneityum.

The gospel expanded, and was the forerunner of civilisation on the island. Then the fledgling church was sorely tested – beginning in December 1860 a measles epidemic swept through the island and killed one-third of the population; in March 1861 the fine church and school buildings at Anelgauhat were burnt to the ground; a week later a fierce hurricane struck; and on 20 May 1861 George and Ellen Gordon on the island of Erromanga were tomahawked to death. A year later the mission on Tanna was broken up.

After John Geddie suffered several strokes, the Geddies left the New Hebrides, and took up residence in Geelong, Victoria. Every year he went back for a visit, until his death on 14 December, 1872. John Geddie's epitaph on the pulpit at Aneityum stated: *'When he landed in 1848 there were no Christians here and when he left in 1872 there were no heathens'.*

Allan M. Harman/Peter Barnes