

A MORAVIAN MISSION IN AUSTRALIA: EBENEZER THROUGH ERNABELLA EYES

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Introduction

Despite the failure of early Aboriginal mission in Australia due to pressure on land, disease and the virtual destruction of the societies who were the objects of these early enterprises, colonial authorities largely ignored the plight of Aborigines, being content to leave church missions to struggle on with little aid.¹ Missions were established in many regions of Australia by various denominations and mission societies. Many of these stations survived as major centres of Aboriginal community life. Attitudes towards these endeavours have been polarised between hagiographic accounts praising the sacrifices and achievements of missionaries, and critical voices, from anthropologists for the missionaries' interference with traditional cultures and values, from politicians and public servants for their interference in social programs, from historians for their autocratic control of Aboriginal lives, from Aboriginal people for alleged destruction of cultural heritage and the removal of children from families.²

The anthropologist, Kenelm Burridge sought to rescue the study of missions from this polarisation. Referring to the accounts of social scientists he wrote:

As a result, missionaries emerged more as robots programmed to convert the heathen and making an unholy mess of things in the process than as men and women living difficult lives and, because of their work, facing personal and moral as well as political dilemmas not wholly of their own making.³

Burridge exposed the way in which stereotyping of missionaries has blurred judgments about their endeavours. In *One Blood*, John Harris has analysed the diversity of these endeavours in Australia, and provided evidence supporting Burridge's judgements.⁴

The aim of this paper is to outline and evaluate the contribution of Moravian missionaries at Ebenezer Mission (1859-1904) in the Wimmera district of Victoria by identifying their background and motivations, describing their daily work, outlining problems they encountered and commenting on their relationship with the Aboriginal people. As a participant in the Aboriginal missionary enterprise for 20 years, the

¹ Hilary Carey, *Responses to failure in pre-Victorian missions to the Aborigines of New Holland*, North Atlantic Missiology Project Position Paper Number 26, Cambridge, Westminster College, Cambridge, 1997.

² e.g. Robert Tonkinson, *The Jigalong mob: Aboriginal victors of the desert crusade*, Menlo Park, California, Cummings, 1974; David Trigger, *Whitefella comin': Aboriginal responses to colonialism in northern Australia*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992; Bain Attwood, *The making of the Aborigines*, Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 1989;

³ Kenelm Burridge, *In the way: A study of Christian missionary endeavours*, Vancouver, UBC Press, 1991, xiii.

⁴ John Harris, *One Blood: 200 Years of Aboriginal encounter with Christianity: A story of hope*, Second Revised Edition, Sydney, Albatross Books, 1994.

particular contribution I bring to this study is an emic perspective.⁵ As I read reports and letters of Ebenezer, I am reminded of events from my own experience a century later. Although so much has changed, so much remained the same. Many of the issues faced by those missionaries in the latter half of the nineteenth century were the same as those confronting me and my colleagues at Ernabella Mission a century later. Much of the past seemed so contemporary. Thus I have subtitled this paper, *Ebenezer Through Ernabella Eyes*.

In 1958, a century after the Moravians arrived in the Wimmera, I left my home in that region of Victoria to work at Ernabella Mission, established in 1937 by the Presbyterian Church in the north-west of South Australia. Dr. Charles Duguid, the advocate for the establishment of Ernabella laid down the following principles:

There was to be no compulsion nor imposition of our way of life on the Aborigines, nor deliberate interference with tribal custom ... only people trained in some particular skill should be on the mission staff, and ... they must learn the tribal language.⁶

While there were significant differences between the philosophies, locations, historical contexts and outcomes of Ebenezer and Ernabella, both missions belonged to a tradition of Presbyterian missionary enterprise with an historical continuum.⁷ There were many similarities between the two missions; — their locations near watercourses, the church buildings, baptisms, the gardens, sheep enterprises, schools, clinics, building, picnics in the bush, caring for people in times of sickness and death, meagre resources and limited government support. When visiting the Ebenezer site beside the Wimmera River and looking at the restored church building with its square tower, my mind visualises the Ernabella church with a similar tower, situated on the banks of the Ernabella Creek. From my memories of life at Ernabella I imagine the day-to-day scenes on the Moravian mission at Ebenezer a century earlier.

Who were the Moravians?

Moravia is a province of what is now the Czech Republic. Christianity was introduced there in 863 by two brothers, Cyril and Methodius, from the Greek Church of Constantinople. The Moravians trace their heritage to Jan Hus, a peasant's son born in 1369 who was educated at the University of Prague. He became rector of the university and ordained a priest in 1402. He preached at the Bethlehem Chapel, which had been erected in 1391 as a place for preaching in Czech language. Hus opposed the selling of indulgences which were introduced into Bohemia and Moravia in 1411. He was excommunicated in 1412. Tricked into meeting with cardinals in Constance in 1415, he was burned at the stake on 6 July 1415. His followers met in the fields and despite periods of severe persecution and divisions within the movement, the Hussite movement survived and gained strength. The Moravian Church was established in 1457. The group called themselves *Jednota Bratrska* - a unity of Brethren. The Latin title, *Unitas Fratrum*, was used in legal documents.

⁵ Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological insights for missionaries*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Baker Book House, 94. 'Anthropologists refer to this insider's perspective as an 'emic' view of a culture.'

⁶ Charles Duguid, *Doctor and the Aborigines*, Adelaide, Rigby, 1972, 115.

⁷ Bill Edwards, Reflections on Presbyterian Aboriginal missions in Australia, in M Hutchinson & G Treloar (eds), *This gospel shall be preached: Essays on the Australian contribution to world mission*, Sydney, Centre for the study of Australian Christianity, 1998.

The Moravians survived through alternating periods of freedom and intense persecution. Some followers sought refuge in Poland and other nearby states. On 21 June 1621, 'The Day of Blood', several noblemen who followed the Brethren were executed in the Old Town Square in Prague. White crosses painted on the pavement mark the site. As persecution continued, groups of Moravians met in the woods of Bohemia and Moravia. In 1722, a small band of members of two families, led by Christian David, fled over the border from Bohemia into Saxony. The small band sought refuge on the estate of a German Pietist, Count Nicholas von Zinzendorf.

Pietism was a movement within the Lutheran Church, led by Philip Spener (d.1705) and August Francke (1663-1727). They advocated a simple religion of the heart with emphasis on Bible reading, the priesthood of all believers, the need for a conversion experience and fellowship. Francke advocated foreign mission work and established the Danish-Halle mission in 1705. Zinzendorf, born in 1700, was educated at Francke's School in Halle and in 1719 underwent a deep spiritual experience when visiting the Art Gallery in Dusseldorf. He viewed the painting *Ecce Homo* by Domenico Feti, with its crown of thorns. Zinzendorf prayed that he might be drawn into the 'fellowship of His sufferings.' Zinzendorf welcomed the refugees and allowed them to build a village, Herrnhut, on his estate near his castle at Berthelsdorf. A plaque marks the spot where the first tree was cut down. The Herrnhut model of a village as a Christian community for oppressed refugee people influenced later Moravian missionary work. A feature of the settlements initiated by Zinzendorf was a choir system under which 'people lived in groups according to age, sex and marital status'.⁸

Zinzendorf assumed leadership of the settlement and moulded together the traditions of Moravian zeal, practical service and simplicity, the devotion and scholarship of German pietism and his own commitment to worldwide mission. Following divisions in the movement, there was a deep experience on 13 August 1727 during Holy Communion. Moravians look back to this as the beginning of a renewed *Unitas Fratrum*. Although Zinzendorf wanted the movement to remain within the Lutheran church, internal and external pressures led to the recognition of the Moravians as a separate church in 1742. Other Christians, dissatisfied with the formalism of established churches were attracted to the movement. Zinzendorf's contacts and influence as a Count opened up the way for Moravians to commence missions in Greenland and the West Indies. This expanded later to North, Central and South America, South Africa, East Africa, the Gold Coast, Tibet and Jerusalem.

Zinzendorf and the Moravians influenced John Wesley, William Carey, the founder of Baptist missions, and William Wilberforce. Moravians gained a high reputation for their zeal and dedication. They had a special concern, according to the mission historian, Stephen Neill: 'to go to the most remote and unfavourable, and neglected parts of the surface of the earth'.⁹ The Aborigines of Australia were seen to fit this description and following the failure of early Aboriginal missions, the Moravians were invited to accept this challenge. In 1848 the Moravian Synod in Saxony accepted an invitation, issued through the Moravian London Association, to commence work in the Port Phillip District.

Lake Boga

⁸ David Schattschneider, 'William Carey, Modern missions and the Moravian influence', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 22: 1, January 1998, 9.

⁹ Stephen Neill, *A history of Christian missions*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1964, 237.

The Superintendent of the Port Phillip District, Charles La Trobe, was the brother of Peter La Trobe, the Moravian agent in London. Their father, Charles Ignatius La Trobe, was a Moravian minister in London. The invitation was supported by the Church of England Bishop, Charles Perry, Presbyterians and members of other churches in the colony. The first Moravian enterprise in Australia at Lake Boga was short lived and suffered the fate of earlier missions. The Rev. Fred Tager and a lay Brother, Johann Friedrich Spieseke, arrived in Melbourne on 25 February 1850. They arrived at Lake Boga near Swan Hill and on 21 October 1851. Opposition from local settlers, delays in receiving title to land from the government and disruptions caused by the discovery of gold in the colony hindered their efforts to encourage Aboriginal people to settle permanently at the mission and to educate the children and train the adults in gardening and agriculture. Brother Paul Hansen joined them in 1853 but the breaking down of fences and disturbances caused by travellers to gold fields led the missionaries to depart in May 1856. The Moravian Mission Board, unaccustomed to such retreats, expressed their disapproval.¹⁰

Ebenezer Mission

Despite this disappointment, the Moravians reported in December 1857 that there was hope of re-establishing a mission to the Aborigines.¹¹ The Governor of Victoria, Sir Henry Barkly, offered government support and suggested that the work be transferred to the Wimmera River area where there were less white settlers. Distance from the more heavily populated white settlements would offer security rather than tyranny, just as remoteness of the Pitjantjatjara region in north-west South Australia ensured them this security of distance for another century. The Unity's Elders' Conference accepted the invitation and re-appointed Spieseke who they believed, 'had acquired a considerable knowledge both of the language and habits of the aborigines'.¹² On his return from Lake Boga he was ordained a deacon at Herrnhut in January 1858. Friedrich August Hagenauer, who was to become the longest serving Moravian in Australia, was appointed to accompany Spieseke. Born in 1829 in Saxony, he was ordained a deacon in January 1858.

Spieseke and Hagenauer arrived in Melbourne on 7 May 1858. The difficulty of their task was acknowledged: 'The fate which, in all probability awaits the natives of New Holland since Europeans have gained a firm footing among them, certainly affords but little encouragement for missionary effort'.¹³ Despite this prediction the missionaries saw it as a further motivation for their work. Their efforts would be worthwhile if only a few souls were won for Christ. Encouraged by support from the Governor of Victoria and Bishop Perry of the Church of England, they left Melbourne on 15 June 1858 to inspect sites in the Wimmera. Major Thomas Mitchell, on his 1836 expedition from Sydney, named the region in western Victoria, 'Australia Felix'. He named the Grampians ranges and applied the local Aboriginal name, Wimmera, to 'a flowing stream'. Mitchell wrote: 'Of this Eden I was the first European to explore its mountains and streams ... and by my survey, to develop those natural advantages,

¹⁰*Periodical Accounts relating to the missions of the Church of the United Brethren established among the heathen, London, The Brethren's society, 22, 1857, 204.*

¹¹*Periodical Accounts, 22, 1857, 361.*

¹²*Periodical Accounts, 22, 1857, 361.*

¹³*Periodical Accounts, 23, 1858, 66.*

certain to become, at no distant date, of vast importance to a new people'.¹⁴ The Moravians were called to serve the dire needs of the original people of the region.

The introduction into the region of grazing stock led to clashes between settlers and Aborigines as Aborigines killed stock and settlers retaliated by shooting Aborigines. In turn Aborigines killed isolated shepherds and other Europeans. In April 1845 the Protector of Aborigines, George Robinson visited the region in an attempt to reconcile the settlers and Aborigines. He noted: 'Every spot where Water and grass is met with is being occupied, hence the situation of the Aborigines must, if driven from their waterholes especially in dry seasons, be perilous and truly pitiable'.¹⁵ Horatio Ellerman and John Shaw settled at Antwerp in 1846. Ellerman, born in Antwerp, Belgium in 1822, emigrated to Sydney in 1839. In February 1846 Ellerman, finding sheep missing from Antwerp station, led a punitive party in pursuit of a group of Aborigines. At Banjibunag on the Wimmera River a shot was fired, killing an Aboriginal woman. The Aborigines fled, leaving the dead woman's young son. Ellerman took him home and raised him.¹⁶ Ellerman became a significant figure in the Presbyterian Church in the Wimmera and, as an advocate for Aboriginal causes, was one of the Moravian's closest advisers. Clark suggests that his change of attitude may have developed because of contact with the Aboriginal boy. A deepening Christian commitment, following the accidental shooting and recovery of a friend in 1857, probably contributed to this change.¹⁷

Travelling to the region between June and August 1858, via Geelong, Ballarat and Ararat, Spieseke and Hagenauer inspected sites at Mt Zero at the northern end of the Grampians and near Horsham. Following local advice they continued on to Ellerman's Antwerp station to inspect a site on the banks of the Wimmera River. They were pleased with what they saw: - the river with an abundance of water, wood and stones for building and land suitable for agriculture. They envisaged 'the rows of cottages, the church, the school, the fields and gardens, and the poor blacks flocking to hear the Word of Life'.¹⁸ The missionaries returned to Melbourne to negotiate title to land but faced official reluctance to setting apart more land for an Aboriginal reserve. Eventually a section of 260 acres was made available. Ellerman added a section of land from Antwerp station and persuaded two neighbours to do the same.¹⁹ Spieseke and Hagenauer returned to Antwerp and stayed as guests of the Ellermans, established contacts with local Aborigines and held services in Ellerman's woolshed. In February 1859 Hagenauer expressed pleasure that local Aborigines had indicated a desire to have a fixed place of residence and intended to perform a corroboree to honour the coming of the two missionaries.²⁰

Commencement of Ebenezer

¹⁴ Kathleen Fitzpatrick, *Australian explorers: A selection from their writings*. London, Oxford University Press, 1958, 139.

¹⁵ G.A. Robinson, *Australia Felix -Report of a journey of 1100 Miles to the tribes of the N.W. and Western Interior, 1845*, Mitchell Library, Manuscript Collection. 7-8.

¹⁶ Ian D Clark, *Aboriginal languages and clans: An historical atlas of Western and Central Victoria, 1800-1900*, Melbourne, Monash University, 1990, 341.

¹⁷ Clive Morey, *Presbytery of Wimmera: History to 1968*, Nhill, 1968.

¹⁸ *Periodical Accounts*, 23, 1859, 123.

¹⁹ M.H. Fels, *A history of the Ebenezer Mission*, Occasional Report no 51, Aboriginal Affairs Victoria, 1998, 4.

²⁰ *Periodical Accounts*, 23 1859, 166

Spieseke and Hagenauer commenced work on 10 January 1859, clearing ground and cutting wood for the construction of their first hut. Hagenauer compared the felling of the first tree with Christian David's similar act at Herrnhut in 1722. They travelled daily from Antwerp station to the new site. A week later Hagenauer commenced a school with three pupils, finding this contact helpful in learning the local language. The missionaries did not name the language in their reports. It is now identified as the Wotjobaluk dialect of the Wergaia language group.²¹ On 9 May 1859 Hagenauer reported that they had taken up residence in their log hut.²² In June he wrote of the need to learn the language to communicate with the older people.²³ While the Moravians attitude to language was positive, their impressions of the Aborigines' 'heathenish and barbarous customs', reflected prevailing views.²⁴

In the early months at Ebenezer a small group resided on the site and attended daily services. Two young men, Boney and Pepper, assisted in the building of the hut and built one for themselves. In September 1859, when Spieseke was absent in Melbourne, a group of 75 to 80 people arrived. The following month ceremonies were held and a dispute arose over Hagenauer's refusal to give rations to people who had not worked. The people refused to attend a service and displayed hostility, responding to Hagenauer's invitation with the words: 'Pray tomorrow'. Hagenauer retired to his hut to pray. Ellerman arrived unexpectedly and resolved the dispute.²⁵

Uncertainty about title to the land continued, despite friendly overtures from Governor Barkly. The Board of Land and Works had not resolved the issue. Peter La Trobe wrote to the Mission Secretary in Herrnhut, L.T. Reichel, advising that the unsettled political situation in the colony delayed progress:

It was expected however that Mr O'Shanassy's ministry would not last long: but that they would be ousted by the new parliament, an assembly, in which stonemasons, innkeepers & the like, seem to have taken the place of men of education and standing in society. The democratic experiment appears to have been a great blunder in Victoria -- the colony was not ripe for it.²⁶

In February 1860, Spieseke advised the Mission Secretary in Saxony that their sphere of work did not offer the stories of triumph as in other mission fields. There was little to offer encouragement, with the Aboriginal population declining, and a general view in the European community that the people were depraved and beyond redemption. However Spieseke affirmed that it 'was a duty of Christian love to extend a helping hand to a race which is rapidly dying out', and that through faith in God, change for the better was possible.²⁷ He was encouraged by the interest shown by the young men Pepper and Boney. In the same month he returned from a visit to other stations to find Pepper preaching to a group of about 50 people in his own language.²⁸ Following the death of a young man, Blucher, on 15 February 1860,

²¹ Clark, 341.

²² *Periodical Accounts*, 23, 1859, 217.

²³ *Periodical Accounts*, 23, 1859, 218.

²⁴ *Periodical Accounts*, 23, 1860, 336.

²⁵ Susan Robertson, 'The bell sounds pleasantly', in E.W. Wiebusch (ed), *Yearbook of the Lutheran Church of Australia 1977*, Adelaide, Lutheran Publishing House, 1977, 39.

²⁶ Herrnhut Archive, Rubrik 15 V 1A5. This Archive is situated in Herrnhut, Saxony, Germany

²⁷ *Periodical Accounts*, 23, 1860, 405.

²⁸ *Periodical Accounts*, 23, 1860, 469.

Pepper and another young man, Dallio, told the missionaries of dreams they had in which heaven opened and angels appeared.²⁹ Dreams are significant for Aboriginal people, and in a conservative society, dreams were a way of validating change. A century later in the Pitjantjatjara region, dreams provided confirmation for changes in burial practices and, in one instance, a dream similar to that of Pepper's led to the baptism of an older man.³⁰

In a letter of 1 May 1860 Spieseke expressed pleasure that the settlement which had been a wilderness now presented a pleasing aspect.³¹ This theme of transformed wilderness was central in the historical presentation of the Australia frontier. The anthropologist, Deborah Bird Rose, in analysing her Aboriginal informants' references to 'wilderness' and 'quiet country' has demonstrated the 'contrasts between European and Aboriginal ways of talking about similar phenomena'.³² Her research suggests that the residents of Ebenezer would have viewed the encroaching white settlement as turning their familiar settled habitat into a wilderness.

On 2 May 1860, there occurred an event which the missionaries saw as pivotal in awakening interest in the Christian message at Ebenezer.³³ Hagenauer later recalled sitting in the mission hut with several young men following a period of instruction in preparation for baptism. He took out a pamphlet given to him by Peter La Trobe. Hagenauer began to read the story of an Aboriginal boy found wandering the streets of Melbourne in approximately 1850. Other children took him to St James School where the Rev S L Chase befriended him. Three months later Chase took the boy to England. The boy received instruction and was baptised and given the name William Wimmera. He had been reticent about his past but said that his country was the Wimmera, that his master was a Mr. Ellerman, that his mother had been shot by a white man and that he had become ill and taken to Melbourne on a wool-dray. There he became lost.

Willie Wimmera became ill in England, died on 10 March 1852 aged eleven years, and was buried in Reading churchyard. The young men were very attentive as Hagenauer read the story and the atmosphere was electrified when he read the words: 'My country is the Wimmera, my master is Mr. Ellerman and my mother was shot by a white man'. The men began weeping and one said: 'That was Jim Crow, I was with him when his mother fell dead on the ground'. He pointed to another youth and said: 'That is his little brother, and outside in the camp is his old father, Dowler, and all of us are his cousins'. By coincidence, the mission had been established on the site of this killing. The men showed Hagenauer the grave of Willie's mother. For Hagenauer this was no coincidence: 'It was God's wonderful guidance ... it was His mysterious plan that we should erect our Ebenezer on the very spot which became so sacred to us.'

The First Baptism at Ebenezer

²⁹*Periodical Accounts*, 23, 1860, 471.

³⁰ William H. Edwards, *Recovering spirit: Exploring Aboriginal spirituality*, Adelaide. Charles Strong Memorial Trust, 2002, 18.

³¹*Periodical Accounts*, 23, 1860, 471.

³² Deborah B. Rose, Exploring an Aboriginal land ethic, in W.H. Edwards, (ed) *Traditional Aboriginal society*, Melbourne, Macmillan, 1998, 295.

³³*Periodical Accounts*, 30, 1878, 381-86; 34, 1887. 100-103.

The Moravians, influenced by Zinzendorf, emphasised the importance of the 'first fruits', the first souls to respond to the missionary preaching.³⁴ Thus there was great rejoicing when the discussions with Pepper led to his baptism on Sunday, 12 August 1860.³⁵ Neighbouring settlers and friends from Horsham joined the missionaries and Ebenezer residents to attend the service in the church. Amongst the guests were two men who had been significant in the story of Willie Wimmera, Horatio Ellerman, and the Rev. Lloyd Chase from Melbourne, who preached at the service. Pepper was given the baptismal name of Nathaniel.³⁶

In December 1859 Ellerman had written to Peter La Trobe commending the missionaries' work but suggesting that they needed the support of wives who would contribute to the training of the women.³⁷ The Moravian system of choirs facilitated arranged marriages and in May 1861 Spieseke journeyed to Melbourne to meet two Moravian Sisters who arrived from Germany to marry the missionaries. Spieseke married Sister Christina Fricke in St Paul's Church, Melbourne, on 29 May. Hagenauer married Sister Louise Knobloch in the same church on 15 June. Chase presided at both ceremonies. The missionaries' wives brought a new element to the life of Ebenezer as they interacted with the Aboriginal women, teaching them sewing, reading and housekeeping.

While in Melbourne Hagenauer was asked to undertake a tour to report to the Presbyterian Missions Committee on the possibility of opening a mission in Gippsland. At Ebenezer, sickness among the Aborigines gave concern. A Report in 1861 stated 'Not unfrequently nine-tenths of all the natives who are here are laid up with sickness'.³⁸ In the course of fourteen months, out of 300 natives inhabiting the Wimmera district, 43 had died. On a more positive note, in 1861 the uncertainty about the mission's land was resolved with a Crown grant issued for 1897 acres.³⁹

Despite the widely held opinion that Aboriginal people were ineducable, the missionaries, reflecting Moravian tradition, gave education a high priority. Spieseke wrote: 'That the aborigines are by no means wanting in natural capabilities I feel assured, and if only they could be favoured with regular and uninterrupted instruction, they would soon prove this'.⁴⁰ A boy and girl, aged nine and eight respectively, had in a fortnight become acquainted with the alphabet and learned by heart the Lord's Prayer and some scripture passages. A century later, the Ernabella Mission school was the only provider of education for Pitjantjatjara children and its policy of vernacular education enabled children to gain literacy skills quickly. In the same letter Spieseke reiterated the rule of the mission that while food was given to children, the aged and the infirm, others received assistance only as a reward for their labour, a rule still applying at Ernabella in the early 1960s.

A visiting member of Parliament, Robert Gillespie, MLA was impressed with the work of the missionaries and with the work done by the Aborigines and their general demeanour:

³⁴ David A. Schattschneider, *Pioneers in mission: Zinzendorf and the Moravians*, *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 8: 1, April 1984, 65.

³⁵ *Periodical Accounts*, 23, 1860, 536.

³⁶ This name was later written as Nathanael.

³⁷ Herrnhut Archive, Rubrik 15 V 1A5

³⁸ *Periodical Accounts*, 23, 1861, 178.

³⁹ Anne Longmire, *Nine Creeks to Albacutya: A history of the Shire of Dimboola*, Melbourne, Hargreen Publishing Company, 1985, 9.

⁴⁰ *Periodical Accounts*, 24, 1861, 174.

They are generally orderly and well behaved. After visiting them at their work, and looking into one of their huts, I found six or seven young men waiting, dressed like Europeans in clean clothes, their boots blackened and polished and their hair combed ... Some of their faces are really intelligent and prepossessing, besides indicating much gentleness of spirit.⁴¹

The criteria for judging success changed over the next 100 years, but a century later, the Premier of South Australia, Don Dunstan, was to write favourably of Ernabella: 'The best of the situations in the north-west were at Ernabella and Fregon. This was the outstanding Christian mission for Aborigines in Australia.'⁴²

Brother Job Francis arrived on 2 November 1861 to replace Hagenauer, who had been appointed to the new work in Gippsland. Francis took responsibility for the school with sixteen scholars. Spieseke wrote in February 1862 of plans for a dining hall, a house for the children and a hospital. He reiterated the recurring theme of their letters and reports that these endeavours were aimed 'to ameliorate the condition of these poor people in the last days of their existence as a race'.⁴³ At the same time the missionaries aimed to train them in the customs of civilisation and occasionally invited some to drink tea with them.⁴⁴ This comment resonated with our experience of inviting members of the Ernabella Choir to have meals in our house in preparation for their tour of Victoria and South Australia in 1966.

A baby daughter, Helen, was born to the Spiesekes on 10 March 1862 and baptised eleven days later. An Aboriginal man of 40 years, Paton, was also baptised. He died two weeks later. Although Spieseke wished to bury him near the church he agreed to the demands of the people to allow a customary burial. They allowed Spieseke to read a litany at the graveside. This resonates with experiences at Ernabella a century later, where under the policy of minimal interference, the Pitjantjatjaras continued traditional burial rituals while gradually incorporating Christian elements. In July 1862 Nathanael spoke at a meeting of the Moravian Missionary Association in Melbourne, chaired by the Governor. Nathanael's interest encouraged the missionaries but their Diary continued to reflect the themes of death, illness, movement of the people, lack of interest in their message and drunkenness due to proximity of a tavern. In April 1863 Spieseke confirmed his desire to remain steadfast in the work committed to him and reflected the Moravian philosophy of mission when he acknowledged that they would not see great rewards for their labours, 'but if only some of them attain to living faith in Jesus, and show forth His saving power, I shall deem our labours more than compensated'.⁴⁵

An Aboriginal women, Rachel, trained at a school in Albany, Western Australia, travelled to Victoria to be married to Nathanael on 21 May 1863. This arranged marriage reflected the Moravian tradition as exemplified in the marriages of Spieseke and Hagenauer. Nathanael and Rachel assisted in the Sunday School. Other young people were baptised. By the end of 1864 it was reported that 'Ebenezer is

⁴¹ Quoted in Robertson, 45.

⁴² Don Dunstan, *Felicia: The political memoirs of Don Dunstan, South Melbourne, Macmillan Company*. 112.

⁴³ *Periodical Accounts*, 24, 1862, 318.

⁴⁴ *Periodical Accounts*, 24, 1862, 320.

⁴⁵ *Periodical Accounts*, 24, 1863, 665.

rapidly assuming the aspect of a neat, well-ordered Christian village'.⁴⁶ Another young couple, Philip and Rebecca, assisted and encouraged the missionaries, Philip working as an evangelist among his own people.

On 28 December 1863, in Fairfield, England, a German Moravian, Brother Adolphus Hartmann, married Sister Mary Hines whose father had been Principal of a Moravian School in Northamptonshire.⁴⁷ They sailed for Australia on 22 January 1864 to serve at Ebenezer. Mary taught the girls in the school and Adolph engaged in a variety of practical tasks with cows, sheep and the water supply. Francis had left Ebenezer and was appointed by the Church of England to Lake Condah Mission in the Western District of Victoria. By the beginning of 1865 eight persons had been baptised at Ebenezer with others receiving instruction as candidates for baptism. The Hartmanns were teaching 26 children in the school.⁴⁸

The Melbourne Moravian Committee invited the Moravians to open up a new work in the Cooper's Creek region of South Australia and four German Moravians arrived in Melbourne in November 1864. While awaiting approval for the new mission they were placed at Ebenezer and Ramahyuck to gain experience. Brothers H. Walder and G. Meissel travelled to Ebenezer and Meissel assisted the Hartmanns in the school. Hartmann found that while the younger children showed facility in oral and written English, the older ones who were accustomed to speaking in their own tongue 'have to study a new language when learning to read'.⁴⁹ While his scholars were making progress with addition of numbers, subtraction remained a mystery to all but one or two. These pioneer missionary teachers were experiencing problems which were still confounding teachers in remote Aboriginal schools well over a century later. Nancy Sheppard who taught at Ernabella and Fregon from 1955 to 1963, later wrote: 'At Ernabella a lot more effort was spent trying to explain and demonstrate mathematical concepts, than would have been necessary in most other Australian schools.'⁵⁰ Walder and Meissel left Ebenezer on 1 April 1865, taking with them a young man Daniel who was to accompany them, to Cooper's Creek. Daniel became ill on the way and died in South Australia.

More baptisms were celebrated in July 1865 with local settlers attending the service and providing provisions for a meal. A few days after the baptism service, one of the candidates, a man named Lanky, died unexpectedly, although he had been ill for some time. Before his death he had expressed a wish to be buried close to the church. This provided the Moravians with the opportunity to set apart an area near the church as 'God's acre', the name given to their burial grounds in Herrnhut, Bethlehem, and other Moravian settlements.⁵¹ Hartmann's report of this incident bears a striking resemblance to incidents surrounding death at Ernabella in the Pitjantjatjara region of South Australia over a century later, when Aboriginal Christians with a premonition of imminent death requested burial near the mission and told their relatives not to wait for them.⁵²

⁴⁶ *Periodical Accounts*, 24, 1864, 286.

⁴⁷ Undated note in Mary Hartmann's handwriting, Hartmann Collection, Moravian Archives, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

⁴⁸ *Periodical Accounts*, 25, 1865, 409

⁴⁹ *Periodical Accounts*, 25, 1865, 466.

⁵⁰ Nancy Sheppard, *Sojourn on another planet*, Adelaide: Gillingham Printers, 2004, 20-21.

⁵¹ *Periodical Accounts*, 25, 1865, 510.

⁵² W.H. Edwards, 'The gospel and Aboriginal culture', *Interchange*, 24, 1978, 203.

The Rev Patrick Simpson of the Presbyterian Church in Horsham assisted at the baptism service. He wrote to Peter La Trobe in London advising that he had obtained a grant of £30 from the Presbyterian Mission Board to Nathanael and Philip in evangelism and teaching. In contrast to widespread disregard of the rights and needs of dispossessed Aborigines, Simpson wrote: 'I have long felt the remissness of the Christian Church in the matter of the Blacks to be just shameful'.⁵³

The missionaries continued their efforts to provide an economic base for the mission. In November 1865 Spieseke advised that their flock had produced 2000 lbs of wool and 400 lbs of skins. Hartmann's practical skills were utilised in the construction of a home-made windmill to pump water from the river to irrigate the garden by means of iron pipes.⁵⁴ A century later at Ernabella it was still necessary to raise finance through pastoral development, as little funding was available from government sources. In July 1965 120 bales of wool sold for a top price of 54 pence with most bales bringing between 45 and 50 pence.⁵⁵

Aboriginal Issues in Victoria

In October 1866 Spieseke raised issues which were at the heart of the Aboriginal situation in Victoria. He noted that many who had led wandering lives were now dying in misery while the settlers enjoyed good health. The recovery of a woman, Magdalene, encouraged him in the hope that 'the blacks' can be rescued, and we earnestly long to see more done for them'. He recognised that dependence on charity hindered progress. Aboriginal people were asking him: 'Why are we to have no land at all'?⁵⁶ Although local settlers supported the mission, their presence and fencing of land destroyed the traditional economic life of the Wotjobaluk. The missionaries attempted to provide alternatives. In 1867, Hartmann constructed a larger windmill to replace one destroyed in a storm. Its usefulness had been proved in 1866 with the production of water-melons, apricots, peaches, grapes, rock-melons and other fruits and vegetables.⁵⁷ The people were encouraged to cultivate their own gardens along the river bank. In January 1868 the population was 95 with encouraging attendances at services and school, and the village growing, with seven houses under construction to add to existing stone houses and bark huts. The Spiesekes had five girls and two young women living with them. A children's home was needed.

At the Annual Meeting of the Moravian Missions Committee in Melbourne in September 1867 Spieseke draw attention to abuses suffered by Aborigines. He pleaded for a just application of laws, and acknowledging the growing prosperity of Victoria, concluded: 'But let the Aborigines have a decent share'.⁵⁸ Such challenges were rare in colonial Victoria. For the first ten years of Ebenezer a local Committee had assisted the Moravian Mission Board in Saxony to administer the mission. In 1868 negotiations between the Presbyterian Church and the Moravians led to the handing over of the mission to the Presbyterian Chinese and Aboriginal Missions Committee, with the Moravians to continue providing staff.

⁵³ Herrnhut Archive Rubrik 15 V 1A5.

⁵⁴ *Periodical Accounts*, 26, 1865, 28.

⁵⁵ W.H. Edwards, Ernabella letters Number 333. (Letters written from Ernabella by the author of this paper to his parents in Stawell, Victoria. They are held by the author).

⁵⁶ *Periodical Accounts*, 26, 1866, 195.

⁵⁷ *Periodical Accounts*, 26, 1867, 235.

⁵⁸ Quoted in Robertson, 69-70.

A death which was the occasion of great sadness at Ebenezer was that of Rachel Pepper, who died in the Pleasant Creek Hospital on 23 March 1869.⁵⁹ Her grieving husband, Nathanael, later moved to Ramahyuck Mission to assist Hagenauer.

In 1870 the missionaries forwarded to the Board for the Protection of Aborigines several letters, written by Ebenezer residents, including Philip Pepper, requesting more land. The Board at first disapproved of this action but eventually agreed to provide land to expand the sheep enterprise.⁶⁰ A letter from Hartmann to his in-laws in England of 21 February 1870 provides insights into the personal lives of the missionaries. He quoted from correspondence with George Mackie, Convenor of the Presbyterian Missions Committee. Hartmann had sought assistance in finding and purchasing a piano. He could pay £5 from savings from the £2 of pocket money they obtained per annum, and hoped to obtain help from friends in England. Mackie obtained a piano from Mr. Glen, Music Seller of Collins St, for £27.10.0. Mackie wrote: 'You can send what you can out of your large salary, & I will try & get the rest from friends who are able to pay for it'.⁶¹ Hartmann and his wife were to find the recreation of playing the piano and singing, a relief from the busyness of their lives. This incident reminded me of the purchase on my first furlough from Ernabella in 1961 of a Beale Piano from Savery's, Rundle St., Adelaide for £175, to assist in training the Ernabella Choir.

Dick-a-Dick

On 3 September 1870, a man known as Dick-a-Dick died at Ebenezer. He was involved in two significant events in Victorian history. In August 1864 three young children, Jane, Isaac and Frank Duff had wandered from Spring Hill station near Apsley, west of the Grampians, and become lost. Jane, aged seven protected her younger brothers against rain, frosts and hunger. Three Aboriginal men brought from the Kaniva region found the children on the ninth day of their time in the bush. One of the men was Dick-a-Dick. This event became celebrated and the story was retold to generations of children (including the writer) through Victoria's Grade IV Reader.⁶²

Dick-a-Dick was a member of the first cricket team from Australia to tour England. Cricket became a popular past-time for pastoralists and station workers in the Edenhope-Apsley region and Aboriginal workers participated in matches. An Aboriginal team was formed and after playing games in Melbourne and Sydney, they visited England, playing 47 games against a variety of teams between May and October 1868. The players provided other entertainments such as spear throwing while Dick-a-Dick was noted for running backwards and avoiding cricket balls thrown at him by using a shield. Mulvaney wrote that the cheerful Dick-a-Dick vanished back into his tribal bushland and that a Kaniva district historian had recorded that he was last seen at a race meeting on Mt. Elgin station in 1884.⁶³ However, Spieseke recorded that Dick-a-Dick on his return from England came to

⁵⁹ Robertson, 96. Pleasant Creek is now part of the township of Stawell.

⁶⁰ *Periodical Accounts*, 27, 1870, 409.

⁶¹ Hartmann Collection, Moravian Archives, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Underlining as in the original letter.

⁶² Peter Pierce, *The country of the lost children: An Australian anxiety*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, 27. The mother of the writer of this paper, as a child in Horsham, visited the home of Jane Turnbull, formerly Jane Duff, to hear her story of this experience.

⁶³ D.J. Mulvaney, *Cricket walkabout: The Australian Aboriginal cricketers on tour 1867-8*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1967, 73.

Ebenezer with his wife Amelia. He became ill and returned to his home region where his condition deteriorated. He went back to Ebenezer and confessed his faith in Jesus.⁶⁴ He was baptised on his sick-bed on 30 July 1870.⁶⁵ Amelia, died a few months later.⁶⁶

Children at Ebenezer

In April 1871 Spieseke reported that there were 26 children under the age of thirteen at Ebenezer. Later that year he visited Pleasant Creek to pick up some neglected children and in December they had 34 children, most of them referred to as destitute orphans.⁶⁷ Philip and Rebecca Pepper cared for these children. In April 1872 the population was over a hundred and supporters petitioned for more land. This was opposed by squatters. More Europeans, including a significant German influx, were settling in the region and land previously thought most suitable for grazing was being developed for agriculture. Mary Hartmann's health was a matter of concern and the Hartmanns left in March 1872 to return to England. They later spent 25 years as Moravian missionaries in Canada. They were replaced in 1872 by Rev John Heinrich Stähle and his wife Maria. Stähle assisted in the school. Their stay at Ebenezer was to be brief and tragic, a tombstone near the church bearing witness to Maria's death in childbirth on 16 October 1872 and of the death of the baby, also named Maria, on 14 November. Stähle moved to Coranderrk government station in Gippsland before accepting an offer from the Church of England to take charge of Lake Condah Mission. He married again and remained at Lake Condah until 1913.

A Children's Home was opened on 19 March 1873 with twelve girls and five boys under the care of Philip and Rebecca Pepper.⁶⁸ However Philip died on 16 August and Rebecca died a year later. Neighbours and residents contributed towards the erection of a new church building which was opened on 1 January 1875. In recent years restoration work, including a new roof, has been undertaken and the solid structure with its square tower overlooking a bend of the Wimmera River bears some similarity to the cement block church opened at Ernabella in 1952, on a bank of the dry Ernabella creek. This period marked the peak of Ebenezer's population and development but continuing health problems tempered optimism about the future. A widespread epidemic of dysentery and fever affected white and Aboriginal people in the region. The Spiesekes' three children were ill and their two year old daughter, Bertha, died on 14 March 1875. In May, Spieseke reported on a measles epidemic. Measles was to have devastating effects in two epidemics at Ernabella in 1948 and 1957.⁶⁹ Spieseke's own health gave concern to his wife and friends. In January 1875 the Rev Carl Kramer, one of the four men who had come to Australia in 1864 to open the mission on Cooper's Creek, arrived to assist him.

Royal Commission

A Royal Commission appointed by the government of Victoria to enquire into conditions of Aborigines visited all stations in 1877. Because of Spieseke's ill-health,

⁶⁴*Periodical Accounts*, 28, 1870, 44.

⁶⁵ Hartmann Collection, Letter of Polly Hartmann, 9 August, 1870.

⁶⁶*Periodical Accounts*, 28, 1871, 126.

⁶⁷*Periodical Accounts*, 28, 1872, 280.

⁶⁸*Periodical Accounts*, 28, 1873, 525.

⁶⁹ W. M. Hilliard. *The people in between: The Pitjantjatjara people of Ernabella*. London. Hodder & Stoughton, 1968:,139-40, 230-36.

Kramer superintended the work at Ebenezer and he argued before the Commission for extension of the reserve and increase in the flocks. The commissioners expressed general satisfaction with the work at Ebenezer and Ramahyuck.⁷⁰ Their Report published in 1878 commended the garden, the discipline and general appearance but noted the need for more land to enable the grazing capacity to be increased.⁷¹ However the declining Aboriginal population gave little hope for the future. In 1852 the Aboriginal population in the Wimmera had been estimated to be 1200. In 1871 it was 362 and by 1877 it was reduced to 103, 66 of who were of full Aboriginal descent.⁷²

Following a long illness, Spieseke died at Ebenezer on 24 June 1877, a month short of his 57 birthday and 27 years after his first arrival in Australia. Kramer wrote that the Aborigines were sad to lose a friend and teacher. They paid for a coffin made in Dimboola and he was buried near the church at Ebenezer.⁷³ Kramer was joined in August 1877 by the Rev Paul Bogisch and his wife Amalie, from Germany. Kramer sought to deepen Christian commitment by introducing fortnightly love-feasts for communicant members. These services were a Moravian tradition based on the picture of the early church given in Acts 2:46-47 and introduced into the Moravian Church in 1727.⁷⁴

The Royal Commission Report noted the failure of attempts by Aborigines to embark on personal economic ventures. Despite this, in February 1878 an Ebenezer resident, Stewart, with his wife, Susan, and his brother left to occupy land near Lake Boga with a view to developing it.⁷⁵ In a letter of 7 June 1878, Kramer wrote that Stewart and Susan kept in touch by letters. There is evidence from several regions that Aborigines who became literate at missions valued the ability to maintain contact with their home communities or with former missionaries. For example, two young men from Ernabella in the mid-1960s who worked in the Darwin area in the mid-1960s wrote in Pitjantjatjara of their experiences.

Christmas was celebrated in 1878 with a service, gifts, a social meeting in the school and games on the following day.⁷⁶ Kramer's description was reminiscent of similar celebrations at Ernabella in the 1950s and 1960s. Each year the Ebenezer people were encouraged to camp in the bush during a holiday period. The missionaries visited them at a camp in June 1879 and enjoyed this relaxed time as the Aborigines cooked bush foods.

The Beginning of the End

From 1880, reports were increasingly pessimistic with frequent references to deaths, falling population and the possibility of closing the mission. The Report of Moravian Missions for 1880/81 contrasted the prosperous nature of the external conditions at Ebenezer with the seeming hopelessness for the future of the people. "The missionaries are so to speak, the grave-diggers of this fast disappearing people."⁷⁷ The population at Ebenezer was depleted further as men sought

⁷⁰*Periodical Accounts*, 30, 1877, 358.

⁷¹*Periodical Accounts*, 30, 1878, 438-39.

⁷² Longmire, 7.

⁷³*Periodical Accounts*, 30, 1877, 375.

⁷⁴*Periodical Accounts*, 30, 1878, 495.

⁷⁵ Fels, 4.

⁷⁶*Periodical Accounts*, 31, 1878, 187.

⁷⁷*Periodical Accounts*, 32, 1881, 107.

employment on the railway line which was being extended towards the South Australian border. Despite their desperate situation the people were encouraged to make offerings to support other mission work and collections were made for the Horsham Hospital where many of them had received treatment, and to a Leper Hospital in Jerusalem. This practice was followed occasionally at Ernabella with, for example, the Pitjantjatjara people contributing an offering of £20 for the Royal Flying Doctor Service in November 1962.⁷⁸

During the 1880s and 1890s details of life and work at Ebenezer received much less attention in the Moravian reports as attention was diverted to the possibility of commencing a new promising work in North Queensland, a promise realised in 1891 with the establishment of Mapoon Mission. The population was reduced further following the passing of *The Aborigines Protection Act 1886* under which people who were not of pure Aboriginal descent could not reside on missions. Two families were forced to leave Ebenezer. Subsequent reports reiterated the themes of the imminent closure of the mission and the assumption that the Aborigines would soon die out. 'It is a well-known fact that the aborigines of Australia are dying out steadily and rapidly.'⁷⁹ On 14 September 1889 Amalie Bogisch, the 26 year old wife of Paul Bogisch was buried in the cemetery next to the church. On the 17 February 1891, Carl Kramer died aged 56 years after 27 years of service in Australia. Local support for the mission declined and there was increasing pressure to open up the mission land for agriculture. In a letter of 28 October 1896 Bogisch gave a positive report on the garden, farming and grazing activities and the work done by the few people who remained at Ebenezer. Five families and a few single men lived in the cottages, most of which they had built. The women looked after them capably, cleaning, cooking, baking bread and sewing on machines.⁸⁰

In 1899, Bogisch reported an average attendance at the mission of 34. Two 'half-caste' families had been given permission by the Protection Board to reside there.⁸¹ For some years the government had employed teachers at the school and in 1901 there were 30 children attending, fifteen of who were white children from the neighbourhood. The government supplied rations and employment was provided for the men.⁸² In 1902 Bogisch reported on problems arising from indulgence in intoxicating liquors, this being encouraged by the football and cricket clubs at Jeparit and other townships, where they were much required for those sports.⁸³

In 1902, the Board for the Protection of Aborigines recommended the closing of Ebenezer because of the decreasing population. The remaining Aborigines would be transferred to other stations.⁸⁴ The September 1904 issue of the *Periodical Accounts* intimated that Ebenezer had closed during 1903, soon after the death of 'its faithful missionary', Br. Bogisch. The headstone in the Ebenezer cemetery records his date of death as 2 June 1903. His son, A. Bogisch, was appointed Acting Manager until the

⁷⁸ W.H. Edwards, Ernabella letters, Number 212.

⁷⁹ *Periodical Accounts*, Second Century, 1, 1890, 55.

⁸⁰ *Periodical Accounts*, Second Century, 3, 1897, 245-47.

⁸¹ *Periodical Accounts*, Second Century, 4, 1900, 323-24.

⁸² *Periodical Accounts*, Second Century, 5, 1902, 53.

⁸³ Quoted in Longmire, 18. In September 1999, the writer was told that Aboriginal footballers are now recruited from the Darwin region to play in the south-east of South Australia because of the difficulty of finding sufficient players in country towns.

⁸⁴ *Periodical Accounts*, Second Century, 5, 1902, 58.

mission finally closed.⁸⁵ Under the Lake Hindmarsh Land Act of 11 October 1904 the reserve was revoked and the land handed back to the Lands Department. The land, except for the churchyard and a small reserve, was made available for selection.⁸⁶ The Board for the Protection of Aborigines stipulated that an Aboriginal farmer, Pelham Cameron, be granted land he was working on the west side of the Wimmera river.⁸⁷ Cameron remained there until 1912.

An Antwerp township reserve was proclaimed and this was referred to at times as an Aboriginal Reserve.⁸⁸ Despite attempts to move remaining Aborigines to Lake Tyers in Gippsland several families with names including Cameron, Marks, Kinnear, Kennedy and Harrison continued to live on the river bank, often in conditions which were described in 1940 by the Secretary of the Aborigines' Uplift Society, as 'so shocking, so totally unfit for human beings'⁸⁹ The church building was given a B classification by the National Trust in 1968 and ownership of the church land transferred to the Trust in 1971.⁹⁰ In 1991 the Victorian government handed the land which included the church and cemetery to the Goolum-Goolum Aboriginal Co-operative Ltd, based in Horsham.⁹¹ Three other partially restored buildings are on land administered by the National Trust.

In contrast to the Ebenezer situation, remoteness and protection provided at Ernabella Mission enabled not just the survival, but the growth of Pitjantjatjara population and the continuity of language use and of many traditional structures and practices. Population growth led to the establishment of other centres such as Amata and Indulkana and of several outstation or homeland communities in the 1970s. With the change from an institutional to a community approach to Aboriginal development in the 1970s the Presbyterian Church handed over control of Ernabella and its outstation, Fregon, to local incorporated councils from 1 January 1974.⁹² A Pitjantjatjara Council was established in 1976 and negotiations between this council and the South Australian government led in 1981 to the granting of freehold title to the Pitjantjatjara lands to the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Incorporated.

Conclusion

In her history of the Dimboola Shire, Longmire referred to the Moravians at Ebenezer as follows:

The most determined action to aid the devastated tribes was undertaken by Moravian Missionaries who arrived in the area in 1858 to establish the Ebenezer Mission on Antwerp Station. Although they failed in their endeavours, the missionaries' work deserves careful scrutiny. No other whites engaged themselves with such commitment to the welfare of the Wotjobaluk.⁹³

⁸⁵ Aldo Massola, *Aboriginal mission stations in Victoria*, Melbourne, The Hawthorn Press, 1970, 54.

⁸⁶ Clark, 348.

⁸⁷ Fels, 9.

⁸⁸ Fels, 10.

⁸⁹ Fels, 11.

⁹⁰ Fels, 12.

⁹¹ D. Rhodes, *An archaeological report on the Ebenezer mission station*, Aboriginal Affairs Victoria, nd, 4.

⁹² W H Edwards, The changing climate of Aboriginal development, *Interchange*, Number 14, 1973

⁹³ Longmire, 9.

Any judgement of Ebenezer should take account of the aims of those involved as well as a longer historical perspective. Longmire herself set out the aims of the missionaries, as expounded by Spieseke, as:

the gospel should be preached to them, and that without loss of time, before they disappear; along with that bread should be given them; and being poor and needy should be brought into houses; being too often denuded should be covered, until by their own industry they can procure this for themselves.⁹⁴

The Moravians worked in an extremely fragile situation under the shadow of predictions that the Aborigines would soon disappear. With their strongly held Christian convictions and motivation to share the gospel, they would have felt that the fact that many of the people had expressed a faith in Christ and been baptised made their efforts worthwhile. With their emphasis on firstfruits, the conversion of Nathanael Pepper alone was, for them, testimony to the success of their enterprise. In her recent survey of the history of Ebenezer, Fels concluded:

It should be noted that the records strongly suggest that the religious conversion of the people was deeply experienced and absolutely meaningful. This is contrary to the expressed view that the missionaries forced religion down the people's throats. The issue requires careful and intensive study and I would not presume to make any interpretation as to why this phenomenon occurred, but the fact of it seems beyond challenge.⁹⁵

In relation to the giving of bread, or material developments, the Moravians provided the Wotjobaluk with some of the necessities of life and a haven where they were protected from many of the atrocities and injustices of colonial settlement. Although unable to protect them completely from dispossession and disease, their presence enabled the survival of Aboriginal people in the region. Their voices were some of the few drawing attention to abuses and asking for recognition of Aboriginal rights. Spieseke's call in 1867: 'But let the Aboriginal have a decent share', is a call still taken up by Aboriginal leaders and their supporters today in relation to land, education, health and law.⁹⁶

The reports and letters from Ebenezer provide evidence that the missionaries made important contributions in the areas of care and education of Aboriginal children. Many children in the nineteenth century were destitute as orphans or neglected children because of the rapid population decline, disease and the breakdown of traditional economic and social structures. Ebenezer provided a refuge for such children. Some were taken in to the homes of the missionaries but when possible they were placed under the care of Aboriginal people such as Philip and Rebecca Pepper. The Moravian emphasis on education meant that at a time when schooling was unavailable for many white children, the children were encouraged to attend school and to become literate and numerate.

⁹⁴ Longmire, 10.

⁹⁵ Fels, 15

⁹⁶ Quoted in Robertson, 70.

Many of the Moravians came from an artisan background. Exhibits in the Moravian Museum in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania provide evidence of their ability to use their hands to work on available materials to manufacture utilitarian items. Hartmann demonstrated such ability at Ebenezer. Despite problems of droughts, limited resources and insufficient land, the missionaries worked with, and trained Wotjobaluk men to produce food. The efforts of Stewart and Cameron in embarking on their own farming enterprises and the employment of Ebenezer men on railways, shearing and other farm work in the region testify to the effectiveness of this example and training.

There is evidence in the Moravian reports and letters that despite their repudiation of many of the cultural practices of the Wotjobaluk, the missionaries treated them with respect as fellow human beings, sharing with them in their homes and on picnics in the bush. Such respect was rare in colonial Victoria. One sign of this respect was the way in which the missionaries communicated with the Aborigines. Most settlers used a jargon which they thought suited the perceived inferior status of the Aborigines. Visitors to Ebenezer noted that 'it is the practice of the missionaries to speak in plain and simple English in complete sentences'.⁹⁷

While the long term achievements of Ebenezer were limited they achieved more than any other enterprise among Aborigines up to that time. They had meagre resources and no success stories to serve as models. Earlier support from the public and local settlers waned towards the end of the nineteenth century as the attention by Victorians was diverted by development, booms and depression. The survival of the mission for over 40 years may appear to be something of a miracle. One unfortunate incident, such as the escalation of a dispute or the death of a person such as Nathanael, could have brought the venture to a halt much earlier. Ebenezer was the first mission in Victoria to survive for several decades. According to Christie, 'it was the initial 'success' of the Moravians there that encouraged other churches in the early 'sixties, to set up missions for the Aborigines'.⁹⁸ These missions at Ramahyuck, Lake Condah and Lake Tyers became with Ebenezer, the centres where surviving Aborigines regrouped and became the families from which many of the present day Aborigines in Victoria trace their descent.⁹⁹ Shaw wrote in his history of the Port Phillip District, that 'the cost of the squatter's pastoral success was the destruction of Aboriginal society'.¹⁰⁰ That this destruction was not complete in the Wimmera, is largely due to the Moravian presence at Ebenezer.

Despite the overriding acceptance at Ebenezer that their work would be shortlived because of the expected imminent demise of the Wotjobaluk, there is evidence in the reports of good relationships between the missionaries and the Aboriginal residents, of positive activity and progress and a feeling that at the time Ebenezer was viewed as achieving some success. However in retrospect, Ebenezer and other missions of its time, have often been judged as failures. During its period as a mission, Ernabella was generally praised as successful. Despite the political changes of the 1970s and 1980s towards self-management, there are signs of increasing

⁹⁷ Robertson, 37.

⁹⁸ M.F.Christie, *Aborigines in colonial Victoria 1835-86*, Sydney, University of Sydney Press, 1979, 160.

⁹⁹ The writer lectured in Aboriginal Studies at the University of South Australia from 1981 to 1996. Three of his Aboriginal colleagues traced descent from residents of Ebenezer.

¹⁰⁰ A G L Shaw, *A History of the Port Phillip District: Victoria before separation*, Melbourne University, The Miegunyah Press, 1996, 142.

political, social, educational and health problems at Ernabella and other Pitjantjatjara communities. This raises the question: How will the contribution of Ernabella be judged in the future?

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