



The New Guinea Martyrs are more than a sentimental memory

By Archbishop Geoff Smith

September 2nd each year is kept as New Guinea Martyrs day.

The commemoration remembers 12 people who were serving the Anglican church in Papua and New Guinea when the events of Second World War, and particularly the Japanese invasion of PNG, impacted them.

They were teachers, nurses, priests, layworkers and evangelists. Most were either Australian or English but two were Papuans – Lucien Tapiedi, and Leslie Gariardi. (The picture at the top of this page is of the statues of 20th Century Martyrs at Westminster Abbey. The statue of Lucian Tapiedi, by [Tim Crawley](#), stands second from right.)

These 12 are called martyrs because they were killed in the course of their mission service either by Japanese forces or local Papua New Guineans in 1942 and 1943.

They all had the opportunity to go to safety as the war drew closer, but all decided to stay and continue their work.

The 12 Anglican martyrs we remember on September 2nd are just a very small number of the Christian workers who were killed in New Guinea during world war two. Sadly all the churches lost people not just the Anglicans.

The English word we translate as “martyr” means “witness” in Greek. Martyr has come to be used to describe someone who dies for or because of their faith. In being prepared to die for their faith or because of their faith the martyr bears witness to their faith and demonstrates their commitment to it.

The deaths of the 12 in New Guinea were tragedies in the midst of a much greater and even more horrible tragedy – the Second World War, and as I read the stories of the deaths of those 12 I can't help feel great sadness that these good and devoted people were killed in circumstances that were violent and must have been very frightening. They had done nothing deserving punishment, they were just in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The martyrs' deaths were very sad and seem an incredible waste, and yet their commitment to Jesus, the work they had been sent to do, and the people they had been sent to serve was a great encouragement to the church in PNG.

After the war was over, the example of those who stayed, including the martyrs, really helped the growth of the church in that country. What was a total disaster actually ended up bearing a lot of really good fruit as people in Australia and England as well as Papua New Guinea were inspired by the commitment and love of the martyrs and offered to serve.

It's good for us to remember the New Guinea martyrs. It's good to remember the reality of their sacrifice. It's good to give thanks for them. But we can do that and then just get on with life.

There are actually at least three things we can do now so that the sacrifice of the New Guinea martyrs is not just a perhaps sentimental memory.

The first is to remember the meaning of the word martyr – that is “witness”.

A witness is someone who sees or knows something and provides testimony to that truth. The reality is that all who call themselves Christians are called to be witnesses – witnesses for Christ.

We don't need to die to be witnesses to Jesus. We can consciously be witnesses by living our lives in such a way that shows our commitment to Jesus and his reality for us.

We can also use opportunities we have to speak of what we know to be true about God as we see God revealed in Jesus.

In this we don't speak someone else's theory, or someone else's story, but as witnesses we speak of what we know to be true from our experience, and we can all do that.

All of us who are Christians are Christians because somehow or other the reality of God in Christ has become clear to us. So, we have a story to tell – we can be witnesses for Christ.

Part of the very strong witness of the New Guinea martyrs was not so much what they said but what they did.

They were there in Papua and New Guinea serving the people. They had the chance to leave as the war got closer, but they did not. Their commitment to their Christian work because of their commitment to Jesus Christ was their witness. Their life told the story.

We are called to be witnesses where ever we are. To show by our life our loyalty to Jesus Christ. To take opportunities when we have them to speak what we know to be true about God.

As we remember the new guinea martyrs we can honour them by following in their footsteps as witnesses where we are, as they were witnesses in New Guinea.

The second thing we can do is to pray for the church in Papua New Guinea.

PNG is a beautiful country with wonderful people, but there are enormous challenges there. The geography is incredibly rugged. The weather is very tropical and that means hot and wet, which means lots of rain and floods and sadly tropical diseases like malaria.

Most of the people are subsistence farmers, education for children is haphazard, and health care away from the two major cities very limited. The Anglican church of Papua New Guinea continues to strive to bear witness to Christ in very trying circumstances. They really need our prayers, so to pray regularly for the Anglicans in PNG would be fantastic.

Third, we can support the church in PNG financially.

The mission organisation of the Anglican Church of Australia, ABM-A has projects in PNG that really make a positive difference in peoples lives and we can give generously so that Gods work, which the martyrs were committed to extending, can actually keep contributing to people's lives being more whole.

In some ways the martyrdom of twelve people in PNG in the midst of so much suffering and death was a small thing.

But we continue to remember those 12 by name: Henry Matthews, Leslie Gariardi, May Hayman, Mavis Parkinson, Henry Holland, Lucien Tapiedi, Lilla Lashmar, Margery Brenchley, John Duffill, Vivian Redlich, Bernard Moore, John Barge.

We give thanks for their witness and pray that we might be witnesses for Christ where we are.

Archbishop Geoff and his wife, Lynn, lived and worked in PNG from 1987-90. The archbishop was the parish priest of Taraka, on the outskirts of Lae, and Lynn was the national accountant for the Anglican Church of PNG.

You might also like to read a little local Adelaide history linking one of our parish churches to the martyrs: [New Guinea Martyr honoured in Prospect](#)

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