



DECLARATION OF AUTONOMY

since 1976

140 Years from Mission to Church

since 1886

Liberated by Christ. Stand Firm. Be Fruitful | Gal 5:1, John 15:16



A milestone journey from Mission to Church

Written by Dr. Jack Urame, Head Bishop of ELCPNG | 2026

The first Lutheran missionary from Germany, Johannes Flierl, arrived in Simbang, in Finschhafen in 1886. After him other missionaries from Germany, Australia and America came and began work in different locations, Finschhafen, Siassi and Madang area. In 1899 the first Baptism of two indigenous converts in Simbang took place, Kaboing with the baptismal name Tobias, and Kamunsanga with the baptismal name Silas.

Since the arrival of the first missionary, mission work was coordinated under Lutheran Mission New Guinea (LMNG). During this period, three mission churches or mission organizations began work in New Guinea. They were Finschhafen, Madang, and Siassi/Menyamy missions. In 1956, on the 70th anniversary of the arrival of the first missionary, the first synod was held at Simbang, on the site where Johannes Flierl landed. The three missions came together and formed the Evangelical Lutheran Church of New Guinea (ELCONG). The Lutheran Mission in New Guinea was taken over by ELCONG.

The merger in 1956 was marked as the birth of an indigenous church. Dr John Kuder who was the president of LMNG became ELCONG's inaugural bishop. The indigenous leaders pressed for this step to be recognized as an organized entity. When the transition from mission to church took place in 1956, autonomy was seen as a process than a result.

At the Ninth General Synod of ELCONG held at the present Balob Teachers College, Lae, on January 22-29, 1973 Zurewe Zurenuoc was elected the first indigenous bishop of the Church. He was installed by Bishops Kuder and Dietzfelbinger (Germany), assisted by District Presidents Boniepe and Mambu, President Grope (Australia) and the Rev. Gudmestad (USA). During that synod, efforts towards autonomy was further intensified when the new constitution was approved and entrusted to a revision committee for further work.

Bishop Zurewe Zurenuoc felt that there was a need for greater autonomy of the young church. On July 2 1976, on the eve of the 90th anniversary celebration of the arrival of the first Lutheran Missionaries, the 'Declaration of Autonomy', was issued on the initiative of the first indigenous Bishop.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Papua and New Guinea (ELC-PNG) was declared. It was felt that the declaration was necessary to be in tune with the country's political independence, which was declared the previous year in September 1975.

Because autonomy was a process many felt that the declaration was more symbolic than real. Therefore, according to the missionaries, it is difficult to say precisely when the ELC-PNG became autonomous just as it is difficult to say whether Papua New Guinea as a nation is even now truly independent in every respect. Many felt that both the autonomy of the church and the independence of the nation was a long and painful process towards full maturity. Today this feeling is still strong when both the church and the nation are confronted with new realities and new challenges.

This year 2026, we look back and see a milestone journey of 140 years since the arrival of the first missionary with the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. We also reach a landmark of 50 years since the indigenous leaders and members of the church declared autonomy. This is a remarkable history of humble mission and its transition to church. It is a testament of the movement of faith through which God works to extend his Kingdom to people of many tribes, languages and cultures across Papua New Guinea.

When we reflect on the history of the church, we see how Gods mission transformed the lives of thousands of people and brought them together to form the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Papua New Guinea (ELCPNG). We are included in this work of transformation and transition, therefore we are grateful to celebrate, not only our history but also who we are as God's people and the task we have as church to continue the propagation of the Gospel in the world. It is God's mission, through which we have been liberated and called into mission. Therefore our synod theme from Galatians 5:1 reminds us of our liberation and it will guide us in the next phase of our journey. We are called to stand firm because we have been liberated by Christ. So our faith must be firmly rooted in Christ and on his divine Gospel of redemption, liberation and salvation. With faith and hope in the promise of Christ, we continue the journey of mission and church in a renewed spirit of solidarity and unity!