This year, throughout the Torres Strait and mainland Australia, Torres Strait Islanders celebrate the 140th anniversary of the arrival of the Christian Gospel or the Word of God. The London Missionary Society brought The Gospel to the Torres Strait on July 1, 1871, when the missionaries landed at Erub.
The introduction of Christianity to the people of the Torres Strait became known as the ‘Coming of the Light’. Islander accepted the teachings of the missionaries and understood that they were living in the darkness of ‘heathenism’ before 1871. The light of their ‘salvation’ was due to the missionaries.

In the early part of the 1800’s, the missionaries of the LMS were converting Islanders to Christianity in the Southwest Pacific. It was via the Southwest Pacific that the missionaries came to the Torres Strait. Christian missionaries played a significant role in encounters between the West and peoples of the Pacific islands. Through their evangelical pursuits, Christianity had become a global religion. Missionaries had devoted themselves to making peace with native peoples and negotiated change in belief and practice. They had sometimes played the role of pacifying the people on behalf of colonial governments.

Reverend Samuel MacFarlane along with Rev. A. W Murray decided to take the mission to New Guinea using the islands of the Torres Strait as stepping stones. Reverend MacFarlane had been previously stationed in Lifu, an island of the Loyalty Islands of New Caledonia. He had toured eastern Australia from December 1867 to March 1868, including a visit to Somerset at the tip of Cape York.

The two missionaries were acquitted in December 1870 when Rev. A. W. Murray arrived in Lifu to replace Rev S. MacFarlane. Together they planned their mission to New Guinea and on May 30 1871 the London Missionary Society ship, Surprise, set sail. The voyage took over a month to reach the Torres Strait. In the evening of Saturday, 1st July 1871, Surprise carrying the Reverend S. MacFarlane and the Reverend A. W. Murray anchored at Erub. Accompanying the LMS clergymen were eight Polynesian mission teachers and their wives.

The two missionaries were greeted on shore at Kemus on Erub by Dabad, a Warrior Clan Elder who challenged his “tribal law” and defiantly accepted Reverend MacFarlane and his fellow missionaries. The people of Erub received the missionaries after intense negotiations with other clan headmen and agreed to place two missionaries there. The first of the four mission stations was set up on Mer.

In the 1870s the London Missionary Society missionaries established mission-stations on three other islands in the Torres Strait – Masig, Dauan and Mabuiag. From these centrally placed mission-stations they reached out to the people of neighbouring islands converting them to Christianity.

The Islander on each island readily accepted the missionaries and Christianity. Certain Christian principles aligned with the Islander’s spiritual beliefs. The missionaries also helped the Islander and protected them from the more dubious foreigners working in the fledgeling marine industries.

One of the main reasons for Islander so willingly consenting to Christianity was they were strong spiritual people. They were highly spiritual long before contact with the LMS. Islander had their own belief system based on their ancestral spirits and ‘cultism’. These traditional practices were replaced by Christianity.

The arrival of missionaries was the turning point in the history of Torres Strait. The LMS missionaries brought new religion, new language and new cultural influences. As a result there had been a big impact on Islander’s culture and way of life. Profound changes took place from that time onwards.

When the missionaries arrived on each island they carried only the Bible. They made peace by training the Islanders as missionaries so that they could then instruct other islanders in the ways of Christianity. The warriors were able to understand and clearly identify with the newly-trained missionaries from neighbouring islands and laid down their weapons. This also meant the end of head-hunting and inter-island conflict.

Other changes to cultural practices included: no longer allowing men to have two or more wives, persuading people to wear clothes, attending church service on Sunday etc. The missionaries discouraged Islander from practising heathen or anti-Christian ways.

The LMS missionaries were keen to learn the languages of Torres Strait people, firstly to communicate with them and secondly to translate the Bible. To translate the Bible the missionaries devised a spelling system based on Roman symbols. The missionaries then taught the people to read and write their languages in order to help them with the translation of the bible.

The date is now celebrated annually as a significant religious and cultural festival. The celebrations include the re-enactment of the landing of the missionaries, religious services, community festivities and feasts.

Torres Strait Islander’s regardless of faith, distance, age and circumstance come together every year on July 1 to honour and celebrate ‘The Coming of the Light’.