

Arnhem Land

The Aboriginal homeland communities in Arnhem Land in the Northern Territories of Australia are profoundly in need of the meaning and hope life in Christ brings. Through its staff, MAF brings the expertise needed to manage and support Aboriginal owned airlines, which are vital for remote area transport. By living in communities and operating charter services, MAF staff have a unique opportunity for Christian influence where there is profound spiritual need.

MAF's ministry in Arnhem Land is different to most other MAF programs in placing great emphasis on the impact of its staff in communities. It is difficult for many people to understand how MAF's calling could apply to a developed country like Australia. It is important to understand that:

1. vast distances separate Arnhem Land from the nearest large city (Darwin), with roads impassable during the 3 month long wet season;
2. Aboriginal communities have deprivation, dysfunction and major social and health problems despite government funding; and
3. missions were effectively expelled from Aboriginal communities 30 years ago as the government promoted self-determination in 'homeland' areas.

By strategic placement of staff into Aboriginal communities to fly them or to manage their airlines, MAF staff have an opportunity to provide a Christian influence that would otherwise probably not occur. Many staff have shown great initiative in building relationships and reaching out to their communities through their everyday activities as well as through running 'Christianity Explained' courses, supporting the indigenous church with Bible studies, participating in school councils and so on, on top of a demanding operational workload.

The Arnhem Land program ensures that its first concern is deploying resources and energy to sustain the Christian influence of its staff. This means evaluating the places where our witness makes the most difference and ensuring we can provide both air service and a Christian witness there with excellence, within the limits of our resources, rather than stretching them to maintain existing levels of service.

To ensure there is sufficient capacity to meet our expectations of families in Aboriginal communities, and to refocus our operations, we withdrew from Regular Public Transport flying in 2006.

1.1 MAF in Arnhem Land

Permanent bases are located at Gove Airport, Millingimbi, Ramingining, Numbulwar, Elcho Island and Lake Evella.

MAF's central base in Gove provides administration, aircraft maintenance and is MAF's main air terminal.

On the Gove peninsula, MAF staff live in Nhulunbuy (also called Gove - a Bauxite mining Town) and Yirkala, an Aboriginal community 20 km outside town.

From the permanent bases our staff serve the outlying communities providing support for a network of small outstations, known locally as homelands. These homelands are each family group's traditional land, and are very important to the sense of identity and well being of many Aboriginal people.



1.1.1 Aboriginal Owned Airlines

MAF also works with Aboriginal communities to provide flight services. Some Aboriginal communities own their own aircraft and have established agreements with MAF whereby MAF provides pilots to operate the aircraft on behalf of the communities as well as engineers and in some cases management staff too. Currently Marthakal Yolngu Airline (Elcho Island) and Laynhapuy Aviation (Gove) are owned by Aboriginal homelands councils.



1.2 MAF's Work in Arnhem Land



The focus of MAF's work has to be on activities of high value in terms of our calling, irrespective of their profitability. According to our measurement of 'value'¹, MAF's most valuable ministry in Arnhem Land is the Christian influence our staff can provide, because there are few alternatives available for that, whereas there are alternative operators able to undertake our flight services.

MAF flies education, government, essential services, pastors and other personnel to and from the isolated communities.

MAF also transports medical personnel to outlying communities and patients in to hospital. The Yolngu and Nunggubuyu (Aboriginal) people use MAF flights for shopping, selling arts and crafts and to attend traditional ceremonies and funerals.

MAF staff are sometimes involved with search operations when they arise. These include searching for lost boats, aircraft, and people over vast areas.

From the branch headquarters in Gove and five satellite bases located throughout the region, MAF's Arnhem Land flying activities primarily consist of:

1. transport for patients receiving medical treatment in Gove, or health professionals stationed in communities (both Government funded);
2. freight, particularly during wet season when land transport can be impossible for extended periods;
3. contractors / communications specialists installing or maintaining services in remote Aboriginal communities;
4. individuals journeying for shopping, funerals², or similar personal reasons; and
5. discounted flights for church and mission organizations.

MAF in Arnhem Land currently own 4 aircraft, (1 GA8, 1 C206, 2 C210), but is involved in maintaining and operating a further 10 aircraft owned by 5 different groups or individuals in a complex set of management or lease agreements.

¹ See the 'priorities' statement

² Funerals are culturally significant and often require the transportation of a coffin and / or large numbers of people.