

FoLA NEWS

Newsletter of Friends of Lutheran Archives Inc

Volume 35 Number 2

June 2025

*Biar family
home
America
1894
See story P2*



Farewell from Rachel to the members of FoLA

By the time this newsletter is published, I will already be finished in my role at Lutheran Archives and will have commenced in a new position at ALWS (Australian Lutheran World Service). Some of you might not have even known that I was to leave. However, I want to say farewell to all of you and THANK YOU for your ongoing support of Lutheran Archives; for your interest in preserving and feasting upon the stories that the Archives hold – stories that you can access through FoLA and through researching at Lutheran Archives.

I've been privileged and blessed to have worked at Lutheran Archives for the past 16 years: 5 of these years as Archivist, and then 11 years as Director and Archivist.

For my first 5 years I was the first point-of-call for enquiries, assisting researchers to find the information they needed: information to restore identity, to inform, to educate, or to simply enjoy. My most memorable research encounter was an enquiry that came from America not too long after I started in 2009 – the man's name was Brad and he knew that his family had been torn apart in the aftermath of WWII: some family went to America as displaced persons, and some came to Australia. Brad wanted to locate his Australian family. Through our records, I was able to reconnect that family after decades of no contact. I remember there were multiple name changes involved and it was not easy to track down, but when I did find the information that was needed to piece this family together – well, I cried, understanding just how important it was to this fractured family.



Rachel, left, at her Farewell Morning Tea

I've had many memorable times in my role as Director and it has truly been a privilege to serve the church and wider community in this role. One highlight was the involvement in a project with Adelaide University's Mobile Language Team, where all photographic images in our collection pertaining to Koonibba Mission were digitised and provided to the community. I was blessed to attend the event at Ceduna where language resources developed by the language team were given to the community, and images from our collection were shown: we heard from community elder Peter Miller the impact and importance of accessing these photographs and what it meant to him to be able to access his family story.

I also had the opportunity to meet Adam Goodes and share with him the story of his Lutheran heritage at Hahndorf – one of his ancestors was one of Kavel's people, by the family name Boehm, and I told him this story on an episode of the TV show *Who do you think you are?* Sadly the segment didn't make it to the final TV version but was on an extended online version. It was a great experience nevertheless! In recent years, along with Ben Hollister, we were interviewed by local Adelaide radio-personality Peter Goers.

One of my favourite people from the collection is a man named Lou Borgelt. I love his story of how he contributed so much to his church, simply through using his gifts and interests as a hobby photographer and travel-aficionado, and the legacy this has left behind for so many central Australian Lutherans. He generated interest in Finke River Mission by showing film footage from Central Australia in the 1930s and 1940s at film evenings – he charged an entrance fee and took donations, presumably talked about his holidays, and this financed the building of churches, the purchase of trucks and other essential equipment.

I love too the story of the *travelling trowel* (used to lay foundation stones first in Perth in 1903 then in 11 ELCA churches from 1950 to 1960) that represents the changing demographics in our church in the 20th Century – the foundations in the *German church*, then evolving from a largely rural church to an increasingly city and suburban based church of established Lutherans, and bolstered and mixed with the influx of a new wave of Lutheran migrants from the Baltic countries and Germany following WWII.

New stories and layers of stories are always being discovered. And that's what I love. If you've ever been on one of my *Behind the scenes* tours at the Archives premises, I would have shown you the oldest item in our collection – an edition of Luther's Works from 1553 which was owned by Pastor Oster Senior. Sadly, while travelling by ship with his family and congregation to Australia, he died. His son however, grew up to become one of the first trained Lutheran pastors to graduate in Australia under Pastor Fritzsche. He was President of the ELSA synod. Only last year, one of our international researchers, Sue-Ann Harding has translated the diary of Oster's sister, Anna Ey, where she records their arrival in Australia, and the fact that the dray (pulled by oxen) that was carrying the trunk

Continued on Page 2

The Biar Family divided

FoLA meeting 27 March 2025, Speaker Geoff Saegenschnitter



Geoff with a picture of his great grandparents taken at their Golden Wedding anniversary in 1930

What an amazing person is Geoff Saegenschnitter, who has dived into the depths of his family history – the Biar brothers – and presented a historical account of these two family members, one going to America and one coming to Australia. Geoff has also authored and co-authored many books, chaired many committees of his Lutheran Church at Nain and the Greenock Lutheran Parish as well as being a Justice of the Peace for over 30 years. He is the Greenock Community Historian.

On researching the Biar family in 1971, Geoff found out they are of Wendish origin, not German, and so he joined the Wend/Sorb Society of South Australia. By 1860, 400 Wendish families had come to Australia. The name Biar has many variations and often in the past was spelt Bjar, Biach, Baer, Bär, Bähr, Bihar, Biehar. In 1971 Geoff wrote the history of his great great grandfather Andreas Biar. Now he knows so much more about the Biar families both here and in Texas USA, I'm sure he could upgrade this history book.

Geoff made contact and has kept in touch with Harold and Rosalie Biar who live in Thorndale, USA with Harold being the youngest of 12 children. He passed away in 2021. Harold and Rosalie came to Australia in 1981 to visit Geoff and wife Enis.

An exciting find came about when the Texas members of the family moved a writing desk in Serbin and found over 40 letters written between 1881 and 1926 from members of the family in Australia. Geoff had them translated into English which gave a correct basis for the history of the Biar families in America and Australia.

Whilst visiting the Biar family village in Gröditz, Saxony, Geoff had the pleasure of playing the organ in their Lutheran Church. Geoff said there were Ukrainian refugees living in the manse, as Gröditz no longer has a resident Pastor. He was alerted to many Gröditz church register references to the Biar family from 1668 by an 80 year old lady who could read those registers. Bill Biar from USA was able to gain this valuable assistance from Frau Mihan and translated those references into English. Records back this far are not easily accessed. Geoff explained there is a beautiful cemetery in Gröditz and the families are expected to look after the grave site for 25 years, after which they can take the headstone as the plot is then reused for someone else.

Michael Biar from Gröditz originally had 12 children but only one survived to adulthood. After his wife died, Michael remarried and had two further children. Geoff says the family think it was the money left to the two children from the second marriage which may have caused the family split, with one son going to USA and one to Australia within two months of each other in 1854. They never saw each other again.

The American folk certainly made good money from cotton, corn and peanut crops along with oil wells on some farms in more recent years. The Australian folk battled on farms in dry South Australia, but all made a living, all stayed with the Lutheran Church, all joined in Community and all rarely spoke of their Wendish origins.

Geoff is one of the fifth generation of the Biar family in Australia.

Lorraine Fielke [whose mother was a Biar]

Continued from Page 1

Farewell from Rachel

containing her father's books overturned on their journey from the Port. She writes, *it's no wonder that the oxen could not stop at the hills and the drays were overturned. The chests with books were broken open and many books were lost. The furniture was badly damaged. The books were delivered like cabbages and turnips in old potato sacks, you can imagine how Mutter felt about this.*

Now with so many amazing stories and experiences here, I know some people are wondering: Why are you leaving now? There is such an exciting future ahead with the new exhibition and research space being planned in the new CBD church building. Well, I feel confident in leaving the Archives now because we do have such an exciting future ahead, and because we have such an experienced and knowledgeable team in Angela, Bethany, Ben and all the volunteers, that I know the Archives will be well taken care of and the records and the stories of the people, places, and ministries of the church will continue to be preserved and made accessible for generations to come.

Keep enjoying the benefits of being a FoLA member, enjoy reading the journal and the events that the committee works so hard to curate for you each year. And keep advocating for the importance of Lutheran Archives and keeping records, because they truly do have an important impact on individuals, communities and society at large.

With love and blessings from Rachel.

(PS don't forget the end of the financial year is approaching, so now is the time to send your donations to Lutheran Archives for a tax-deductible benefit)

Coming events

Daniel Schlinke: Barossa Entrepreneur

Speaker: Philip Mann

Thursday 26 June at 7.30pm

139 Archer St, North Adelaide SA 5006

LIVESTREAM on FoLA YouTube channel:

[https://www.youtube.com/](https://www.youtube.com/@friendsoflutheranarchives9644/live)

[@friendsoflutheranarchives9644/live](https://www.youtube.com/@friendsoflutheranarchives9644/live)

Life on the Far Side: Adventures Undergone while Investigating a Forgotten Past

Speaker: John Strehlow

Thursday 24 July at 7.30pm

139 Archer St, North Adelaide SA 5006

LIVESTREAM on FoLA YouTube channel:

[https://www.youtube.com/](https://www.youtube.com/@friendsoflutheranarchives9644/live)

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Researching family history is a common enough activity among Australian Lutherans, but when John Strehlow embarked on a book about his family, *The Tale of Frieda Keysser*, he had no idea what he was letting himself in for. At the beginning his sources seemed manageable enough – the diaries of his grandmother Frieda Keysser’s time at Hermannsburg in Central Australia (1895-1922) and his grandfather Carl Strehlow’s letters to the Mission Board (1892-1922) – but information quickly multiplied and almost spiralled out of control, as thousands of letters by their friends and colleagues turned up just waiting to be discovered. Visits to little-known archives in Central Europe soon followed: how was this venture to be encompassed and how was it to be paid for? *Investigating a Forgotten Past* gives the inside story in a nuts-and-bolts outline of the 25-year project, ranging from descriptions of how to do emergency repairs when your car’s exhaust system falls off on a German motorway, to circumventing attempts by other family members to block the project, with here and there a skeleton turning up in the family closet. It is an easy read about an extraordinary venture with long-term lessons for Australia’s future. Copies of the eBook will be on sale on the evening, and it is hoped a Print on Demand copy may also be available.

Biographer, playwright, theatre director, and set designer, John Strehlow was born in 1946 in Adelaide, into a family closely involved with Aboriginal people for three generations. He began researching his grandparents’ two-volume biography, *The Tale of Frieda Keysser*, in earnest in 1994, publishing the first volume in 2011 and the second volume late in 2019.

Farmers, Entrepreneurs, Lutheran clergymen and a Doctor - Germans of the Mount Gambier District

Speaker: Betty Huf

Thursday 21 August at 7.30pm

139 Archer St, North Adelaide SA 5006

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[https://www.youtube.com/](https://www.youtube.com/@friendsoflutheranarchives9644/live)

[@friendsoflutheranarchives9644/live](https://www.youtube.com/@friendsoflutheranarchives9644/live)

Victorian pastoralists moved their herds and flocks into the Mount Gambier area in 1839. By 1849 the newly arrived Dr Eduard Wehl was conducting a medical practice in the emerging settlement. Late in the 1850s, the rapidly increasing number of Germans settling in the area resulted in two Lutheran congregations being established, with both of them dedicating newly erected churches in 1860. As well as a large number of German farmers, there were also ambitious entrepreneurs who established themselves as successful businessmen in Mount Gambier.

FoLA member Betty Huf is a historian who specialises in

researching the social history of the Western District of Victoria. She has written several papers and books about the settlement story of the German and Wendish immigrants of the Hamilton area.

Enlightened Aboriginal Futures and Sandhill Girl: The Story of Two Books and the Importance of Writing as Kin

Speakers: Barry Judd, Katherine Ellinghaus

Thursday 18 September at 7.30pm

139 Archer St, North Adelaide SA 5006

LIVESTREAM on FoLA YouTube channel:

[https://www.youtube.com/](https://www.youtube.com/@friendsoflutheranarchives9644/live)

[@friendsoflutheranarchives9644/live](https://www.youtube.com/@friendsoflutheranarchives9644/live)

In 2017, Professors Barry Judd and Katherine Ellinghaus embarked on a project that explored the work of Pastor F.W. Albrecht and the Finke River Mission. In particular, they were interested in the story of an education scheme initiated during the 1950s and 1960s that targeted Aboriginal girls (one of whom was Professor Judd’s mother, Lorna Wilson) living on pastoral stations across Central Australia. Largely unknown and unacknowledged outside the FRM, the Lutheran Church of Australia and the Aboriginal families directly impacted by it, the education scheme was underpinned by the progressive political ideal of individual consent and the even more radical idea that a productive Aboriginal future must have its foundations in an individual retaining connection to Aboriginal culture, traditions and history. In 2024 two books were published from the project. *Enlightened Aboriginal Futures* (Routledge) is an academic book which uses the education scheme as a case study to shift the focus on Enlightenment thinking from Europe to Australia. *Sandhill Girl* (LWBJKE Books) is a self-published hard cover book, authored by Lorna Wilson, that tells the story of her experiences in the scheme in her own words. In this paper Professors Judd and Ellinghaus talk about the journey of these two books, their working collaboration and how the theme of non-Indigenous and Indigenous people finding ways to work together authentically and productively permeated both the books and the project itself.

Professor Barry Judd, Deputy Vice Chancellor - Indigenous, University of Melbourne

Professor Katherine Ellinghaus, Professor of History in the School of Archaeology & History, La Trobe University

Check Cheques

Two of our well regarded FoLA members recently paid their 2025 membership fees by cheque. This is normal practice for quite a number of members. However, the cheques were dishonoured by their bank.

A few days later, when I went to the LLL to deposit more cheques from members, the people at LLL looked at a list and compared the cheques with the list. I asked them if there was a problem and I was informed that some banks were phasing out cheques. I asked if this is what happened to our two members and they said it was likely to be so.

Our two members since paid by EFT and there was no problem with this method.

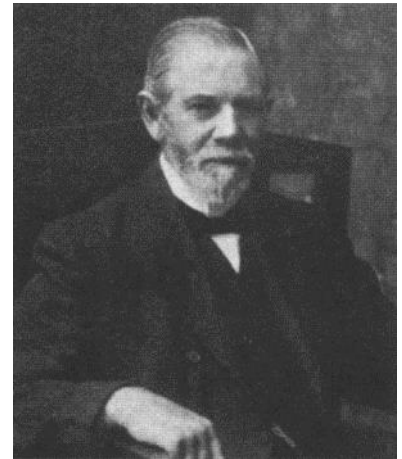
For members who still use cheques, it might be advisable to discuss this with your bank at some point.

Shirley Golding FoLA Treasurer

FoLA News — June 2025

Pastor Mads Christensen: A Danish Pastor in New Zealand

Since 1976 the Archives of the Lutheran Church of New Zealand had been on long-term loan to the Alexander Turnbull Library in Wellington, New Zealand. In 2023 the collection was transferred to the Lutheran Archives in Adelaide. Among the stories they bring are those of the Danish and other Scandinavian Lutherans who settled in New Zealand from the 1870s. A key character in that story is Pastor Mads Christensen. Mads and his son Pastor Ansgar served what is now St Lukes Palmerston North for 63 years from 1894 to 1958. Mads also served us well by writing an account of the Scandinavian Lutheran story from the earliest days until near the beginning of the 20th Century. His son Ansgar then added a final section.



Retired Flinders University historian David Hilliard focused on Mads Christensen (pictured right) as he told the story of these pioneers at the FoLA meeting on 27 February.



About 2,000 Danes, 1,000 Norwegians and 400 Swedes arrived in 1871-1876 under the Vogel plan of assisted migration and were mainly settled in Wairarapa's 70 Mile Bush and southern Hawkes Bay, where they were to clear the land and assist with the building of a major road. The first Lutheran pastor, Jørgen Johansen George Sass, came from Queensland, only arriving in 1878, which was five years after the establishment of the settlement in Mauriceville and seven years after the first migrants. He was soon joined by Norwegian Christopher Gausted in 1880 and another Dane, Hans Madsen Ries, in 1886.

Mads Christensen also arrived late in 1886. He was born to Danish parents in Aabenraa, Slesvig, Denmark in 1856. After the war of 1864 the area was occupied by Prussia, and in 1873 Mads crossed the border into Denmark where he came under the influence of the Inner Mission, a pietistic movement in the Church of Denmark. There is no record of him having received formal theological training, but the Inner Mission sent him to New Zealand in response to Sass's request for more workers. Sass examined him and ordained him on 19 December, and he served the Mauriceville congregation until 1894, when he was called to replace Sass at Palmerston North. On 28 April 1888 he married Anna Larsen. They had two sons and two daughters before her death from tuberculosis on 20 August 1896. He married Anna's sister Hedvig on 15 March 1899, and they had four sons and four daughters. Hedvig died in 1958, a few months after the death of her son Pastor Ansgar on 7 March.

Times were hard. The Danish pastors were poorly paid, if at all. Most had to supplement their income by farming and other work. Mads bought 4½ acres (1.8 hectares) of land on the edge of Palmerston North where he kept a few cows and grew fruit and vegetables for sale. He also rented out a second house on the block. The Inner Mission eventually provided a small subsidy, but that didn't go very far. The clergy of other denominations were better paid at the time.

There was ongoing conflict between the Danes and Norwegians. Pastor Gausted had served Palmerston North from 1880 to 1885 when the congregation dismissed him. When Pastor Sass had returned from a trip to Denmark in 1893, he announced that the Inner Mission Board had appointed him the director of their work in New Zealand. Gausted was furious since he was the senior man, and their relationship never recovered.

Another issue that adversely affected the congregations was the continued use of the Danish language. Preserving their culture was clearly of great importance to the original migrants, but as new generations emerged, they began to marry *outsiders* who didn't speak Danish and so members began to *leak* to other denominations. The Scandinavians easily assimilated into the dominant culture and so church membership decreased. Pastor Mads did his best to hold things together and he was obviously much loved and respected. When requested by younger members he introduced English evening services in 1915, but that was almost 50 years after the arrival of the first settlers. English also replaced Danish in the mornings by 1936, but the damage was done.

The Inner Mission had been formed in 1853 as a revival movement within the Church of Denmark. It emphasised repentance, personal piety, and separation from the world. That included some legalism that did not translate well into the new context. Card playing and dancing were forbidden and playing table tennis was a frivolity that was not to be tolerated. The Inner Mission's teaching and practices reflected the theology and concerns most of the migrants had brought with them from their old countries and so preserving church culture, liturgy and hymnody in the new land was highly valued by the older generations.



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Early Danish Pastors in New Zealand in 1894
Left to Right: Mads Christensen, George Sass, Carl Bjelke-Petersen, Hans Ries, Niels Topholm & Johannes Legarth



The Palmerston North Church in 1906.
The original church became the hall at the rear.
The Evangelical Lutheran Emmaus Congregation in Palmerston North had been formed in 1880.

Jens Dixon, a Danish evangelist from America, visited the congregation for two months in 1921. Many young people were renewed in their faith and as a result three young men went to the United States to study to become pastors. One of those was Mads' son Ansgar who returned at the end of 1927 and was installed as pastor of the congregation on New Year's Day. Reaching out to the local community was simply not a consideration and only became a priority after the death of Pastor Ansgar and the end of the Danish era in the Lutheran Church in New Zealand.

Pastor Mads was sincere in his beliefs, and he worked hard in caring for his congregation. He regularly visited members, often by foot to distant farms, and is fondly remembered.

The 25th anniversary of Mads Christensen's service in Palmerston North was celebrated in July 1919. The local paper reported that eulogistic addresses were delivered, and all were most emphatic in their expressions of gratitude to the pastor who had served his congregation so faithfully during a very lengthy period. He died on 28 December 1929. His obituary, published in the local paper, said he was *a gentleman of particularly fine character [who was] endowed with the old pioneer spirit*. From what we know, he was an attractive personality. He is remembered as being happy and contented, whose pastoral care of members of his congregation, including the young, was exemplary.

New Members

FoLA welcomes these new members for 2025:

Steen Olsen, Anne Winckel, Suzanne & Erik Tikoft, Lorraine Fielke, Celeste Schulze, Kevin Hamdorf.

Tax-Deductible Donations

At Lutheran Archives, we ensure that the records of our church are available for the church and wider community to access, remember and reflect, and to share today and for generations to come. As a **Friend**, we know you value and love the stories and treasures in the collection.

Please help us to provide access to the treasures in our collection by supporting us financially.

Donations \$2 and over to Lutheran Archives are **tax-deductible**.

Your donation will go towards making the stories accessible. This includes collecting, preserving and transcribing records, assisting researchers, digitising records and of course sharing stories.

Help us gather a harvest of stories for our children and grandchildren.

Three easy ways to support us

- ◆ **Electronic transfer (EFT)** to Lutheran Archives. BSB: 704 942 Account no: 100846262 (Write "Donation" as reference). Then notify us of your address, so that we can send you a receipt.
- ◆ **Credit card:** navigate to donation.lca.org.au
Then select **Departments > Lutheran Archives > Lutheran Archives Fund Donation**.
- ◆ **Cheque/money order** made out to Lutheran Archives, 27 Fourth St, BOWDEN SA 5007.

Director's Report

Welcome to the middle of the year at the Archives – it feels like we really are the meat of the sandwich! It's a very busy time here and we have lots of projects on the go.

We said a sad farewell to our wonderful director of 11 years, and archivist of 16 years, Rachel Kuchel. The staff, volunteers and committee members linked to Lutheran Archives have been lucky to call Rachel our leader, and we have seen some incredible changes and progress made by her hard work and advocacy. Her generosity and thoughtfulness will continue to be an inspiration to the team.

The project to audit and rehouse the rare and oversized books is currently wrapping up. This project was supported by a CHG (National Library) grant in 2024, and now that all the books are safely rehoused in custom archival boxes, we are ready to say goodbye to the project! Thanks to Ben for the wonderful work he's done on it.

We have had news of another successful grant from the History Trust of SA MaC program, which will see our artefact collection audited, rehoused to archival standards, arranged and catalogued. Lutheran Archives will hire a collections professional to undertake this work within the next twelve months. The artefact collection, which is large and at high preservation risk due to its complexities in size, age and materials, is overdue for an audit and will benefit greatly from a strong collection management project. This will also allow the artefact collection to be considerably more discoverable and accessible via the website.

In conjunction with the artefacts collection management project, we are thankful for funding from the Helen Gordon bequest to photograph the artefact collection. This work will be undertaken by a professional collections photographer, in collaboration with the collections professional hired through the MaC grant, outlined above. This work will similarly make the collection more accessible and discoverable, and showcase the depth and intricacies of the Lutheran Archives collection. A huge thank you to Helen Gordon's Estate and FoLA for the generous facilitation of this resourcing project.

The planning for the exhibition and research space in Frome St (yet to be named) is well underway, with the archives team working with designer Richard Browning and his team now on a regular basis. We are looking forward to getting into the meat of this project, due to be completed in early 2026.

Thanks to everyone for their support so far this year – many more wonderful and busy months yet to come!

Angela Schilling, Collections Archivist

Broad Horizons: SA German Stories from a Wider World

Proceedings of the German Heritage Research Group Workshop, 4 May 2024

In 2023, the GHRG History Festival seminar, SA German Connections, highlighted the links SA German settlers maintained with their families, communities and networks in their former homeland: stories of migration and family letters, disgruntled migrants and return visits; of scientific exchanges and the legacy of Lutheran mission to the Kurna; and of aid sent to those suffering in the aftermath of war.

The 2024 Broad Horizons seminar explored more far-flung global contexts of migration movements and international shipping, scientific interchange and church and mission networks. Despite its remoteness, Adelaide proved to be a hub for merchants and mariners, naturalists and adventurers. Pastors and missionary wives came with experience of Africa, America, India or New Zealand, but the traffic was not all one way, as South Australian Germans followed opportunities abroad in academia, church or mission, or service in American or African wars.

Matt Williams / Herbert Stock, **South Australia's First Honorary Consul – HC Stakemann**
Janette Lange, **Lutheran emigration: destinations intended and unintended**
Geoff Saegenschnitter, **Migrant destinations: the Biar family from Germany to Texas and Australia**
Gilbert Materne, **Migration and Global Shipping: the voyage of the *Elisabeth*, 1878**
Bernie O'Neil, **Johannes Menge: Mixing minerals, linguistics and missions**
Pauline Payne, **The Global Schomburgks**
John Temme, **Justus Albert Wohlgemuth: Berlin, New York, Adelaide**
Lois Zweck, **Sermon without Words: Johanna Meischel, Emilie Appelt, Luise Homann**
Trevor Schaefer, **A Misfit on Three Continents: Rev. Krause in Germany, America and Australia**
Allan Bretag, **Dr Hans Hermann Behr: entomologist and botanist in SA and California**
Peter Mican, **Rudolph Carl Alexander Miethke: Sailor, US civil war volunteer and SA teacher**
Vanessa Kreusch, **Adventures in South Australia and beyond: The travel diary of F.L.M.**
Bethany Pietsch, **Rev. Gottlieb Blaess, Missionary to the Maori, and ELSA Lutheran Networks**
Peter Brinkworth, **SA Germans in the Boer War**
Everard Leske, **From Langmeil to the world: the Geyer family in PNG, Brazil and New York**

Thanks to the efforts of our editor, Bert Stock, the 2024 Proceedings as listed here, were launched at the 2025 seminar and are now available from Lutheran Archives at \$10, or \$5 if you attended the 2024 seminar, plus postage.

Copies of the 2023 Proceedings are also still available at the same price.

Elizabeth Buck's Koonibba Journey

presented to FoLA on 24 April 2025

Elizabeth Buck's presentation *Memories of Koonibba* differs from most FoLA presentations because it was based on the memories of her childhood at Koonibba Lutheran Mission. She was raised in the early 1960s at Koonibba when her father Clem Eckermann was the pastor there for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Australia. It was his third Koonibba posting, as he had been there in the 1940s and early 1950s. He was called to return following some problems in the Mission in the latter 1950s. Elizabeth's memories of Koonibba are of a very happy place where people got on well and the Aboriginal people ministered to each other as witnesses to the love of Christ in their lives.



Koonibba Mission—Church, Manse, Old Church (demolished), Children's Home

The Mission was established in 1901 as a mission to the Aboriginal people of the Far West Coast of South Australia. Some of its personnel later served the peoples of the inland, as in the early 1950s people were displaced from Ooldea and lands further north around Maralinga where in the mid 1950s the Australian and the British Armies began to conduct atomic bomb tests. Consequently, the Aboriginal people were removed from their lands and sent south. Here they were entrusted to the care of the Lutheran Church in a new settlement at Yalata.

Elizabeth Buck was one of six children of Pastor Clem and Norma Eckermann. Pastor Eckermann had 50 years of relationship with Koonibba and its Kokatha and Wirangu people, beginning in the 1940s. (He later was pastor to the Aboriginal congregation in George St in Thebarton, Adelaide, from 1977-1984). His first posting to Koonibba was immediately after his ordination in 1941 when he served with Pastor Traeger. He then served as Pastor/Superintendent at Koonibba from 1946–1953. He returned in the 1960s after a difficult period at the Mission and Elizabeth remembers those as being the *golden years*. In her time there she was of primary school age. The church and the worship life it provided was the focus and core of the community, led by the pastor and supported by faithful members of the Aboriginal community. Elizabeth recalled hearing people such as Charlie Kelly and Patrick Nandy (also known as Lame Paddy) saying that Jesus set them free from darkness.

In the 1960s the church committee which oversaw the Mission became inclined towards the state government's desire to make it a State-run Aboriginal Reserve, which would remove the church's responsibility for its wellbeing. Elizabeth's father Pastor Eckermann sought some stability as he fought for the continued alignment of Koonibba with the Lutheran Church. He was opposed to the policy of assimilation embraced by the state government. He fought for this, as did the teachers at the school who actually resigned in protest in the 1960s. In the latter part of 1965 Koonibba Mission became Koonibba Reserve. In 1967 things got worse when the prohibition of alcohol was lifted with devastating consequences to the community. Assimilation really meant the government removed families from Koonibba and placed them in white communities.



Children playing near school 1940

There has been a lot of criticism of Christian missions in Australia, but Koonibba was one where relationships were much more positive. In the early 20th century both federal and state governments embraced assimilation policies which included the removal of children that were of mixed origin from their Aboriginal mothers. The evidence is that the Lutheran Church and its workers sought to protect the Aboriginal people from the assimilation policies of the government of the day, and provided a community with access to both health care and education. The ELCA built both the hospital and the Koonibba Children's Home, to care not only for locals but also Aboriginal people who moved around the region in traditional ways. The children housed there were voluntarily placed by their parents. These parents were given daily access to the children. The Children's Home was a way of keeping the children from being taken away from their country to State-run Homes such as at Glandore in Adelaide. It was also a reliable way of giving education to the children because in the first half of the 20th century they were not given access to education through the state government systems. The school established at Koonibba and staffed by Lutheran teachers gave this education and a preparation for life in the very white-dominated world of Australia. A significant number of children from Koonibba attended Concordia College in Adelaide and were given a decent education to high levels. Many of these moved on to take important roles in Koonibba and Ceduna and also in Adelaide and Canberra.

There is much debate by historians and researchers about the influence of the church on traditional communities and much has been written about children being stolen from their parents, but Koonibba was not part of this. The church worked hard to preserve the family unit. When the government did take over in the late 1960s and Koonibba became an Aboriginal reserve it meant the demise of the children's home and the hospital, but the school did continue then as a state school. The congregation at Koonibba has also continued, but since 2009 as part of the wider parish including Ceduna and Denial Bay.

Malcolm Pech

FoLA News — June 2025

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<https://www.youtube.com/@friendsoflutheranarchives9644/live>

Thursday 21 August at 7.30pm
Farmers, Entrepreneurs, Lutheran clergymen and a Doctor - Germans of the Mount Gambier District

Speaker: Betty Huf
139 Archer St, North Adelaide SA 5006
\$5 donation

LIVESTREAM on FoLA YouTube channel:
<https://www.youtube.com/@friendsoflutheranarchives9644/live>

Thursday 18 September at 7.30pm
Enlighted Aboriginal Futures and Sandhill Girl: The Story of Two Books and the Importance of Writing as Kin

Speakers: Barry Judd, Katherine Ellinghaus
139 Archer St, North Adelaide SA 5006
\$5 donation

LIVESTREAM on FoLA YouTube channel:
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FoLA NEWS

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