

Obituary Karl-Heinz Kirsch: Living in the service of our Lord

In Loving Memory

Our Saviour Jesus Christ has destroyed death and brings immortal life through the gospel. Let us remember with thanksgiving what God has done through Karl-Heinz Kirsch. Karl (also affectionately known as Charlie) was born in Finschhafen, Papua New Guinea on Thursday 16 of May 1935. Because of the antimalarial drug, quinine, he was born three weeks early. He was the first of the five children of Friedrich Karl Kirsch, a Deacon of Neuendettelsau and a medical missionary, and his wife Babette nee Bach, both natives of the village of Sausenhofen in Bavaria.



Karl Heinz Kirsch, Pastor

16 May 1935 Finschhafen, Papua New Guinea
21 June 2024, Redlands, Queensland

He was baptised on June 9 by Field Inspector, Rev. Willi Flierl, his sponsors being Sister Helene Moll and his Uncle Wilhelm and Aunt Mina Bauer in Germany. No Irish names. 'White and brown took part in the ceremony. The family Kirsch was evacuated from PNG to Australia in 1941, in response to the threat of Japanese invasion, and because of their German ancestry they spent the next four years in an internment camp at Tatura, Victoria. In 1951 Karl's parents were allowed to return to Papua New Guinea. Karl remained in Queensland, and completed his Secondary Education at St. Peter's Lutheran College in Brisbane, excelling both academically and at sport. It was nothing to do 10 laps of St Peter's Ovals both before and after a game of rugby, and because of his renowned galloping ability, he was nicknamed, Horse, with his younger brother Gerhard being known as Little Horse. The three sisters, Heidi, Hedwig and Marianne, also excelled academically, and in track-and-field athletics. It was a very different world back then, with the only Apple on offer being the one you ate after Sunday Lunch in the Boarding House Dining Room: the five Kirsch children were blessed not to have the distractions of an i-phone, i-pad or i-pod, and they lived busy lives, free of screen addiction. As to the dining room bread, Karl recalled that the St Peters Boarders had configured a favourite hymn to: Rock of Ages, left for me, let me sink my teeth in thee. After Karl graduated in 1953, he enrolled in the Immanuel Lutheran Seminary in North Adelaide. He furthered his Theological studies at the Augustana Hochschule (University) at Neuendettelsau of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Bavaria and the renowned Tübingen and Heidelberg Universities and returned to Australia to graduate in 1958.

While studying in Bavaria he also worked in Lutheran Aged Care facilities, tending to the infirm in return for food and board. This experience had a profound influence upon him, giving him that special ability to connect with the elderly, sick and dying in his congregations later in his career. Karl was ordained at the beautiful Langmeil Lutheran Church in Tanunda in the Barossa Valley on June 21, 1959, by Rev. Walter Fritsch and assigned to the Church's Lutheran Mission in Papua New Guinea. This was before the Church

in PNG was independent. After further completing Primary Teaching qualifications at Wattle Park Teachers College in Adelaide, he arrived in PNG on 29 December 1959. On the 13 January 1960 he married Heidi Hoehne nee Herrmann, the widow of the Rev. Friedrich Hoehne of the Leipzig Missionary Society, who also served in PNG. Karl and Heidi had met at the Teachers' College in Adelaide, where Heidi had gone to gain suitable teaching qualifications for service in the Lutheran Church in PNG. They served together in PNG until 1970, among an international community which included Americans and Canadians. While in PNG they were blessed with their two sons, Philipp and Bernard. Karl was assigned to Kotna in the Western Highlands District, where he started the Kitip Area School, of which he was Head Teacher from 1960 to mid-1962. Instruction was in English, with the curriculum based on the official education programme of the Australian administration of the then Territory of New Guinea. From mid-1962 to mid-1963 Karl deputized at the Alkena Station, replacing the furloughed missionary Dieter Klemm. From mid-1963 to mid-1965 Karl created extensive teaching materials in PNG Pidgin called Tok Pisin, for the new Lutheran Mission Village Bible School programme. This was developed jointly by Karl, Rufus Pech and Dick Hueter, as a parallel programme to the official education programme of the Australian administration in PNG. In the middle of 1965 Karl and his family went on furlough, travelling by boat through the Suez Canal and back to Europe.

On his returning to PNG in early 1966, Karl became Head Teacher at Rintebe Teachers' College. Rintebe trained teachers for the Village Bible School Programme, using Tok Pisin as the language of instruction. In preparation for this Karl spent a few months in the coastal village Qorongko, where he lived with a New Guinean family and studied the local language of Kote. Heidi and the children meanwhile stayed in Rintebe, where she began lessons with her older son Philipp under the auspices of the South Australian correspondence school. Early in 1969 the family transferred to Kainantu, where Karl continued to develop teaching resources in Tok Pisin for the Village Bible School programme.

In 1970 Karl returned to Australia, accepting the call to the Pittsworth Parish which included Pittsworth, Milmerran and Yandilla, families spread out over 512 kilometres. Parish ministry in Australia was utterly foreign to the couple. And they arrived with no furniture. He soon forged a strong connection with the rural farming parishioners of the Darling Downs congregations, though he was possibly considered somewhat radical, supporting the enfranchisement of women to vote in the Church, and undertaking extensive native tree and shrub plantings around the Church and Manse in Pittsworth. Karl was very community and ecumenically minded, was a regular Member of Rotary where he served as President, organised the Annual Christmas Carol Service in the Pittsworth Town Hall, led the Parish to participate in the Women's World Day of Prayer and the local Meals on Wheels, and never missed the Dawn Service on Anzac Day, after which he especially enjoyed the early morning cuppa with the locals. When Heidi accepted a position as teacher at the St. Stephen's Catholic School in Pittsworth (from 1972-1980) someone asked her whether she would still be the minister's wife. Karl also helped the nuns when they needed a man to repair things at the school.

In 1980, after ten committed years in Pittsworth, Karl accepted the call to the Redlands Parish: the congregations of Cleveland, Redland Bay and Mt. Cotton. Heidi taught at Faith School, the Redlands Lutheran Primary School. Karl again enjoyed the connection with town and country and bonded with the loyal farming folk. He was also a loyal and active member of Rotary Cleveland. Karl's loyalty and

commitment to community and charitable work saw Rotary International awarding him a Paul Harris Fellow in 1988, in “appreciation of tangible and significant assistance given for the furtherance of better understanding and friendly relations between peoples of the world”.

During his time in Queensland, Karl served the wider Church in various capacities. He presented numerous exegetical and theological papers at Pastors’ Conferences, drafted statements to do with the Church’s work among the Indigenous people, served on an Education curriculum committee and was spiritual counsellor of the Darling Downs’ Zone of the Lutheran Women of Australia. Beginning at Pittsworth, Karl made a significant contribution to the Lutheran Kuku Yalanji and Guugu Yimithirr Bama in Cape York, North Queensland. He led numerous people in the Pittsworth Parish to become involved with the ‘mission’ to the Indigenous people in Cape York. From about 1972 until 1985 he served on the Hope Vale – Wujal Mission Board and was its secretary, writing reports and meticulous minutes. This was very time consuming. In 1973 he made his first visit to Hope Vale. This Board was at first responsible to the national Church before it was handed over to the Queensland Synod. His gift with languages, his long association with PNG and its people, gave him an excellent frame of reference to understand and engage with Traditional Owners, and work towards improving their situation, in the face of a highly challenging and a paternalistic State Government. Karl was treated as family there by Pastor George Rosendale of Hopevale who called Karl Yaba meaning brother, and worked closely with him for many years in the cause of self-determination for the Bama.

Karl urged the Board to seek the advice of anthropologists. In 1978 during a challenging time for the ‘European’ Church and the Bama Church and its relationship with the Governments, when the ‘mission’ was being deinstitutionalised, the Pittsworth Parish granted Karl leave to make a three-week Visitation to Hope Vale, Wujal Wujal and Cooktown, with the late Pastor Paul Renner and the late Mr. Gordon Rose, to do much listening. Pastor Renner called Karl ‘Big ears’. Karl was the main compiler of a highly significant 90-page foolscap report nicknamed the ‘Pink Report’ (on pink paper) produced with typewriter, carbon paper and printed on a Photostat machine. The report was influential and somewhat controversial for the Board. It was mentioned in the State Parliament and the Federal Senate and referenced in a PhD Thesis. In 1979 Karl made a visit to Wujal Wujal and compiled another Report. He was instrumental in bringing about the name change of Bloomfield River Mission to Wujal Wujal in 1980, a ground-breaking step forward in those days.

The Bama truly appreciated Karl for his open, warm-hearted and kind engagement. He was happy to eat any local interesting foods that might be served, and never refused any dish, aware of what an honour it was to be offered it in the first place. Throughout his life he exhibited a delight and interest in all things: he had a sense of wonder, and an inherent love of Nature and God’s creation, and Tropical North Queensland and its people were especially dear to his heart.

In 1989 and 1990 Karl worked again back in PNG, at the Theological Seminary in Finschhafen, where he was a Lecturer in Theology. Heidi worked alongside him there in the library. They were greatly appreciated by both Staff and Students, as well as visiting Academics and Health Workers. In 1991, after their return from PNG, Karl accepted the call to the Hopetoun, Swan Hill Lutheran Parish in Victoria, to serve Hopetoun, Sea Lake, Swan Hill, Kerang and Robinvale. Numerous migrants. A five hour round trip drive for a Sunday service was routine in this far-flung Parish. In mid-1995 he accepted the call to the

Latrobe Lutheran Parish to serve in Traralgon and Warragul. The Silver Band Carol Service at Good Shepherd Traralgon on Christmas Eve was always a highlight of the year, and Karl and Heidi both enjoyed the magnificence and beauty of God's Creation within the local National Parks. Heidi taught German part-time for the Victorian Education Department, Monash University and the Victorian School of Languages.

In mid-1998 Heidi and Karl retired to Cleveland. Karl continued his ministry in different congregations until ill health forced him to give up all work in 2014. They were both members of the University of the Third Age where Heidi taught German for twenty-one years. Karl and Heidi have lived in the Redlands with an extensive network of supportive friends, to whom they and their family are truly grateful. Today Heidi and the family thank the staff of Anglicare, the Redlands Public Hospital, Cleveland Central Medical Centre, neighbours in Christine Court, the members of St. James Congregation and St. Paul's Mt. Cotton (the old Redlands Lutheran Parish), for their invaluable support in so many ways, both recently and over the years.

Karl passed peacefully to be with the Triune God after 89 years, on Friday 21st June 2024. He served our Lord and His Flock with energy, commitment, kindness and love, working with young and old, folk in town, country and remote areas, of different heritage, culture and backgrounds. He leaves to mourn his passing, his wife Heidi (sixty-four years of devotion), sons Philipp and Bernard and their families in Australia, Japan, and the USA; his brother Gerhard (USA) and sisters Heidi, Hedwig and Marianne in Australia and their families, and you among his friends and loved ones.

We give thanks to God our Father through Jesus Christ our Lord for our brother Karl.