

Agnes Dorsch Founder of the Lutheran Women's Guild of Australia



*The staff at Adelaide, SA, Concordia College c. 1938
Back: Rev. EW Zschech, Mr AO Wedding, Rev. RH Altus, Rev. HPA Hamann
Front: Miss DH Schulz, Rev. MT Winkler, Rev. CF Graebner, Mrs A Dorsch.
Photo from the Lutheran Archives SA [P11310 22338].*

The following article was researched and written by Lois Zweck. The paper was given at the Australian Lutheran College Festival of Learning in 2023. It is included here courtesy of Lois Zweck.

United for Greater Service: Agnes Dorsch and the Small Beginnings of Lutheran Women's Guilds

In 1893 – 130 years ago, 21-year-old Agnes Heyne gave up a teaching career to marry Caspar Dorsch, pastor of Adelaide's Bethlehem congregation. Six months later she founded Bethlehem Women's Guild, pioneering the movement that came to play such a central role in the life of Lutheran congregations during the 20th century. Five decades later, at the time when that movement had become the South Australian Lutheran Women's League under the motto "United for Greater Service" Agnes wrote a brief article reflecting on its "Small Beginning" with the Adelaide Guild, and her reflections on the inception of the Guild movement and its development are woven through this paper.

But before that particular historic moment, Agnes had already made history as the brilliant second female arts graduate from Adelaide University, and she later went on to forge a significant career as an educator and advocate of higher education for girls.

Agnes Marie Johanna Heyne was born on 18 December 1871, the daughter of Ernst Bernhard Heyne and Laura Wilhelmine *nee* Hanckel. Her father, the son of a doctor, had graduated from Leipzig University in botany and languages, and migrated to Melbourne in

1849. While working at the Melbourne Botanic Gardens under Ferdinand von Mueller, he was joined by his mother Marianne, who had previously conducted a private school in Dresden and continued working in education in Melbourne. In 1869 Ernst Heyne established a florist, seed and nursery business in Adelaide, which was carried on by his son Carl and continues today as *Heyne's Nurseries*, one of Australia's oldest family businesses. Ernst Heyne published widely in horticulture, viticulture, agriculture and forestry, and his manual *The Amateur Gardener* remained popular for decades. The Heyne family has since then also maintained the family traditions in medicine and nursing and as pastors and teachers in the church and beyond.

Agnes Heyne's maternal grandfather, Heinrich Eduard Hanckel, had migrated with his wife and daughter Laura from Hamburg, to become a well-known book-binder, stationer and bookseller in Adelaide, stocking Lutheran hymnbooks, catechisms and popular pietist devotional books as well as secular writers such as Alexander von Humboldt and the great German poets. So it seems natural that Agnes' sisters Laura and Ida also became teachers, and during their university studies established a Lutheran bookshop that in 1913 merged into the Lutheran Publishing Company, the forerunner of Open Book publishers.

With that urban and intellectual background, Agnes grew up in a time and place when women's position in society was changing rapidly – and provincial Adelaide was well to the forefront in that transition.

When Adelaide University was established in 1876, women were from the start admitted to its courses although not yet to degrees, since there was no pathway for them to matriculate, until the founding in 1879 of the Advanced School for Girls. The first government secondary school in Australia, it was intended to enable girls to prepare for university entrance, since at the time even elite private girls schools, with their emphasis on ladylike accomplishments, did not provide the systematic teaching of the required subjects for tertiary studies. Bursaries enabled Agnes to attend the prestigious Advanced School although her family was not wealthy, and remarkably, she was tutored in Latin and Greek by the Inspector General of Education, John Hartley, who had recognised her exceptional gifts. She became the first woman to receive a scholarship to Adelaide University, which in 1881 became the first University in Australia to admit women to academic degrees. In 1885 Edith Emily Dornwell, also from a German family, became the University's first female graduate, and its first science graduate since she lacked the prerequisite Latin and Greek for an Arts degree. The first female Arts graduate in 1888 was followed by Agnes Heyne in 1891, graduating with 1st Class Honours in Classics and Ancient History, Latin, Greek and Modern Languages, and 2nd class Honours in mathematics before returning as a teacher to the Advanced School for Girls, which continued to provide the majority of women graduates for decades to come.

These milestones in women's education merged into the broader questions of 'Woman's Sphere' and women's suffrage as they were being hotly debated in the press, in public meetings and in parliament by 1890, driven largely by women activists from church circles, seeking a voice in parliament in order to promote laws for the protection and legal rights of women and children. The Women's Christian Temperance Movement, shocked by the domestic violence resulting from alcohol abuse, collected the majority of the

signatures on the 30-metre long Women's Suffrage Petition presented to South Australian Parliament in 1894. The bill granting all South Australian women the right not only to vote but also to be elected to parliament was passed in December 1894. It was accepted by the British Government in 1895, and in 1896 SA women were finally the first in Australia to cast their vote. That ground-breaking process forms an unspoken context of the establishment of the first Lutheran Women's Guild in SA.

But by then it was the role of mother and home-maker that claimed most of Agnes Dorsch's energies. Caspar Dorsch was a widower with three surviving children by his first wife Hulda Stempel, who died in February 1892. So Agnes began married life in April 1893 with three step-children aged between 4 and 9 years, and gave birth to nine children over the next 18 years. Since the inaugural minutes of the Guild are lost, we have no evidence of how much she may have engaged in Guild affairs at that busy time of child-birth and child-rearing.

During those years Agnes gradually returned to teaching through private and evening classes, but above all by tutoring the high-achieving children of prominent Adelaide families to success in the public examinations leading to University entrance. Her subjects included English, Latin, Greek, German, French, Physiology and Mathematics. Her mathematical proficiency enabled her to also undertake astronomical calculations for the Adelaide Observatory to supplement her income. She is said to have taught five sons of South Australian governors, but it is perhaps names like Dr Helen Mayo or Lady Cilento that give a better impression of the prominence of her successful students, and her distinguished reputation made tutoring her financial mainstay even when she returned to the full-time classroom. As sole provider for her family following her husband's breakdown and prolonged illness from 1900 and his death in 1916, she taught at elite schools like Tormore House Girls School, Queens School, and Prince Alfred College, thus enabling her own children to attend them. They went on to brilliant academic careers after winning the state's most prestigious prizes and scholarships, including six Tennyson Medals and a Rhodes Scholarship.

But Agnes' longest and arguably most significant contribution as a classroom teacher was at Concordia College from 1923 to 1943, as the first woman appointed to the academic staff. She was instrumental in Concordia's transition to co-education, and took special interest in the education and welfare of girl students, who were first admitted in 1927—the year that Agnes was made a permanent staff member. The professorial staff valued her erudition and scholarly approach, her intellectual grasp and versatility, while to the students she was also an understanding friend.

During these latter years of her teaching career, Agnes Dorsch was still – or perhaps once more – actively involved in the Bethlehem Guild and the South Australian Lutheran Women's League that had recently developed out of her initiative of 45 years earlier. The celebration of the centenary of Australian Lutheranism in 1938 renewed contact between Australian Lutherans and their American counterparts and led to a request to the SA League from their sister organisation in the US for an article for their new magazine *Lutheran Woman*. Agnes, a noted public speaker, responded with an article titled *Despise not small beginnings*, written in the formally crafted language of her day.

Her brief survey of ‘the modest efforts of the daughters of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod in Australia {ELSA} in the direction of church activities’, provides one example of the parallel developments among the many and varied Australian Lutheran synods and districts in that era, and forms a useful starting point for reflecting on the sources, motivations and chief concerns of these movements.

Beginning with the arrival in South Australia a century earlier of the ‘small band of Lutheran Pilgrim Fathers from Germany’ in search of religious liberty, Agnes paid tribute to the pioneer settlers:

Of the church work of the Pilgrim Mothers no minute-books have left any records. These pioneer women were kept far too busy attending to their household duties and helping their menfolk to wrest a scanty livelihood from the grudging soil of an undeveloped land to find time for women’s guilds and conventions. We may, however, be sure that when the Book of Life is opened, a record will be found there of the faithful work done by many a one who followed in the footsteps of the Lois, the Eunice and the Dorcas we read about. There can be no doubt that such women, working for their Master ‘in quietness and in confidence’ within their narrow bounds, scattered by word and example seeds which are now bringing forth a healthful store of fruit to the honour and glory of God.

In the published reports of church and school dedications, mission festivals, harvest thanksgivings and synods we do in fact have ample evidence of the capacity of the women of small rural communities to collaborate in beautifying their churches, billeting whole synods of pastors and delegates, and catering for hundreds of visitors at special events, often under the most trying conditions. But there is indeed no evidence that the pioneering Prussian Lutherans, or the others who soon followed them, brought with them any concept of a formal women’s organisation at a congregational level, until the social changes in women’s status we have just noted around the turn of the 19th to the 20th century influenced their aspirations too. In the words of Agnes Dorsch:

We are living in an age when the women of all progressive nations are impelled by an ardent desire for organized corporate activity in every phase of life, and everywhere Christian women, while still striving after high ideals as home-makers, are yielding to this urge by launching movements for definite church work and social service in ever-widening spheres. Driven by this impulse, the women of Bethlehem Church of Adelaide in 1893 inaugurated the first women’s guild of the ELSA. This Frauenverein, as it was called in those days, made its chief aim the alleviation of the hardships of the sick, the aged and the poor of their congregation, and wherever possible also of sufferers in public institution. In addition to this, it undertook to raise funds for effecting improvements in the interior of the church.

The German word *Frauenverein*, which was widely used for our local women’s guilds in the 19th century, simply means ‘women’s society/association’ without necessarily implying a church organisation. The basic meaning of the word *Verein* is ‘to unite’, clearly encapsulating Agnes’ concept of women joining forces for the “organised corporate activity”. In Germany in the 19th century royal women organised patriotic *Frauenvereine* in times of war to aid the war effort and to support wounded soldiers, war-widows and orphans. Despite the vast distance separating SA from the battlefields in France, the

Franco-Prussian War in 1870 saw a patriotic women's society launched here by Marie Fiedler, wife of the independent Pastor Fiedler in Hahndorf, to organise bazaars, concerts, and picnics to raise contributions for the royal war relief funds in Berlin.

Less dramatic examples of women's societies formed for a limited time to raise money for a specific purpose include the Eudunda *Frauenverein* set up in 1884 to fund the furnishing of their new Emmaus Church, winding up with a donation to the organ fund once its goals were achieved. Mrs Emilie Peters' sewing circle which produced items such as baby clothes, aprons, and the like for sale in aid of Concordia College in Murtoa in 1890, is just the beginning of support for the colleges and seminaries of the church. That becomes a constant theme found in most Guild minutes, reflecting the supreme value church members placed on the training of their pastors and teachers. In the United States two individual societies were founded already in 1852 in Fort Wayne, Indiana and in St. Louis, Missouri to sew, mend, wash and iron clothes for the students at the seminaries in those cities. There, as here in Australia, rural families were conscious of the sacrifices families made when they sent their promising 12- year- old sons off to years of study at College although that meant losing their contribution to the work of the farm or business, or to the household budget through their later earnings.

In Germany, mission societies were also supported by associated women's groups, who above all employed their needlework skills to raise funds or to outfit newly commissioned missionaries. The Dresden Mission *Frauenverein* sent baby clothes for Friederike Meyer's first baby at Encounter Bay in SA, but also lengths of material which she used to teach the Aboriginal girls in her husband's mission school to cut out and sew into dresses for themselves and shirts for the boys.

The first South Australian women's societies were also mission societies, initiated in 1865 by Johanne Louise Zilm, a farmer's wife in Nain, to support a Cologne (Germany) women's society for mission to the Jews in sponsoring poor Jewish pupils in a Protestant orphanage in Smyrna in Turkey - a striking example of the reach of 19th century Lutheran networks. With the beginning of Aboriginal missions in Central Australia in 1866, these guilds in the parishes of Langmeil and Light Pass shifted their primary focus to this local mission, and with their small but regular donations largely financed the building of the Killalpaninna school and church, a remarkable achievement. These essentially fund-raising societies were in decline by the end of the century, though still providing 'Christmas cheer' and provisions such as jam or dried fruit and vegetables for the mission. They were largely forgotten after the deaths of their founders, Pastors Rechner and Auricht.

When the social upheaval of industrialisation in Europe saw the growth of an impoverished working class in the cities and more and more women employed in factories, we find aristocratic and middle-class women forming societies to ameliorate the misery of the urban poor. In Liegnitz in Silesia the Countess Stolberg-Wernigerode formed a women's society to sponsor a day-care centre for the workers' children who otherwise wandered the streets: as a boy in Silesia, Pastor Julius Rechner had assisted his father in running such an institution. Volunteering as a nurse during the Hamburg cholera epidemic in 1831 so impressed upon Amalie Sieveking the depth of misery and distress among the city's poor that she founded a Lutheran "Female Association for the Care of the Sick and the Poor", which prompted similar *Frauenvereine* in many German cities. Her work in

reforming hospitals and nursing, education and housing for the poor is considered the forerunner of women's engagement in church-based social welfare work, *Diakonie*, and was perhaps well known to Agnes Dorsch's Hanckel grandparents from Hamburg. In her childhood Agnes had attended Sunday School at St Bartholomew's Anglican Church and at the Unitarian Church where her parents were married – and where prominent educationist and suffrage activist Catherine Helen Spence was a member and occasional preacher. Those links suggest some familiarity with English women's guilds, the historic English term later borrowed by many of our Lutheran women's societies.

These scattered examples of women from far and near "*launching movements for definite church work and social service in ever-widening spheres*" bring us back to Agnes Dorsch and her story, flagging many of the concerns that emerged over time in the Guild movement. The minutes of the Bethlehem Guild's first meetings, held in the Dorsch manse with Agnes presiding, are lost. But the records from 1915 focus on what Agnes defined as its *chief aim: the alleviation of the hardships of the sick, the aged and the poor of their congregation, and wherever possible also of sufferers in public institutions*. The recurring business at every meeting was the election of two women to visit the frail and needy of the congregation, armed with tram tickets supplied by the Guild; and a detailed report on the visits of the previous month listed the individuals and institutions by name. The outbreak of war in 1914 brought new tasks: the minutes record a request by the Red Cross for reading matter and warm clothing for the German 'prisoners of war' interned (in tents) in the Torrens Island 'concentration camp' ! That was soon followed by the distribution of knitting needles and yarn for socks for Australian troops overseas (a project overseen by the Dorcas Society – see Acts 9, 36-42), and a series of social events for soldiers heading to or returning from the Front. After the War the women contributed to the efforts made by both synods to relieve the distress of fellow Lutherans in Germany.

A pillar of the Bethlehem society from its inception was Emma Maria Magdalene Hippe, 10 years older than Agnes, who served for a time as Secretary and as Treasurer until her illness and death in 1922. Mrs Hippe was the daughter of Blumberg Lutheran school teacher August Ferdinand Andrae, and she and her husband Fred had recently moved from Blumberg to the city where Fred established himself as a carpenter and builder in the eastern suburbs. At the Guild's 25th Jubilee Mrs Hippe was presented with a purse of gold sovereigns for her 'faithfulness and perseverance' over 25 years as Treasurer, but by then she was herself one of the sick on the Guild's visiting list.

During those decades, the Women's Guild flourished and grew into a movement: Karlsruhe and Hahndorf 1902, Lobethal 1905, Blumberg and Eudunda 1909, Rosenthal 1910 – to name just a few.

Luise Homann, founder of the Karlsruhe Guild, could by that time look back on an adventurous life, having served on three continents – in Germany, India, and South Africa with her first husband Wilhelm Wendlandt, and at Killalpaninna and Adelaide with her 2nd, Ernst Homann. And uniquely, she had even visited the fifth inhabited continent, as the Hermannsburg mission ship that picked her up with her four sons in Africa after Pastor Wendtland's death continued on to South America before making the return voyage to Germany. So it is hardly surprising that her very active foundation focussed above all on supporting missions.

The country congregations soon followed the example of the Adelaide women by establishing similar guilds, with aims adapted to local needs, and Lutheran women's guilds may now be found even in the most isolated districts of Australia. Before long these organisations embarked on wider activities. Not only did they undertake to raise funds for home and foreign missions, but they also made it their aim to cater to the material needs of Concordia College, the institution for training pastors and teachers for the ELSA and providing a higher general education for boys and girls. To the kindly thoughtfulness of guild women the students of this college owe many an improvement in their dormitories and studies, not to mention all sorts of gifts to the larder that afford a welcome relief from the monotony of institutional fare.

In these early years, the older more compact congregations of the first immigrants had the advantage of more dense settlement, but women still walked a number of miles to attend meetings, before the advent of motor travel led to a new level of cooperation between individual guilds. So by the time Australian Lutheranism celebrated its centenary the stage was set for the next milestone in women's activities in the church. As Agnes describes it, the atmosphere reflects the same enthusiasm for 'organised corporate activity' she saw in the foundation of the first guild:

During the past few years guilds of congregations separated by a distance that can be covered by a few hours travel began to pay visits to one another. Thus the way was being prepared for a closer union through a bond of common interests, and women with vision had dreams of a closer union through an amalgamation of women's guilds into a league that might launch enterprises for greater service.

Then in 1938 the Missouri Synod sent the Dean of Concordia Seminary St Louis to attend the Centenary Synod of the ELSA in May – the first such official visit for 35 years. While Dr John Fritz addressed congregations and spoke with synodical leaders, his wife Emilie did likewise with the women:

The needed stimulus was given by Mrs Fritz, who by her vivid description of the work done by the Lutheran Woman's League of the Missouri Synod and her inspiring words of advice and encouragement, was largely responsible for starting on its career our South Australian Women's League. – constituted under the motto 'United for Greater Service' in February 1939.

Agnes Dorsch retired from the committee of the SALWL in 1942, just short of 50 years after she had first presided over the Adelaide Guild, only to tackle a major new challenge on their behalf. Until War's end she ran the Adelaide Lutheran War Relief Organisation, initiated by the Adelaide Guild at their Pastor Janzow's request, to raise funds for the many and varied causes, contributing sums of money ranging from £5 to £30 to the Australian war effort: Red Cross, Fighting Forces Comforts Fund, Schools Patriotic Fund, Cheer Up Society, National Clothing Drive, Army Nurses Association, POW Fund, London Air Raid Relief, Daw's Road Military Hospital, Russian Medical Aid, Chinese Famine Relief, UNRRA Clothing Appeal, and Food for Britain. At the same time, the public acknowledgement of these donations demonstrated the loyalty of the Lutheran community, still largely perceived as German. Agnes' close contacts with elite Adelaide families proved invaluable in this work, enabling her to invite prominent women such as

the Governor's wife to open the fund-raising garden parties, bazaars or concerts organised by her committee.

At that point Australian women – like their American counterparts – turned their efforts to providing post-war relief to a devastated Germany, as you may have heard in Bethany Pietsch's paper yesterday on the Thank-you letters received by Guild members from the recipients of their Care packages.

Just a few blocks away from Bethlehem Church, at the neighbouring St Stephens congregation (aligned with Immanuel Synod aaG), another *Frauenverein* was established five years after the Bethlehem Guild, by Mrs Winifred Eitel, wife of its new pastor Dr Ernst Eitel. The Eitels arrived in 1897 after the congregation had suffered a six-year vacancy, to find the congregation in a state of decline and its church in a state of dilapidation. Mrs Eitel organised an invitation-only Guild with just six members and one major aim: to restore the dignity of the church building and the morale of its members. Within three years membership had increased to such an extent that they were able to build a new church, the current St Stephens in Wakefield St. Mrs Eitel was another remarkable woman with a unique story.

MARY ANNE WINIFRED EATON, an Englishwoman, arrived in Hong Kong in 1862 to take up a post as superintendent of the Diocesan Native Female Training School, a bilingual school for Chinese girls, on behalf of the London Society for Promoting Female Education in the East, an initiative of the British Church Missionary Society. She was a keen teacher who strove for high standards in the school, but it aroused the anger of the local Chinese population and was forced to close. In 1866 she married Ernst Eitel, who had taken up work among the Hakka people for the Basel Mission Society before ultimately taking on British nationality and embarking on a career in the Hong Kong civil service, gaining renown as a scholar of Chinese language and culture. Mrs Eitel was Anglican and their children were baptised and confirmed Anglicans, although they worshipped as Lutherans while their father served as St Stephens pastor. The younger daughter Winifred served as secretary of the Guild, run in English and on English lines. Alongside the goal of beautifying the church building, the society aimed to foster fellowship. The Guild records deposited at Lutheran Archives by St Stephens are the most comprehensive I have seen.

The same could be said of the Women's Guild movement within the Church. The women of the church have throughout their history met more regularly and recorded their activities more thoroughly than most auxiliaries or organisations in the Church. A quick sampling of Guild records in the Congregation boxes at Lutheran Archives listed deposits from 28 Guilds in Victoria and 115 in South Australia, and the other districts would surely render a similar yield. The Guilds have always been admirable record keepers, and the holdings of Lutheran Archives constitute a treasure trove of inspiring and often surprising stories like the few I have outlined here, just waiting to be told.

Galatians 6:10. **King James** Version ... As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, **especially** unto them who are of the **household of faith**.