

A bridge and a beacon

This is the story of a church for the nation. St Peter's Canberra: built from contributions of church groups, congregations and people from all over the country and still filled with a global membership, it is now a story that belongs to the church—across the nation and across the seas.

In 1960, Max Lohe, president of the United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Australia (UELCA), wrote to Australian Lutheran youth in *Focus* magazine: 'As in the case of the Methodist, Church of Christ and Congregational churches, ours too is to be a "national church", not only the property of one congregation but a symbol of the UELCA in the national capital. Thus the appeal has gone out to all our members, men, women, youth and children.'

The idea for the church for the nation was already in UELCA president Dr J J Stolz's mind in 1927 when he attended the opening of Canberra's Parliament House. But it was 1954 before a land grant was received from the Commonwealth government and the idea could take shape. A worship service was held onsite and a signboard unveiled, stating 'Site of an evangelical Lutheran Church to be erected by the United Evangelical Lutheran Church. Declare the deeds of God among the nations.' Subsequently, it was decided the site was unsuitable and it was finally reported at Synod, 1959, that an alternative had been found and granted, free of charge.

Architect Eric von Schramek was most impressed with the new site. He recalled: 'On the southern corner there was a dense thicket of elms and I immediately visualised that this thicket would become the backdrop of the sanctuary through a clear glass window behind the altar. It would appear like a stained glass window changing from light green in spring to lush dark green in summer and with colourful foliage in autumn. In my vision I saw the bare spindly trees of winter before me. What an opportunity for a cathedral type church right in the centre of our capital city.'

The building of St Peter's became a national project. Sunday schools around the country provided the funds for the New Zealand pine timber crucifix; women's associations 'subscribed liberal amounts towards the furnishings of the chancel', and it became a project for Lutheran Men from 1956 to 1959. The young people relished the opportunity to provide the organ. They raised funds, but then came news that a Walcker organ had been donated and sent from Germany. The money from the youth was used to pay the customs levy on it instead. The congregation purchased the pews, and the Canberra Latvian congregation provided carpet for the building. UELCA Canberra ministry had begun in 1948, with St Peter's reaching to and establishing Estonian-, Latvian-, Finnish-, German- and English-speaking congregations—rather befitting a national church! By 1958 Dr J J Stolz was the pastor, then 80 years of age and 'doing a yeoman's task in Canberra, particularly amongst New Australians', the *Lutheran Herald* reported. It was widely recognised that these 'new Australians' represented one of the greatest mission opportunities ever granted to the church in Australia. The Finnish migrants were served by the Finnish Seaman's Mission (the pastor travelling from Brisbane) as 'the language barrier is very great ... there is absolutely no similarity between the Finnish language and either German or English [so] it is extremely difficult to converse with them for the first three months of their stay here', *Focus* magazine told its readers in 1960. And at last the great day of dedication dawned—Sunday, 10 September 1961. The dedication was publicised months in advance in the *Lutheran Herald*, in the hope that many members of the church—not just from the New South Wales district—would be able to attend. It was the church for the nation, after all. Pastor WF Roehrs was prepared to arrange accommodation for all visitors. A busload of 40 young people came



STEPPING STONES

If we pause to look back we'll see that the secure stepping stone on which we stand is just one in a long line of others carefully laid by those who have gone before us. Let us be as careful and prayerful as they were, as we lay each stone that will direct the paths of those who will come after us.



by Rachel Kuchel



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Pictures: Courtesy Lutheran Archives

Above left: Sunday schools around Australia helped to raise the funds to pay for the cross and figure of Christ that hang in front of the sanctuary window. Top right: Designed by architect Eric von Schramek, the St Peters Canberra church building was dedicated on 10 September, 1961, with the intention to proclaim the gospel to the nations from the Australian Capital Territory. Above centre: Vestrymen carry the altar cross, sacramental vessels and candlesticks into the newly opened church, as a crowd lines the pathway. Is this procession a part of the film of the day which Lutheran Archives holds? Above right: Pastor W F Roehrs (left) speaks with official guests Dr H Ruoff, of the West German Embassy, and his wife.

from Walla Walla in southern New South Wales, 17 pastors attended, and so did church members from South Australia, Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland.

The church was a memorial 'to the men and women who devotedly served their Country during World War II, 1939–1945'. Naturally then, there was a large representation of government officials at the dedication; including Senator MF Scott (who unveiled the memorial plaque), a representative of the Department of

the Interior (who provided the land), members of the diplomatic corps, the German Embassy Counsellor, the Consul of Sweden and the Charge-de-Affaires of Finland and Denmark. Pastors of the Estonian, Latvian, Finnish and German groups attended, as did Pastor Kokkonen of the Church of Finland.

How does this story continue to be one for the nation?

The Lutheran Archives has moving film footage of the dedication of St Peters

Canberra. Lutheran Archives needs help from you—Lutheran members across the nation and the seas—to provide the funds to digitise this archival film (and the 139 others in our collection), so that we can continue to tell its story on your behalf. Let's make the 'church for the nation' a digitisation project for the nation. Please contribute to our 8-millimetre and 16-millimetre film digitisation appeal.

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Seeds that sprout

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