

# The History of the Bethesda Lutheran Mission, Cooper Creek 1867–1917



Congregation outside the old Killalpaninna church

## 1860–1862

The ill-fated Burke and Wills expedition and subsequent searches for them created worldwide interest. Reports of “good country” by explorers like A. W. Howitt and John McKinlay, who led search parties for Burke and Wills, resulted in pastoralists increasingly taking up land around Kati Thanda–Lake Eyre and Cooper Creek.

## 1865

Pastor Ludwig Harms, head of the Hermannsburg Mission Society in Germany, partnered with the South Australian Lutheran synods to establish a mission in the far north-east of the colony.

## 1866

German missionaries J.F. Gössling and E. Homann with lay helper H.H. Vogelsang and local J.E. Jacob left Tanunda in the Barossa Valley for Lake Hope.

## 1867

After an arduous journey delayed by drought they arrived at Lake Hope, but decided to relocate to Lake Kopperamanna to join a group of Moravian missionaries who had arrived earlier. The Hermannsburg party then moved further west to establish their mission at Lake Killalpaninna.

Both of these areas were important Dieri ceremonial and trade centres. Large gatherings of neighbouring language groups met here periodically.

Wilhelm Koch, a young schoolteacher, recorded his impressions of the mission area in his journal in 1868:

*If you stand on the sandhill and glance in every direction, one must admit, that in spite of many things lacking, the Far North of South Australia has its beauty, and the more often one has a look at the country, the more one will love it.*

## 1868

The Hermannsburg missionaries retreated south in mid-1867 following tensions with the Dieri over their presence in their country. They returned to Lake Killalpaninna in 1868. They attempted to establish a German agrarian community based on sheep, goats and growing vegetables.

## 1871

Their attempts to establish the mission based on European farming methods were challenged by the extreme cycle of flood and drought. Severe drought forced the mission to retreat to Mundowdna Station 100km south, when water supply became critically low.

## 1873

The missionaries relocated to Bucaltaninna in search of reliable water and remained there for over five years.

## 1874

The Hermannsburg missionaries had lost heart. An internal issue between the local congregations and Hermannsburg in Germany saw them relinquish all interest in Killalpaninna and relocate their efforts to New Hermannsburg on the Finke River west of Alice Springs.

## 1878

Missionary J. Flierl and schoolteacher C. Meyer joined colonists Vogelsang and Jacob and they returned to Killalpaninna to continue the mission at Killalpaninna, which they now called Bethesda.

## 1879

The first Dieri were baptised. A Bavarian style Church was built of mud bricks with a 42-foot (14 metre) bell tower. It was an imposing edifice in the desert landscape. Fifty to one hundred Aboriginal people attended services on a regular basis. Missionaries had to cope with repeated droughts and illness.

## 1888–1906

Missionary Reuther arrived. With Carl Strehlow (1892–1894) he translated the New Testament into Dieri language. He became an enthusiastic collector of information about the Dieri language and culture. These were the glory years for the mission under Reuther's energetic leadership.

## 1897

Sheep were the main source of income and although 28,000 were shorn in this year, 22,000 died during drought. The fluctuating seasons made subsistence for the mission community increasingly difficult.

## 1908

Reuther (who left in 1906) was replaced by Riedel, who re-energised the enterprise for a time. He was responsible for the demolition of the old mud brick church, re-building it as a timber and iron structure.

Bethesda now had 25 buildings plus stockyards. Many other Aboriginal language groups gathered at the mission as life on the land, now dominated by pastoralism, became increasingly harder.



Pastor and Mrs JF Gössling



Mrs and Missionary Reuther translating the Bible

## 1913

Father Vogelsang, last of the original missionaries, passed away and was buried beside the church at Killalpaninna.

## 1915

Extended droughts and accumulated debts forced the mission to close and be sold.

## 1917

The school carried on until 1917 when all mission work ended and the school was closed by the SA government. change to a photo of Reuther.. Some stayed at Killalpaninna, but most Aboriginal people moved to surrounding stations such as Mundowdna, Mungeranie, Etadunna, Murnpeowie, Mirra Mitta Bore and Cowarie.