

Keith, John Baird (1901–1989) and Annie Marjorie (Wright) (1903–1992)

LESTER DEVINE

Originally trained as a secondary history teacher, a career long Adventist educator, Lester Devine, Ed.D., has taught at elementary, secondary and higher education levels and spent more than three decades in elected educational leadership positions in two divisions of the world Church, NAD (1969-1982) and SPD (1982-2005). He completed his forty years of denominational service with a term as director of the Ellen G. White/Adventist Research Centre at Avondale University College in Australia where his life-long hobby of learning and presenting on Adventist heritage issues became his vocation.

Born in New Zealand, John Keith entered the ministry of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in 1937 in Victoria, Australia. He later became a union president in two unions in the Australasian Division.

Early Years

John Baird Keith was born in Invercargill, New Zealand, on September 15, 1901,¹ to parents Alexander and Margaret Keith and was the third of seven children in the family.² Keith became a Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) in 1917 as the consequence of reading books and other printed materials which his mother had purchased from a literature evangelist.³ He was the senior elder of the Masterton Church just three years after becoming an SDA.⁴ He attended the New Zealand Missionary College and there spent 4 years doing the Missionary Course.⁵ By his own account, he did not graduate.⁶ During this period he met Annie Marjorie Wright in Wellington, New Zealand.⁷ She had been born, in Perth, West Australia, on October 27, 1903.⁸ They married on November 21, 1928.⁹ To



John Baird Keith

Photo courtesy of Lester Devine.

this union two daughters were born: Joan Marjorie on May 5, 1931 at Wahroonga, New South Wales and Valda May on January 21, 1940 in Melbourne.¹⁰

After spending some time in literature evangelism Keith was employed at the Melbourne Sanitarium Health Food Factory in June 1933.¹¹ In January 1934 he transferred to the Warburton, Victoria, factory where he remained until March, 1937.¹² In April 1937 he commenced service in evangelistic ministry in the Victorian Conference.¹³ He continued in evangelism in Victoria until he was appointed as the President of the New Hebrides (now Vanuatu) Mission, an appointment which he took up in September, 1941.¹⁴

Because of the possibility of a Japanese invasion in the New Hebrides the family was recalled to Australia in March 1942, and Keith was appointed to evangelism in Queensland, but by December of that year, JB had returned to the New Hebrides along with his colleague Algie Gallagher.¹⁵ Others who returned included A. D. Pietz, A. R. Barrett and J. H. D. Miller.¹⁶ Their families remained in Australia where six missionary wives, including those of JB and Gallagher, and their children were all living together in one old crowded house across the street from the Australasian Union Conference. Communication was irregular.¹⁷ The mission had a boat but it had no engine, and the two men attempted to sail the 100 kilometres to visit the island of Ambrim but spent much of the time rowing. JB also walked from Atchin to Tanmaru, 40 kilometres distant and back again contracting Malaria on the trip and was bedridden for a time afterward.¹⁸

In July 1943 it was reported that J. B. Keith had been appointed as president in the Society Islands.¹⁹ However, a following edition of the *Australasian Record* reported that the appointment had been rescinded and a position was to be filled in the North New South Wales Conference.²⁰ By September Keith was back in Australia engaged in pastoral work in Tamworth, North New South Wales Conference.²¹ In 1947 he was appointed superintendent of the Fiji Mission remaining in that role until the end of 1951.²² From January 1952, Keith was engaged in pastoral work in the North New Zealand Conference until October 1953 when he was invited to be the President of the North Queensland Conference. Three years later, in 1955, he was appointed to be the President of the Coral Sea Union Mission with headquarters in Lae, in the Territory of New Guinea.²³

In 1963, Pastor Keith was elected to the presidency of the Trans-Commonwealth Union Conference in Australia, a huge territory encompassing the south and western areas of that vast country.²⁴ He remained in that role until he retired on March 4, 1967.²⁵

With the heart of a pastor, J. B. Keith served until 1984 as the Chaplain for the Warburton Sanitarium and Hospital before he and Marjorie moved to the New South Wales Central Coast where they could be closer to their two daughters and their families.²⁶ John Keith died on January 11, 1989.²⁷ At the close of his funeral service, 100 ministers present were asked to form an honour guard. They stood with their backs to the end of each pew on each side of the central aisle of the sanctuary, and the two lines of ministers continued through the entrance lobby and down the front steps to the waiting hearse. There they stood at respectful attention as the pallbearers, all of them grandchildren, carried Keith's casket on their shoulders and out of the church; a signal

honor and a mark of respect for a man for whom his co-workers had enormous regard.²⁸ Annie Marjorie Keith lived on until August 11, 1992 when she died at the Esther Sommerville Nursing Home, Normanhurst, New South Wales.²⁹

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