

Westerman, Walter John (1879–1946)

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Walter John Westerman

Photo courtesy of the South Pacific Division Heritage Centre.

Walter John Westerman was an Australian Seventh-day Adventist pastor who spent thirty years in administration at the local conference and union conference levels, twenty-six of those years as a vice-president of the Australasian Union Conference.¹

Birth and Early Years

Walter Westerman, the youngest of eleven children, was born on January 6, 1879, in the Bendigo suburb of Huntley, Victoria, to Jonathan Westerman (1834-1910)² and his wife, Sarah Redfern (1837-1883).³ His older brothers and sisters were Hannah Elizabeth (1856-1925),⁴ Joseph (1859-1860),⁵ Samuel (1862-1926),⁶ Charlotte (1863-1886),⁷ Sarah Ann (1866-1934),⁸ Emma (1868-1951),⁹ Rose Keturah (1870-1938),¹⁰ Jonathan William (1872-1873),¹¹ Thomas Edward (1874-1942),¹² and Martha Bessie (1876-unknown).¹³

When he was only four years old, Westerman's mother died, and not long afterward his family moved from the mining town of Bendigo across the state to Coalville¹⁴ in the dairying area of Gippsland. Here, he completed his schooling and became a dairy farmer.¹⁵

Marriage and Family

When Westerman was about twelve, a new family moved into the district and when he was twenty-three he married their eldest daughter, Ena.¹⁶ Ena Hannah Horley was born in the Melbourne suburb of Carlton on December 29, 1881.¹⁷ Her parents were George William Horley (1854-1941)¹⁸ and Winnifred Anne Lance-Hughes (1855-1949).¹⁹ Ena Westerman had six younger brothers and sisters—Lance Charles George (1884-1963);²⁰ Winifred Ann (1886-1886),²¹ Norman Lance (1888-1958),²² Raymond Lance (1890-1975),²³ Winifred Lance (1893-1982) who married Pastor J. W. Kent,²⁴ and Dorothy Lance (1895-1969) who married Norman T. McMahon.²⁵ Ena and Walter Westerman married on August 20, 1902, and set up their home on Walter's farm at Drouin,²⁶ near Coalville.²⁷ Four children were born to them— Merrian Winifred "Rosalind" (1903-1980) married Pastor Herbert Arthur Kent and became a doctor;²⁸ Raymond Walter (1907-1992) became a manager for the Sanitarium Health Food Co. Ltd,²⁹ Wilfred Alan, CBE, KB (1913-2001) served in the Australian Government Trade Department,³⁰ and Dulcie Joyce (1917-1968) married Albert Roumaine White.³¹

Conversion and Training

In April 1906, two Adventist evangelists, W. W. Fletcher and George Stewart, opened evangelistic meetings in Coalville and Drouin,³² which Walter and Ena Westerman attended.³³ They were baptized, then sold their farm, and with their two children moved to Avondale in 1908 so that Walter Westerman could attend the Australasian Missionary College where he undertook the missionary course,³⁴ exchanging a relatively secure and comfortable daily life for one of struggle and privation.³⁵ During the end of year break in 1908-1909, he sold Adventist books and other literature in Nowra for three months.³⁶ He then returned to Avondale to complete his course and graduated at the end of September 1909.³⁷

Career

Westerman was appointed to field work in the New South Wales Conference and was partnered with Cecil K. Meyers,³⁸ who had been a literature evangelist up until this time. Together, they were assigned to run a tent evangelistic series in the town of Mudgee, New South Wales.³⁹ The meetings began on November 4, 1909, with three meetings a week. Westerman preached at the Friday night meeting each week.⁴⁰ They advertised in the local newspaper and were rewarded with an overflow audience in the weeks leading up to Christmas.⁴¹ In the new year, there were several baptisms, with ten candidates in the first baptism.⁴² The evangelists also started holding meetings at Pipeclay,⁴³ then included a campaign at Gulgong.⁴⁴ They were given separate assignments during the winter with Westerman working at Mudgee⁴⁵ and towards the end of 1910, at Rockdale.⁴⁶

At the Union Conference Session in October 1910, Westerman was asked to transfer to North New Zealand⁴⁷ and on November 26 the family boarded the *Warrimoo* for the journey.⁴⁸ He spent most of 1911 in evangelism in Petone, in the capital city, Wellington, after a short time at New Plymouth.⁴⁹ In December 1911, Westerman was put in charge of a tent evangelistic series in Foxton, just over 100 kilometers north of Wellington.⁵⁰ He worked

there all year with H. E. Piper and J. Mills, then returned to evangelism in Wellington in February 1912.⁵¹

It was a very successful year. Westerman's twice-weekly meetings were well-attended throughout the year and he was kept very busy studying the Bible with those desiring baptism.⁵² A revival was also seen among church members.⁵³

Ordination and Greater Responsibilities

On Sabbath, January 18, 1913, Westerman was ordained to the gospel ministry at the North New Zealand camp meeting in Auckland.⁵⁴ He was appointed to serve on the boards of the Sanitarium Health Food Company, the trust property, and the Oroua Missionary School (OMS).⁵⁵ In April, he was the evening speaker at the South Island Conference camp meeting in Christchurch⁵⁶ and, upon his return home, attended the opening and dedication of OMS on April 30, where he sang in a quartet and offered the dedicatory prayer.⁵⁷ Meanwhile, every few months, he was conducting baptisms⁵⁸ of new converts in Wellington. By mid-1913, he had so many Bible studies he could no longer care for them all, so he was provided with the assistance of Arthur Currow.⁵⁹ By the end of 1913, the Wellington church membership had almost reached seventy and fund-raising was in progress to construct a church building.⁶⁰

It was at this time that Westerman was transferred to work in the larger city of Auckland in the north of North New Zealand. Between February and August of 1914, thirty-one converts were baptized.⁶¹ In September, he was a delegate to the Australasian Union Conference Session in Sydney,⁶² at which he was appointed to the presidency of the South Australian Conference.⁶³ The Westerman family, which now included three children, immediately moved to Adelaide, and, in October, barely twenty-one months after his ordination, Westerman took on this leadership role.⁶⁴ Church members were widely scattered in South Australia, necessitating extensive travel as he met with his constituents.⁶⁵

Two years later, in September 1916, Westerman was given the added responsibility of vice president of the Australasian Union Conference (AUC), while remaining as president of the South Australian Conference.⁶⁶ This entailed regular trips to Sydney for meetings⁶⁷ as well as overseas travel.⁶⁸ In November 1916, he was transferred from South Australia to be the president of the more populous Victorian Conference (still retaining the vice presidency of the AUC).⁶⁹ He held these dual roles until May 1920 when A. H. Piper took over as president of the Victorian Conference.⁷⁰ The Westerman family then moved to Wahroonga from which base he carried out his duties until May 1923.⁷¹

At the AUC council meeting held in April 1923, Westerman was asked to take on the presidency of the South New Zealand Conference in addition to his work as Australasian Union Conference vice president.⁷² He took on the challenge to build up the Church in that conference, receiving financial support from the North New Zealand Conference⁷³ and the appointment of evangelist Pastor J. W. Kent to lead the outreach program.⁷⁴ Westerman continued to have a busy program of speaking at camp meetings,⁷⁵ and visitation around his own conference⁷⁶

as well as union conference responsibilities.⁷⁷

During the General Conference session in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 1926, Westerman was appointed president of the Austral Union Conference with headquarters in Buenos Aires.⁷⁸ However, he was shortly afterwards requested, instead, to return to Wairoa as an Australasian Union Conference field secretary and to lead the Home Missions (now Personal Ministries) department of the AUC.⁷⁹ Before moving from New Zealand in January 1927, he conducted home missions conventions in three South New Zealand centers and baptized twenty-five new members in Timaru.⁸⁰ He was encouraged by the growth that had taken place in the South New Zealand Conference since 1923, with 101 baptisms during 1926 alone.⁸¹

Back in Australia, he travelled from state to state, conducting training institutes⁸² and conventions,⁸³ leading Appeal for Missions teams,⁸⁴ taking meetings,⁸⁵ and representing the AUC at camp meetings.⁸⁶ This schedule of constant movement about the Australasian Union continued until 1930, when he was asked to temporarily add the leadership of the South New South Wales Conference to his responsibilities until the next AUC session could appoint a new president.⁸⁷

The session took place in September 1930, and Westerman was once again appointed a vice president for the home field of the AUC, after a four-year break from that position; he also retained leadership of the AUC Home Missions department for a second term.⁸⁸

In December 1935, Westerman accepted the presidency of the North New South Wales Conference, with headquarters in Newcastle,⁸⁹ until September 1936 when he was also relieved of the vice presidency of the home field, becoming instead a general field secretary again, while still caring for the Home Missions department of the AUC.⁹⁰

Westerman was now fifty-seven years old, and had been carrying multiple responsibilities for most of the previous twenty years, which entailed a schedule of almost constant travel extending to Western Australia in the west and New Zealand and the Pacific Islands in the east, to Tasmania in the south and Papua New Guinea in the north. It is perhaps not surprising that during 1936 he suffered a breakdown in health.⁹¹ His full recovery took almost a year,⁹² but he resumed overseas travel at the end of 1937.⁹³ In 1938, he was once again taking speaking appointments at camps,⁹⁴ and in 1939 was back to his usual punishing schedule.⁹⁵

Throughout the years of the Second World War, he continued itinerating around the conferences, representing the AUC at conference sessions, attending camp meetings, special events, and generally maintaining contact with the isolated church groups that, because of war-time restrictions, found themselves less able to travel to regional meetings.⁹⁶

In the 1930s and 1940s, Westerman wrote a number of devotional and theological articles that were published in the *Australasian Record*. His favorite topic was living the Christian life,⁹⁷ and he wrote about the necessity of the Holy Spirit,⁹⁸ prayer,⁹⁹ grace,¹⁰⁰ and Christ's ministry on our behalf.¹⁰¹ His final article was on the "Loud Cry."

In mid-1943, Westerman was once again called upon to fill a presidential vacancy in the North New South Wales Conference until a permanent appointment could be made.¹⁰³ This appointment became permanent at the session held in December and was made his sole responsibility.¹⁰⁴ Despite the rigors of the war, he was able to report a year later that 101 individuals had been baptized during the previous twelve months and that “over 300 were studying the 20th Century Bible Course in addition to those taking the Radio Bible Correspondence Course...”¹⁰⁵ Although he had now reached retirement age, Westerman continued as president of the North New South Wales Conference.

Last Years and Death

Early in 1946, Westerman again became ill and was admitted to the Seventh-day Adventist Sydney Sanitarium and Hospital in Wahroonga.¹⁰⁶ After a period of hospitalization, he was confident of recovery;¹⁰⁷ however, poor health returned. During his illness, he carried on the conference business as he was able.¹⁰⁸

In November, Westerman took a turn for the worse and died in the Sydney Sanitarium and Hospital on November 30, 1946, aged 67.¹⁰⁹ His last act was to pray with his wife and to ask God to “bless the brethren, and help them to be true to the message.”¹¹⁰ He was buried in the Avondale Cemetery at Cooranbong.¹¹¹ His lasting legacy was recognized in his personal soul-winning evangelism and outstanding conference leadership.¹¹²

Ena Westerman lived another twenty-eight years, dying on November 6, 1974, in the Seventh-day Adventist Parklea Nursing Home in Sydney a few weeks short of her ninety-third birthday.¹¹³ She had been pre-deceased by her daughter, “Betty” (Dulcie Joyce White) in 1968, and was buried with her husband at Cooranbong.¹¹⁴ Ena Westerman uncomplainingly endured move after move, accepting the task of creating a welcoming home for her family and supporting her husband in his work, spending many lonely weeks while he travelled. She never sought the lime-light but was always supportive in the background, cherishing that as her part in service for God.¹¹⁵

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