Lemke, Ernest Charles (1922–2008)

LESTER LEMKE, AND MEL LEMKE

Lester Lemke, M.B.A. (University of New England, NSW, Australia). Retired as executive director of Catholic Secondary Principals Australia in 2014. Born in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea to the missionaries Ernest and Delys Lemke. Worked in education for 44 years in a range of mainstream and cross-cultural contexts as a teacher, faculty head, deputy principal, principal, regional secondary inspector, assistant secretary for education (PNG) and executive director of the Australian Catholic Principals’ Association based in Canberra, ACT, Australia.

Mel Lemke, D.Min. (Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California, the United States), currently serves as Ministerial Association director for Education in the South Queensland Conference, Australia. Born in Papua New Guinea of missionary parents, Lemke has served the church as a pastor, conference and union youth director, division Adventist Volunteer Services director, college lecturer, seminary department director, and school chaplain for over a decade. Lemke is an author and international speaker, and has four adult children.

Ernest Charles Lemke was a Seventh-day Adventist pastor, evangelist, departmental leader, administrator, and pioneer missionary in Papua New Guinea.¹

Early Life

Ernest Charles Lemke was born in Concord, New South Wales, on August 1, 1922.² He was the youngest of eleven children born to Ludwig Daniel August Lemke and Elizabeth Florence Stimson.³ The family moved to Adelaide in 1923 when Lemke’s father was appointed president of the South Australian Conference. He attended the Adventist primary school at Prospect until 1930 when his father was appointed president of the West Australian Conference. With brothers Norman and Gordon, Lemke attended the Perth Adventist school in Hay Street, Subiaco. Later in life, he often reflected that those years of growing up were good years.⁴

After a serious heart attack in 1935, Lemke’s father retired and purchased a dairy farm near Busselton, Western Australia. At this time, as there were no opportunities for secondary education, he and his brothers helped work the farm. After some time, he left the farm and found work driving cattle trucks in Australia’s barren northwest. It was while on one of these long-haul trips that he had a life-threatening experience which changed his life. With his truck broken down in the desert, miles from any inhabited area, and no water, he prayed for deliverance. He made a commitment to God that he would dedicate his life to His service.⁵

Education and Marriage

In 1941, at the age of 19, Lemke enrolled as a ministerial student at West Australian Missionary College (now Carmel Adventist College). There he met Delys Marion Blair who was later to become his wife. Delys Blair was born in Leederville, Perth, Western Australia, on July 15, 1923.⁶ She was one of seven siblings, two boys and five girls. Her eldest brother, Lesley, was later to become an ordained minister in the Adventist Church. Her primary and secondary schooling were completed at Perth Adventist schools and she attended West Australian Missionary College. After completing her studies there, she obtained nursing qualifications at Mt. Hawthorn Hospital on the suburban outskirts of Perth.⁷

Lemke graduated from his theological studies at West Australian Missionary College in 1943.⁸ He then enrolled for further study in theology at Australian Missionary College (now Avondale University College) in New South Wales.⁹ Due to illness, he was unable to complete the final year of the ministerial course at Avondale. Instead, following the
death of his father, he returned to Perth in late 1944. He then took employment with the Sanitarium Health Food Company as a country sales representative. On June 4, 1945, Ernest and Del Lemke were married by A. F. J. Kranz in the Perth Seventh-day Adventist church. Three boys were born to them: David Wayne, Adrian Blair and Lester Charles.

First Missionary Appointment to Papua New Guinea

In 1947, Ernest and Delys Lemke accepted an appointment as missionaries to the Territory of Papua and New Guinea. Before departing, Lemke took basic medical skills training at the Royal Sydney Hospital Casualty Section. He was also accepted at the Sydney Dental Hospital to do a basic course in dentistry. This course provided him with practical experience in the use of anesthetics, in dental filling, and in extraction.

The Lemke family sailed from Sydney on June 21, 1948. Initially, they were stationed at Bisiatabu where the work of the Adventist Church in Papua had commenced almost forty years before. Del Lemke, a certificated nurse, quickly involved herself in medical ministry. With no interpreter, they had to use sign language to communicate. Within three weeks, with the help of an old Motu-English dictionary gifted to them, they learned to speak Motu.

In 1950, Lemke was appointed principal of the Papuan Missionary College at Bautama. While there, he was ordained to the ministry early in 1951. After furlough, the family left Sydney on December 3, 1951, to take up a new appointment “to set up a new mission station in the Delta area in the western section of Papua.”

As part of this new assignment, Lemke was responsible for the care of a forty-five-foot mission vessel name the Lao Heni. Until a mission station could be established and a home built, the family lived onboard the newly acquired petrol-engine powered vessel. Because of fire risk associated with petrol engines in marine operations, the Australasian Division had established a policy that all mission ships be diesel powered, and to this end a new diesel engine had already been ordered, shipped, and was on the wharf awaiting installation. Before that could happen, however, the family needed to travel on the Lao Heni to Port Moresby for the scheduled year-end meetings of the mission.

Stormy weather in the Gulf of Papua, normal for the time of year, led Lemke to take shelter and anchor the Lao Heni a little upstream in the Turama River late in the afternoon of December 28, 1952. The storm passed and the weather was calm when the family and crew woke early the next morning to prepare for the day’s sailing. After morning worship, the crew made ready to haul anchor. Lemke slipped into the cabin to let his wife know that he was about to weigh anchor and discovered that, while the two older boys were still asleep, the baby (Lester) was awake and restless. So, in order to allow his wife a little more rest, Lemke picked up Lester, ascended the three steps to the wheelhouse and, on a signal from the leading deck hand, pressed the starter button. He later wrote:

I pressed the starter button, and the mission boat exploded. I dashed below, then dragged my wife and our three boys up to the rear deck. It was 5 a.m. They’d been sitting on their bunks. We had just finished our morning prayers and they were still in their pyjamas. Our ship, the Lao-Heni, was in flames from bow to stern. Six 44-gallon drums—our petrol reserve—exploded, spilled, and burned on the surface of the water with searing heart. Another explosion. We were thrown into the water, and I lost consciousness.

The main force of the initial explosion smashed both of Lemke’s legs and burned the skin off about two thirds of his body. Delys Lemke at age 29, David age 6, and Adrian age 4 lost their lives. Delys and Adrian were buried together in the Port Moresby Cemetery. The current was strong, and David’s body was never recovered. Lemke and 19-month-old Lester, although severely injured and badly burned, were saved from the wreckage of the boat that quickly sank in the river.

Marine authorities in Port Moresby subsequently posited that the explosion was likely to have been caused by a “stuck” carburetor float that had allowed fuel to be siphoned though the carburetor bowl, down the side of the engine, and into the bilge-water around the keel of the ship. It was further suggested that this fuel and the fumes that would have filled the engine-room were probably ignited by a spark generated in the starter solenoid.

Lemke and Lester were flown by Catalina from an Australian Petroleum Company drilling base on the delta of the Omati River to Port Moresby then, after a week of emergency stabilizing treatment, they were flown to Australia where they spent several weeks at Sydney Sanitarium and Hospital. Delys Lemke’s sister, Rae Newland, flew over from Perth and stayed with them, caring for them every day of their extended stay at the hospital. After discharge, Lemke, his sister-in-law, and Lester flew back to Perth where Delys’s mother and sisters, Katherine Blair and Rae Newland, helped care for baby Lester.

Ministry in Australia

Following several months of recovery and recuperation, Lemke was invited to join the West Australian Conference ministry team as pastor of the Fremantle Seventh-day Adventist church, and as speaker on radio station 6PR where he presented the daily half hour devotional program Mid-day Meditation from January 1953 until August 1954. During this time Lemke met Valmai Joyce Richards in Perth. Val Richards was one of two daughters of W. J. Richards who, as president of the West Australian Conference, had been instrumental in bringing Lempke back into ministry following the accident.
Born in Kyogle, New South Wales, on June 20, 1930, Val Richards moved to New Zealand with her parents in 1931 where her father was posted as conference evangelist. She attended school at Papanui Seventh-day Adventist school in Christchurch, as well as schools in Napier and Auckland. In 1946, W. J. Richards was appointed president of the church in Western Australia. Val Richards completed a year of colporteur work there before enrolling for the Bible workers course at West Australian Missionary College. Graduating from there in 1949, she went on to complete Bible Worker’s Qualifications at the Australian Missionary College (now Avondale University College) in 1950. Val Richards returned to Perth and from 1951 to 1954 worked as the youth department secretary and JMV leader alongside the youth leader David Brennan. It was during this time that she met Ernest Lemke. They were married in Perth on February 2, 1954. Ernest and Val Lemke were to have one son, Melvin Wayne, born four years later on November 4, 1958, at the Wewak Hospital just over the road from the mission compound in Wewak.

Second and Third Missionary Appointments: Papua New Guinea and the Cook Islands

In September 1954, Ernest and Val Lemke travelled to New Guinea where Lemke had been appointed president of the Sepik Mission with headquarters in Wewak. They remained there from 1954 to 1960 and when Lemke became president of the Central Papuan Mission with headquarters in Port Moresby from 1961 to 1966.

In February 1967, Lemke accepted an appointment as president of the Cook Islands Mission with headquarters in Rarotonga. He held that position until March 1970. His total mission service in the South Pacific island missions spanned twenty years.

New Zealand and Australia

In April 1970, Lemke was asked by the Trans-Tasman Union Conference (TTUC) to lead a new venture in New Zealand raising funds for a Seventh-day Adventist hospital planned at St Heliers Bay, Auckland. Two years later he was appointed ministerial, stewardship, and development director at the TTUC with headquarters in Sydney. He served in that capacity from 1971 to 1978. In 1978, he was elected president of the South Queensland Conference with headquarters in Brisbane, a position he held from 1978 to 1981. In 1981, he was appointed associate ministerial and stewardship director of the Australasian Division with headquarters in Sydney, a position he held until his retirement in 1985 at age 63 after forty-one years of service.

Later Life

After retirement in 1985, Lemke was invited by the South Pacific Division President Walter Scragg to serve as the director of Christian Services for The Blind and Hearing Impaired. This he did in a volunteer capacity for another six years until 1991. The Lemkes moved back to Brisbane to spend their retirement years in the Adventist Retirement Village at Victoria Point in Brisbane, a facility Ernest Lemke had helped to establish while president in South Queensland. From 1991 to 1995, he volunteered for the South Queensland Conference supporting stewardship ministry. He remained active as an elder of the Village church and a regular preacher around the conference. Lemke died on August 22, 2008, at 86 years of age and was buried at the Redland Bay Cemetery, Queensland.

SOURCES

Australasian Inter Union Conference Executive Committee Minutes, January 6, 1953.


Lemke, Ernest. “Life History—The Lemkes.” Unpublished private memoirs held in the personal collection of the authors.

Lemke, Ernest. “Life Sketch.” Unpublished manuscript held in the personal collection of the authors.
Lemke, Ernest. “My Service in the South Pacific.” Unpublished private memoirs held in the personal collection of the authors.


NOTES

1. Much of this article is written from the personal experience of the authors as the sons of Ernest Lemke. Together they shared first-hand experience of many of the events described herein. The memoirs of Ernest Lemke, which are held in the personal collection of the authors, were also used extensively. Where facts are cited without reference, they are either from the personal experience of the authors or from the memoirs.


4. Ernest Lemke, _When God Intervened: Selected Stories, Memories, Family History and Events from the Life and Ministry of Ernest Lemke as Told by Him_ (np: Ernest Lemke, 2007), 4-10.


9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.


22. Personal knowledge of the authors.


27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

29. Personal knowledge of the authors.