

# Methodist Babies' Home

1929 – c. 1974

## Details

---

The Methodist Babies' Home in South Yarra was established in 1929. It organised the adoption of many babies in Victoria. In 1974, it became the Copelen Street Family Centre, offering foster care and preventive family services.

The establishment of the Methodist Babies' Home in 1929 coincided with the implementation of [Victoria's first adoption act](#) (passed in 1928).

The Home was a major player in adoption in Victoria. In its first five years of operation, it arranged for 198 babies to be placed in adoptive homes.

The establishment of the Methodist Babies' Home relieved pressure on staff at [Methodist Homes for Children](#) in Cheltenham to care for young babies. The two institutions, both being run by the Methodist Church, were related in that those children in Babies' Home not adopted by the age of four were transferred to the Children's Home at Cheltenham.

The Methodist Babies' Home Committee retained legal control of these children even after they were transferred to the Methodist Homes for Children. Many children were placed at Methodist Babies' Home, then moved to the Children's Home, and then at the age of 9 they were transferred yet again, this time to the farm school at [Tally Ho](#).

One submission to the Senate inquiry into institutional care described his childhood placements, which followed the path described above:

*I was institutionalised from the age of three weeks, sent to the Methodist Babies Home in South Yarra Victoria from the [Royal Women's Hospital](#). I was at the babies home for three and a half years, then transferred to the Cheltenham Boys and Girls Home on 14/08/1933 aged three years and eight months. I remember at Cheltenham on visiting days I would not get any visitors so I would go to the market gardens or climb up the pine trees until the visitors went. I felt lonely because I didn't have anyone to visit me. The staff at Cheltenham used to walk us down to the beach at Mentone in the warmer weather. I was then transferred to Talley Ho Boys Home 20/05/1939 aged nine years and five months (submission 153).*

The money for the property at 12 Copelen Street, South Yarra, was largely raised by the Young Men's section of the Methodist Church's Laymen's Missionary Movement. The well-known social reformer, F. Oswald Barnett, was a key figure in the establishment of the Methodist Babies' Home. Many of the infants that Barnett "rescued" from the slums of inner Melbourne were placed in the Methodist Babies' Home (Birch, 2002).

The Babies' Home was opened in December 1929. According to one history:

*The opening was a remarkable event with a massive crowd of 8000 people, many of whom had travelled from country regions. The final £3000 needed to pay for the building was raised from the crowd in a matter of minutes, making it debt-free, an astounding achievement at that time when many were themselves struggling.*

Matron Grant was the first matron at the Methodist Babies' Home, and she did not retire until 1962. In 1959 the Methodist Babies' Home merged with the Boards of the [Methodist Homes for Children \(Orana\)](#) to form the Methodist Department of Childcare, led by Rev Keith Mathieson. The two institutions continue to operate separately under this new governance structure.

The passage of the [Adoption Act 1964](#) changed practices at the Methodist Babies' Home. The process of becoming an 'approved adoption agency' under the new legislation led to the appointment of the Home's first social worker, Rev. Graeme Gregory to manage the placement of babies and children. From the mid-1960s, babies and toddlers from the Home spent a period in foster care before they were adopted.

In the 1970s, the changes continued and the institution moved away from congregate care towards smaller, more 'family like' groups of babies and young children. The buildings were renovated and new 'cottages' were built on the site. From the early 1970s, the direct care of 'neglected' babies was phased out in favour of family, unit-based support services and foster care.

In 1971, the Methodist Department of Childcare merged with the Presbyterian Department of Social Services in 1971 to create the Child Care Service of the Methodist and Presbyterian Churches. This Child Care Service was the sole Victorian agency supervising inter-country adoptions and placements of children from Vietnam during the 1970s.

In 1974, a Parents and Children's Centre was established in the buildings of the Methodist Babies' Home at 12 Copelen Street South Yarra. This centre offered a variety of family services programs, including a day care centre, parent skills training, a drop-in centre, and family counselling and support. Around this time, the institution changed its name to the Copelen Street Family Centre.

In 1995 the site at 12 Copelen street was sold. The buildings were demolished sometime after, probably in the mid to late 1990s. The new buildings constructed on the site were designed to look similar to the original ones. There is a plaque on the site commemorating the Babies' Home.

The Methodist Babies' Home was mentioned in the *Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices Inquiry* (2012) as an institution that was involved in forced adoption. The surviving records of the Methodist Babies' Home demonstrate how this institution subscribed to the clean break theory of adoption which was popular in the twentieth century. The registers show how infants admitted to the Methodist Babies' Home were given an 'alias' by staff, changing the names they had been given at birth.

Uniting Church Victoria Tasmania issued a statement on 28 February 2012 in response to the Senate inquiry, apologising "for any physical, psychological or social harm that might have occurred through the past adoption practices and processes of the Church". It stated:

*The Senate inquiry into forced adoptions highlights so many experiences of mothers, especially young mothers, and the adoptees who have been deeply affected by former adoption practices. The inquiry submissions paint a disturbing picture of the removal of babies from vulnerable young women who were not able to participate meaningfully in the decisions about the care of their children. The Uniting Church through its agencies managed some of the babies' homes and hostels. We are saddened that we were part of a service system and practices which have caused such long-lasting pain and trauma to people (quoted in Parliament of Victoria, 2021, p.420).*

# Gallery

---



## Bottle sterilising rack, Methodist Babies' Home

**Description:** Museum Victoria's 'The story of Melbourne' exhibition features a bottle sterilising rack used at Methodist Babies' Home from 1929. This webpage is no longer in operation. this URL is taken from the wayback machine and is dated 13 March 2018.

---



## Methodist Babies' Home banner

**Description:** This is an image of a banner made of white stiffened linen with painted red and blue lettering 'Methodist Babies' & Children's Home'. Used around 1929. Holes in top corners suggest it was pinned, perhaps to a table at a street stall; there is no evidence to show that it was ever hung or supported by all four corners.

---



## Lamp - WT Co, USA, circa 1929 [Methodist Babies' Home]

**Description:** This is an image of a kerosene lamp which was used in the Methodist Babies Home in South Yarra, Victoria. It was manufactured by W.T. Co., USA, circa 1929. The lamp would have given a weak light, and was probably used as a night light in a dormitory at the Methodist Babies Home,

---



## Methodist Babies' Home

**Description:** Postcard of Methodist Babies' Home, South Yarra.

---



## Methodist Babies' Home, South Yarra



## A career for girls: mothercraft nurse

**Description:** This is a copy of an image published in *The Argus* on 27 December 1949. The image shows a photograph of a mothercraft trainee nurse feeding a baby at the Methodist Babies' Home.

---



### Methodist Babies' Home

**Description:** This image was published in *The Argus* on 4 April 1941 in an article titled 'The Methodist Babies' Home'. The caption reads, 'The Methodist Babies' Home at South Yarra is not faced with the suburban housewives' problem of obtaining a supply of milk during the strike. The Transport Workers' Union is giving its services free to deliver milk to creches, baby health centres and similar institutions.'



### Opening of the Methodist Babies' Home

**Description:** This is a copy of an image published in *The Argus* on Monday 9 December 1929. The image shows the outside of the Methodist Babies' Home and the crowds on its opening day. The original caption reads, 'The new Methodist Babies' Home, on a fine site overlooking the river at South Yarra was opened on Saturday by Mr. F. J. Cato. Methodists from all parts of Victoria attended. The gathering in front of the home.'



### Entrance to the Methodist Babies' Home



### Methodist Babies' Home, South Yarra [photo set]

**Description:** This is an image that is part of Connections UnitingCare's photostream on the Flickr website, containing digital copies of historic photographs from the Methodist Babies' Home. The images were used in presentations to raise funds for the Home.



### Front gates at 12 Copelen Street, South Yarra

**Description:** This is a copy of an image of the front gates at 12 Copelen Street, South Yarra. At the time this photo was taken, the buildings housed the Copelen Street Family Centre. The South Yarra Hostel was next door. There are signs on the gate for the Methodist Babies' Home (previously located on the list, closed in 1974), South Yarra Hostel, Copelen Street Family Centre and the Presbyterian and Methodist Child Care Service.

## More info

## Chronology

- **Methodist Babies' Home (1929 – c. 1974)**
  - Copelen Street Family Centre (1974 - 1991)
  - Copelen Child and Family Services (1991 - 1998)
  - Copelen (1998 - 2000)
    - Connections UnitingCare (2000 - 2017)
    - Uniting - Connections (2017 - 2020)

## Related Entries

### Run by

- [Methodist Church of Victoria and Tasmania \(c. 1851 - 1977\)](#)  
Date: 1929 - 1974

### Related Events

- [Medical experiments \(c. 1945 - c. 1970\)](#)  
CSL conducted trials at Methodist Babies' Home  
Date: 1959 - 1961
- [Inquiry into Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices, Commonwealth of Australia \(2011 - 2012\)](#)  
Methodist Babies' Home was mentioned in submission 118 to the Inquiry Committee as an institution that was involved in forced adoption.

### Related Organisations

- [Methodist Homes for Children \(1891 - c. 1953\)](#)  
Young children at the Methodist Babies' Home who had not been adopted by the age of 4 were transferred to the Methodist Homes for Children.  
Date: 1929 -
- [Orana, the Peace Memorial Homes for Children \(1953 - 1988\)](#)  
In 1959 the Methodist Babies' Home merged with the Boards of the Methodist Homes for Children to form the Methodist Department of Childcare, which subsequently merged with the Presbyterian Church's Department of Social Services to carry out the placement of babies and children.  
Date: 1959 -
- [Kildonan Admission Centre \(c. 1960 - 1982\)](#)
- [Kildonan Homes for Children \(c. 1960 - c. 1993\)](#)
- [Girls' Memorial Home \(1922 - 1973\)](#)  
Date: 1928 - ?
- [Presbyterian Babies' Home \(1928 - 1977\)](#)  
In 1971, the Methodist Babies' Home took over the administration of adoptions of children from the Presbyterian Babies' Home.  
Date: 1971 -
- [Presbyterian and Methodist Child Care Service \(1971 - 1977?\)](#)

### Related Legislation

- [Adoption of Children Act 1928, Victoria \(1929 - 1959\)](#)

## Resources

- Australian Heritage Council, [A thematic heritage study on Australia's benevolent and other care institutions](#), 2016
- UnitingCare Victoria and Tasmania, *Uniting Church in Australia: agencies in Victoria delivering substitute care services*, April 2008
- Barnett, Oswald, *I Remember*, No date
- Hughes, Gary, [Polio vaccine tested at orphanages](#), The Age, 25 October 2004
- Davis, Hector, [Submission no 133 to the Senate Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care](#), 20 July 2003
- Brown, John, [Submission no 153 to the Senate Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care](#), 2005
- Name withheld, [Submission no 214 to the Senate Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care](#), 2005
- Methodist Young Men's Movement; Methodist Babies' Home Committee, *Information about the Methodist Babies' Home: prepared for the use of speakers and lecturers*, 1938
- *Annual reports: Methodist Department of Child Care*, 1961 - 1970
- Barnard, Jill, *Methodist Babies' Home: Copelen 7 decades on*, 1999
- *Copelen Street family services - formerly Methodist Babies' Home South Yarra: sixtieth anniversary 1929-1989*, 1989
- Barnett, F Oswald, *Is it safe to adopt a baby? : a social study*, 1948
- [A career for girls: mothercraft nurse](#), The Argus, 27 December 1949

- [The Methodist Babies' Home](#), The Argus, 4 April 1941
- [Methodist Babies Home](#), Finding Records, No date. *Relevance:* See the 'List of records held by the department' section for information about records relating to Methodist Babies' Home
- [From the collection of Uniting Church Archives - Synod of Victoria](#), Victorian Collections, No date. *Relevance:* This collection includes material relating to the Methodist Babies' Home
- O'Neill, Cate, [More photographs unearthed](#), Find & Connect web resource blog, 19 January 2016

## Records

---

For more information and to access your records, follow the links below:

### Records

- [Records held by Uniting Church Archives \(1923 - 1994\)](#)
  - [Records of Uniting - Connections \(adoptions and out-of-home care\) \(1910 - 2020\)](#)
  - [Uniting Photographs Collection \[Methodist and Presbyterian Babies' Homes\] \(c. 1940 - c. 1980\)](#)
  - [Voluntary Children's Homes Files \(1921 - 1989\)](#)
- 

You can view this page online by visiting <https://www.findandconnect.gov.au/entity/methodist-babies-home-3/>