

# House of Mercy and Retreat for Women

1881 – 1974

**Other Names:**

- Adelaide Retreat for Women
- House of Mercy and Adelaide Retreat for Women

## Details

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The House of Mercy and Retreat for Women was established in Walkerville by the Church of England in 1881. It provided shelter for unmarried mothers during pregnancy and the first year of their babies' lives. Babies stayed with their mothers, were placed at the Babies' Home Walkerville or adopted. The House of Mercy closed in 1974.

The House of Mercy and Retreat for Women was established at Stephen Terrace, Walkerville by the Church of England in August 1881. It was run by a management committee that reported to the Diocese of Adelaide. Its purpose was to provide shelter and care for unmarried mothers throughout their pregnancy and during the first year of their babies' lives. The first resident was admitted in January 1882.

A laundry was established in 1883. This became an integral part of the home providing funds to assist in the cost of running the retreat. Women living in the Home worked in the laundry, sewed, and cared for the gardens. In 1885 the matron of the Home described the premises:

*Our room is somewhat limited, as we can only accommodate six girls at a time. Altogether we have seven rooms, and all possible is done to render the inmates happy and comfortable. The home, which is chiefly maintained by a few people, only receives young girls who have made one downward step...After remaining in the home for twelve months the committee endeavour to procure situations for the girls where they can take their offspring with them. If unsuccessful the children are kept at the home till an opening occurs where the mothers can take them with them.*

In 1906 the Home was incorporated and in 1922 it was officially named The House of Mercy and Retreat for Women Inc.

An 1923 interview with Miss Sanders who was matron of the House of Mercy for 36 years gives insight into her attitudes and the policies of the Home at that time:

*I believe that a girl may pass through any experience and repentance such as this and come out a better woman for it in the end. Surely there is regenerating power in mother love. I think I shall never see a more beautiful sight than a girl with her baby. The religious training in the home does wonderful things for the girls. The extra year with the child makes all the difference, too. Our girls cling to their babies, and would never give them up. We don't encourage adoption at all, you know...I don't believe anyone could do better*

*than the mother so long as she is giving her best and leading a good life. I don't believe God ever intended mother and child to be separated.*

During 1941-1942 amendments were made to the rules of the home to allow for more flexibility in how long a woman could stay after the birth of her child.

While some babies did remain with their mothers, many were adopted. The management committee reported in 1947 that thirty women had passed through the Home and 'many babies had been adopted into excellent homes'. In 1953, of the fifteen babies born in the home, eight were adopted. A member of the management committee interviewed and selected prospective parents and arranged for the placement of babies. From 1959 the Church of England Social Welfare Department took over this role.

By 1972 the number of girls requiring assistance had declined markedly. From mid-1973 the home ceased admitting girls and closed its laundry service. The building was sold in 1974 and the House of Mercy ceased to offer residential care from this point. The House of Mercy Trust Fund was established to continue to assist mothers and children in financial need. The House of Mercy committee remained active throughout 1975, but thereafter it seems likely that its functions were absorbed into the existing work of the Church of England Social Welfare Bureau.

## Gallery

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**The House of Mercy**

**Description:** This image was included in the Finding Your Own Way guide, section 1. This photo is undated, the date included is an estimate.

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## More info

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### Related Entries

#### Related Organisations

- [The Babies' Home Walkerville \(1912 - 1945\)](#)  
Many babies born to mothers living at the House of Mercy were placed at the Babies' Home, Walkerville.
- [St Mary's Mission of Hope \(1904 - 1953\)](#)  
St Mary's Mission of Hope took in some young women who did not qualify for admission to the House of Mercy and Retreat for Women at Walkerville.
- [Anglican Diocese of Adelaide \(1847 - current\)](#)

#### Related Concepts

- [Stolen Generations](#)

### Resources

- Dickey, Brian, *Giving a hand: A history of Anglicare SA since 1860*, 2003

## Records

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

## Records

- [The House of Mercy and Retreat for Women Records \(1881 - 1975\)](#)
  - [Records related to Church of England Social Welfare Bureau \(1947 - 1991\)](#)
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You can view this page online by visiting <https://www.findandconnect.gov.au/entity/house-of-mercy-and-retreat-for-women/>