MERYL ANN JENNINGS was born at Victor Harbor on March 8, 1942, the first child of Norm and Marj Jolly. She had one brother, Paul, just one year and 11 months her junior.

She died aged 73 on Tuesday, August 25, 2015, after living with cancer for almost six years.

Meryl leaves behind her husband Graeme, daughter Renee, grand children Micaela, Owen, Zachary, Tyson and Liam, great grand children Hunter and Oliver and countless friends, associates and former students.

In her 73 years she lived a wonderfully accomplished, full and faithful life.

To summarise that life in the words of a friend: her mind was quick and clever and she was so knowledgeable! She could retain detail and use it well in and out of the classroom. Meryl had strength of commitment and absolute reliability – she was careful and thorough always, and was respected for this. Her faith was strong and deep and provided the basis for her life – she gave unstintingly to others.

She was also a strong, loving and committed wife, mother, daughter and sister-in-law and aunt.

Meryl told a retreat some years ago that ‘the directions and direction points in my life have been intimately connected with scripture, church worship and liturgy and with the fellowship of Christian people.’

The foundation for Meryl’s spiritual journey was laid by her grandmother on her father’s side, a strong Wesleyan Methodist from Moonta Mines - strong enough, she said, to control her father to the extent that he kept her and Paul in the context of the Methodist church, where she graduated from attending Sunday school to teaching Sunday school, being part of the youth group and playing tennis for the church team.

A ‘significant Christian camping time’ was instrumental in her seeking official membership of the church, ‘necessitating baptism, since we’d somehow skipped that bit earlier on’.

Later, family members from time to time often challenged her faith and her involvement in the church, which never, as far as I know, wavered, though I do recall a comment at one stage that she had from time to time tried to distance herself from the church, if not her faith, but it never felt right and she had always been drawn back.

Meryl was an avid reader and a consummate and committed teacher, and while she held many high-level admin and leadership roles in the schools in which she served, teaching was always her first love.

She had always wanted to be a teacher and always enjoyed learning, she said in some writing I discovered while researching this, so she was ‘ripe for a meeting with an earnest
and studious seminarian’ during her first years of Teachers College. This relationship led to Meryl learning about Lutheranism, undertaking adult confirmation instruction and joining the Lutheran church.

When that ‘earnest and studious’ seminarian, John Hartwig, completed his studies Meryl, who by then had spent two years teaching in the State education system, and John were married in Bethlehem Lutheran church, Flinders Street, by Pr John Juers, on January 9, 1965, and almost immediately left to serve in Menyamya, PNG, where, in Meryl’s words, they intended to stay.

However, God had other ideas, with John drowning on August 13, 1967, returning from a village patrol. So after just two and a half years of marriage Meryl returned to Australia a widow.

“I can see now how all that had gone before in my life prepared me to deal with the situation and to return to Australia to begin my long career in Lutheran education,” she wrote some time later. “I remember the comfort of scripture—reading John 14 was almost like hearing Jesus speaking the words to me—and the amazing sense of the wide church, people I didn’t even know from throughout Australia and PNG, who gave me messages of comfort and support and directed me back to God.”

Back in Australia Meryl undertook additional studies and accepted roles on professional committees and task forces, congregation education committees, plus running Vacation Bible School and team teaching confirmation classes.

She was ‘all set for a dedicated and single-minded professional life’ but again, she wrote, God had other ideas! “Graeme came into my life and after we were married – by Pr John Sims, in Pasadena church, on July 15, 1977 - the kinds of people he met through the church life I introduced him to led to his taking adult instruction and joining the Lutheran church.”

Renee arrived ready-made, aged 7, in 1984 to complete our family.

I find it daunting to be considered ‘God given’, but the earthly facts are accurate, and I have been known to suggest that Meryl and I both married into the Lutheran Church.

My marriage to Meryl meant I also married into the Concordia College staff community of which she was a vital part at that time and for the first 20 years or so of our marriage I was almost invariably introduced – or at least explained - as ‘Meryl’s husband’ – which at once put me into context and gained me considerable kudos, given the regard in which she was so widely held.

During her fore-shortened but full and faithful life Meryl gained seven God children, who she conscientiously maintained contact with at least until they ‘grew up’; several for long after that.
Meryl’s father Norm was a school teacher – later school inspector, in the days when they had such things – and the young family was in Victor Harbour when Meryl was born because Norm, a maths and physics man, was an instructor training RAAF flight navigators at that time.

The family subsequently moved back to Adelaide and her childhood memories, recorded in various pieces of writing, included playing backyard cricket with Paul in the Colonel Light Gardens house and front lawn beach bat tennis in the family’s Edwardstown home. ‘Romney dog’, a GSP, also featured in comments in recent years whenever we saw one.

Professionally, Meryl spent most of her life in school of one sort of another – a pattern she set very early. Legend has it that young Meryl quite quickly started following in father’s footsteps, lining up younger brother Paul, the family dog and various dolls and teddy bears for lessons in the back yard.

Her summary of her professional life, from a document written not long ago, puts the tally at 48 years in schools - all levels, primary to tertiary and adult education - in Australia and overseas, in two states and one territory as well as PNG and the UK, with 33 of those 48 years in Lutheran secondary schools.

Elsewhere she wrote - ‘English teaching has always been my great love’ and ‘I have always welcomed chances for further study’.

The evidence supports those statements.

Meryl did History 1 at Flinders in 1970, concluded a Graduate Diploma in Reading in 1979, was awarded a Diploma of Lutheran Education from LTC in 1992 & graduate diploma of theology in education in 1993, and in 1999 gained a VHA in a short course on the Australian Constitution. She was awarded a Master of Education studies from Luther Seminary in 1994 and was made a Doctor of Education in 2010 with a thesis on ‘Nurture, Outreach and Beyond: Reconceptualising Lutheran Education for the contemporary Australian context’.

Meryl attended Colonel Light Gardens Primary school from 1947 to 1953, when she was head prefect, and attended Unley High school, topping the State in the intermediate examinations in 1956 with credits in all seven subjects - English literature, Latin, French, Maths 1 & 2, physics and chemistry – an accomplishment that earned her The Advertiser prize and the Campbell scholarship.

The following year she achieved credits for all six of her Leaving subjects and went on to complete Leaving Honours in 1958, studying English, Latin and French plus Maths 1 and 2. Along the way she also won the Tennyson Prize for English literature.
Meryl attended the University of Adelaide and Teachers College, completing a BA honours in English in 1962. [She was offered access to honours courses in Latin and French but managed to gain access to English literature instead.]

She was a bonded teaching student in Years 11 and 12 and began her teaching career in 1963, first at Darwin High school then Unley High School before going to Menyamya, where she taught in the local Lutheran primary school in 1967.

On her return from PNG after John’s death she taught at Concordia College Adelaide from September 1967 to December 1987 – that’s 20 years – albeit with a break in 1972 for 12 months travel overseas, which included a stint as a house mistress in a boarding school on the Isle of Wight.

Somewhere in there – and here I’m vague on the time line – she boarded with several other apparently quite lively young women, some of whom I think are here today – with Mrs Koop, not far from Concordia, and served for a period as house mistress/mistress of girls at what is now ALC – the standing joke over many years being that she was ‘Rolf’s mistress’ – Rolf Mayer being head of LTC at the time.

From Concordia we moved to Queensland, where Meryl taught for 13 years at Immanuel Maroochydore – now Immanuel Buderim – where she was part of a staff group that established the innovative annual ‘Voices on the Coast’ literary festival that still runs today.

In Queensland we not only made some wonderful friends, but were blessed to find an idyllic home, high up and overlooking a creek and the ocean, which I believe became Meryl’s favourite place ... so much so that when we returned to SA it influenced where she wanted to live, declaring that we had to be ‘high up or by the sea’. We ended up ‘high up’, though sadly the views here aren’t as spectacular as those on Upper Rosemount and the winter temperatures are often somewhat lower than they were in Queensland.

Our return to SA, like our move to Queensland, was in response to a professional opportunity available to Meryl, with that final shift taking her to ALC and her dream job - teaching teachers in a Christian environment.

In Meryl’s own words, written at the time of her retirement, which was at least in part forced by her cancer: ‘ALC was the pinnacle. I always wanted to teach teachers and those aspiring to be teachers so these last 10 years have been the icing on the academic cake. I am thankful to God for this opportunity.’

She was appointed a lecturer in the ALC School of Educational Theology in 2001, becoming the first female member of the ALC faculty and subsequently the first Emerita – a role she valued greatly. One of her regrets was not being well enough to engage more fully in the college community after her retirement, and not to be able to continue service as a ‘sessional lecturer’, if that is the right terminology.
At ALC she taught in the area of religious education and was Co-ordinator of the Lutheran ‘strand’ - the pathway for teaching students who wanted to study theology and Lutheran practice as part of their teaching studies – at Flinders University from 2001-2010; a role that saw her appointed a Senior lecturer in the school of education at Flinders.

In 2005 she took on the additional ALC role of Head of the School of Theological Studies for lay students.

Meryl’s love of language extended to ‘occasional verse’ – often set to popular song tunes – for various ‘occasions’ such as anniversaries or farewells. She loved the challenge of finding a tune she felt people would know well enough to sing ‘a capella’ and writing words that made sense in the context of the event or celebration and fitted well with the rhythm and melody. The results suggested to me, at least, that in different circumstances she could have been a very good song-writer.

In addition to all that she was also, at different times, involved in editing the Lutheran Theological Journal and ‘School Link’ the periodic publication of Lutheran Education Australia, and was on numerous boards, committees and working groups including the LCA Safe Place national committee, the Board for Lay Ministry and the Lutheran Publishing House and Editorial Advisory Committee when we had such things.

In the education sector she was deeply involved in curriculum and syllabus development at State and national levels and was a marking examiner for public examinations in SA and Qld.

In 1993 Meryl received an LCA Service Award for 25 years of work on behalf of Lutheran schools and in 2004 she was added to the LEA Teacher Honour Roll of staff who have taught in Lutheran schools for more than 30 years.

Shortly before her death she was advised that she was to receive an award from the Australian College of Education to mark 25 years of membership. ACE was just one of a multiplicity of professional organisations, most of them focused on teaching or reading, of which she was a conscientious member.

Since our return from Queensland Meryl has been engaged in the St Peters community, serving in a variety of roles including as a member and vice chair of the St Peter’s school council and in recent years developing a strong commitment to the work of Beacon, a local ecumenical emergency relief service where, the coordinator told me the other day, she was much appreciated for many things including her intellect and her grammar – she liked to get it right.

To shift briefly to some more personal aspects ...

I really appreciated the fact that Meryl immediately accepted and came to genuinely like and care for the members of my family, despite big differences in background, personalities and experiences.
She was proud of her Cornish heritage and took considerable pleasure in applying the Tre, Pol and Pen ‘rule of thumb’ to identify family names with Cornish origins.

She was a ‘word wizz’ and enjoyed standard and cryptic crosswords. In days gone by she and Paul would mark significant events such as birthdays by designing crosswords for each other.

She eschewed competitiveness and avoided conflict almost at any cost.

She liked to host dinner parties, usually serving at least a main course she had never cooked before and seldom presenting a failure. When it came to guests she had a simple philosophy – people who liked us would probably like each other, and that too usually worked.

For many years I owned a Canadian canoe and Meryl became a competent flat-water paddler. She also came to enjoy fishing.

She was a passionate Port Adelaide football supporter but tennis, which she played well for many years was ‘her sport’ and she would watch good-standard tennis on television over anything else, given the opportunity. Somewhat more recently she developed an interest in and came to understand basketball.

And this has barely scratched the surface. She liked to dance, she grew to like jazz, she enjoyed theatre and was a good director … the list goes on and on.

Meryl’s death has created a huge gap in our lives and our family and I strongly suspect she will be sorely missed by many other people outside our immediate circle.

I prayed that when Meryl had to go it would be relatively quick and relatively peaceful, and I believe that prayer was answered. She certainly looked to be at peace after her death, and we can only trust.

We’ll miss you, sweetheart, in so many ways.