



**St John the Evangelist  
Halifax Street  
Adelaide**

**The History of a Colonial Church**

## Early days in the colony of South Australia

In its present location the Anglican Church of St John the Evangelist in Halifax Street offers expansive views of the parklands, Adelaide's eastern suburbs and the Mount Lofty Ranges. The westward view is dominated by urban development, high-rise apartments, and the city centre.

The church has a history embedded in the early days of colonial South Australia when the landscape was dominated by open grasslands and eucalyptus trees. This was a time when the Kaurna people called the region their home, naming it Tandanya, which meant the place of the red kangaroo.

In 1834 the British Government founded, by Act of Parliament, the 'province' of South Australia. It was to be based upon the principles of systematic colonisation expounded by Edward Gibbon Wakefield. Many of those who backed the new colony were Dissenters – members of religious bodies outside the established Church of England – who wanted it to be a place of religious and political liberty, where there would be no state-supported church and where all denominations would depend entirely upon the voluntary contributions of their members. This was a radical proposal at the time. However, while the South Australia Bill was passing through parliament a clause was inserted allowing for the appointment of chaplains of the established churches of England and Scotland for the new colony. This was intended to ensure the provision of a religious ministry.

A feature of the colony to be established was the notion that it would be free of convicts and attractive to migrants who would purchase blocks of land before sailing to Australia. Capitalism and investment would thus be key to the colony's future, as would be religious and civil liberty.

The first colonial chaplain was Charles Beaumont Howard a clergyman of the Church of England, who sailed on the *Buffalo*. During the voyage he befriended the colonial treasurer, Osmond Gilles who was to become an influential person in the province. Howard was evangelical, affable, and willing to work hard as the first Anglican clergyman in the colony. He conducted the first service in the Glenelg sandhills on 1 January 1837. The following year the foundation stone of a church in North Terrace, Trinity Church, was laid by

Governor Hindmarsh. Howard died in 1843 and was succeeded as colonial chaplain and incumbent of Trinity by the Rev'd James Farrell who had arrived in the colony in 1840.

## **The genesis of St John's Anglican Church**

The need for a second church was realised a few years after Adelaide's settlement. It was growing rapidly and Trinity Church, although recently enlarged, was inadequate. Church leaders feared there was a danger that the importance of public worship may be forgotten if suitable facilities were not provided.

To this end, a half-acre of land in the south-eastern corner of Adelaide and the Octagon Cottage on East Terrace were gifted by Osmond Gilles for the church and parsonage. The church to be built was for those living in the outlying districts of Norwood, Rose Park, Glen Osmond, Burnside, and Unley. Although the location of this second Anglican church was not ideal, a lack of funds prevented the purchase of exorbitantly priced land in town, thus leading to the acceptance of the offer from Gilles. At that time, he lived in St John Street and would have been close to the new church once it was erected.



*Osmond Gilles, c1865  
(State Library of South Australia, B7030)*

Osmond Gilles was one of the more colourful of South Australia's early founders. His unfailing optimism and support must have encouraged many in the pioneering years. Being a successful entrepreneur and having a flamboyant character he was a little suspect to those who thought of themselves as respectable. However, he was generous to the Church of England and later became a warden at St John's.

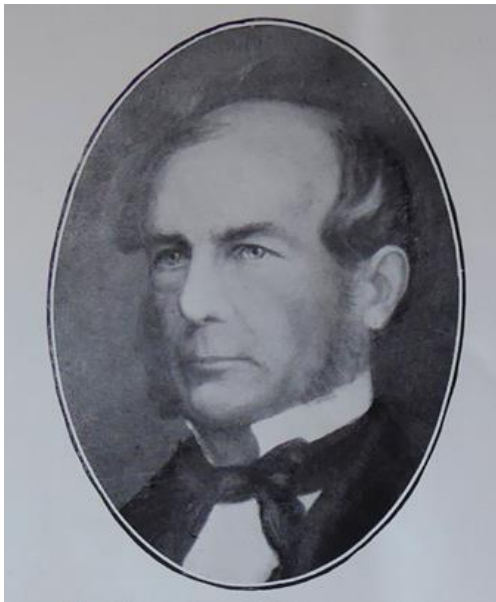
On 19 October 1839, just three years after the founding of the colony, the Governor of the province George Gawler laid the foundation stone of 'St

John's in the Wilderness'. A staunch evangelical, Governor Gawler was particularly pleased with the erection of another church as it both extended religious influence and its building provided much needed employment.

### **A foundation stone is laid**

The amount of money raised for the building of the church was sufficient only to cover the cost of the foundations at the time. Further work on the church was stalled for another two years.

On 6 September 1840, almost a year after the laying of the foundation stone, the Rev'd James Farrell arrived to become the second Church of England clergyman in the colony. Farrell was anxious to see his new church, so he was sent into the bush to find it. At last, he discovered the stonework and foundations, which alone existed of the church in which he was to preach. It is said that at that point Farrell, who had expected to find the church ready to occupy sat down and cried, but not for long. He quickly utilised a building on Halifax Street which he called St John's Chapel of Ease where he could hold services.



*Rev'd James Farrell, 1839-1843*  
(St John's Church, Centenary Souvenir,  
1939)

At the time of Farrell's arrival, the colony was suffering a depression and was in a precarious financial position. Due to delays in the land being surveyed, immigrants were settling in the town, and spending their money rather than cultivating land to establish much needed primary production. Money, although plentiful at first, began to dwindle, as colonists absurdly invested in rash speculation inland or sought to procure liquor, tobacco, and other less useful items. Farrell found himself in a colony where the government purse was empty, and supplies were still being brought in from Sydney and Hobart.

Despite these impediments he engaged in missionary activity in the outlying districts and shared in the work at Trinity Church and other preaching stations. He became the incumbent of St John's, Halifax Street, when it was eventually opened, but continued to help Howard with his numerous duties at Trinity.

Farrell's early work at the colony was directed towards working men, simplifying worship, and preaching evangelical sermons. As one church member reported, he drove away at the fundamentals of religion and never let you forget that there were grievous errors around you against which you were to set your faces like a flint.



*St John's Church, c1840*  
(State Library of South Australia, B58502)

### **St John's 'In the Wilderness', 1841-1886**

A lack of funds delayed the completion of the church, even though the South Australian Church Building Society was devoting all the funds at its disposal towards the building. The church was eventually opened on Sunday, 24 October 1841 by the Colonial Chaplain, Charles Howard, assisted by Farrell. They were the only Church of England clergymen in the colony at that time and remained so until 1846.

St John's Church had no ceiling and no lighting and needed plastering and pews. There was a large debt on the building which was later paid off by friends in England.

Between 1846 and 1852 the South Australian Church Building Society was instrumental in the erection of fourteen churches, six schools, and four parsonages. Clergy and school staff also received assistance from the Society by way of contributions to their stipend. In 1846 Governor Robe introduced government grants to subsidise the erection of buildings and the payment of

clergy. He saw it as the duty of the government in a new colony to provide for public worship and for religious and moral training. Many colonists, however, were strongly opposed. In 1851 the first election to the colony's Legislative Council was largely fought on the issue. At its first session the Legislative Council voted to abolish state aid to religion.

The name St John's in the Wilderness came from the fact that few streets had been formed around the church at the time and settlers living in that part of town were virtually in a wilderness. Despite this impediment the services were well attended by people who rode or walked from nearby Unley, Glen Osmond, Norwood, and Burnside.

In 1843 following Howard's death, Farrell was appointed incumbent of Trinity Church. For a time, he conducted services at both churches, in the morning at St John's and in the evening at Trinity.

Upon his departure the fortunes of St John's fluctuated for years as it was not possible to obtain a replacement for him in a timely manner. The church was closed for weekly services for two and a half years. Despite this, the registers record that 30 marriages and 88 baptisms took place during this time.

Several prominent South Australians were amongst the first parishioners at St John's. These included Osmond Gilles, who became a church-warden in 1842, Governor Gawler who was a trustee in 1844, Charles Sturt (the explorer), Robert Torrens (creator of the Torrens system of land titles), Charles Bonney (first Commissioner of Crown Lands), Charles Mann (Advocate-General) and Henry Ayers (politician and managing director of the 'Monster' copper mine at Burra). It was noted that almost the entire cast in the colonial copper-industry drama came together weekly, as members of the congregation of St John's Church. But despite this array of prominent citizens attendances were low because of the absence of a replacement for Farrell.

Travelling to St John's was not always easy in those days and worshippers faced several hazards on their journey. The south-east corner of the city was, at that time, the least populous. Between King William Street and St John's in the Wilderness there were scarcely any buildings. In winter it took

considerable navigation to get from the vicinity of St John's to the more inhabited part of town after dusk.



*St John's Church, c1845  
(State Library of South Australia, B16062)*

The Rev'd E.K. Miller, who arrived in Adelaide in 1847 recalled that after turning in various directions to avoid the holes of mud and water, pedestrians, attracted perhaps by a light, might find themselves about where they had started from, or on the parklands. Victoria Square was an especially dangerous locality for there were two or three narrow tracks which diverged to create the likelihood of getting bogged.

In 1846 the trustees of St John's persuaded the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel to allow one of the clergymen it had sent to Adelaide to assume charge of the church. This was the Rev'd William Woodcock who arrived in Adelaide in 1847 with his wife and five children.

A new organ, built locally, was installed in the recently constructed gallery at the west end of the church and the fabric of the church was completed. Its interior was plastered and decorated in colours of red and yellow. The colours caused some controversy.

In 1847 the Anglican Diocese of Adelaide was formed with Augustus Short as its first bishop. Short laid firm foundations for the Anglican Church in South Australia when in 1855 he instituted self-government through a synod. The diocesan assembly so formed met together for first time in 1852 and by 1855 was drafting a constitution that would give lay representatives equality with clergy for the purposes of decision-making. Bishop Short consecrated St John's on 1 October 1848 and in 1849 its Sunday School was opened by Archdeacon Mathew Hale. The following year Woodcock was appointed incumbent of Christ Church, North Adelaide.



In the early 1850s news of a gold rush in Victoria filtered into Adelaide. South Australians were said to have flocked to the goldfields like doves flying into windows. Many left Adelaide, selling their houses cheaply, or in some cases swapping them for a dray and enough rations to get them to Victoria. Naturally, this exodus affected Adelaide's land values, housing, and population stability.

The passing parade of clergy at St John's during the late 1850s and 1870s included:

1850 Archdeacon M B Hale  
1851 T P Wilson  
1851 E A Jenkins  
1852 J C Bagshaw  
1860 J S Jackson  
1861 D J H Ibbetson  
1872 T J Smyth

Many pastoralists, merchants and professionals chose to live in the city and built mansions along East Terrace, which afforded a view toward the Adelaide Hills. As the south-east corner of the city became more populated, the number of people attending St John's gradually increased.



*Rev'd Denzil Ibbetson 1861-1871*  
(St John's Church, Centenary  
*Souvenir*, 1939)

The longest serving incumbent during this time was the Rev'd Denzil Ibbetson. He was appointed in 1861 and stayed until 1871 when he died at the age of 48 from a chronic and enfeebling illness.

The church became active in both fund-raising and the promotion of cultural activities, the two often converging. These included musical evenings, lectures by prominent clergy, teas, and bazaars. St John's and its clergy were instrumental in the establishment and support of other churches.



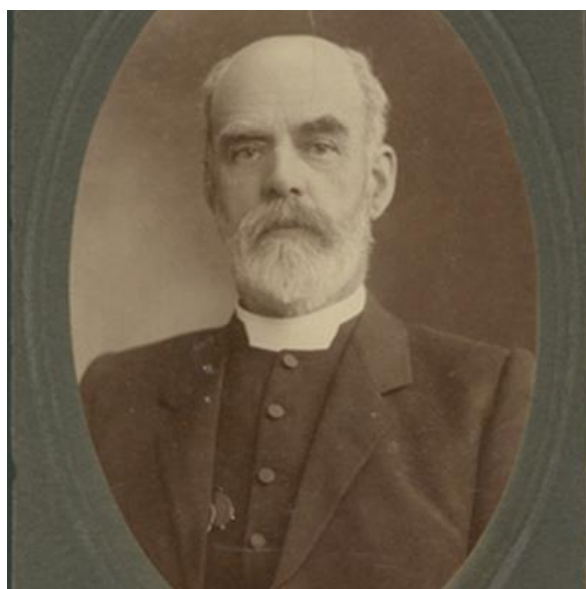
In this regard St John's is said to be the parent church of St Paul's, Pulteney Street 1863, St Augustine's, Unley 1870, St Oswald's, Parkside 1883, St Bartholomew's, Norwood 1896, St Mark's, Maylands 1902 and St Theodore's, Rose Park 1914. All eventually became independent parishes.

In the winter of 1861, the churches placed a formal request to the City Council asking that the footpaths around the church be repaired. Even in 1879, there were complaints about a wide gulf of slush through which foot-passengers and the congregation of St John's Church had to plod their way. A poorly covered well, apparently some eighteen metres away from the church was also of considerable concern, especially with children going to and from Sunday school.

During these early days, the church was a popular subject for artists. Early paintings often depicted the small building set against the background of the Adelaide Hills and surrounding pastures.

For the Anglican Church in the diocese of Adelaide the years from 1860 to World War I were considered 'golden years' as the number of churches doubled to 215.

The arrival in 1874 of the dynamic Rev'd Frederic Slaney Poole coincided with a boom period in the colony. Slaney Poole was an innovator. In 1882 he introduced an 'early celebration' of Holy Communion on Sundays at 8am – initially fortnightly, later weekly – in addition to the customary services of Morning Prayer (Matins) at 11am and Evening Prayer (Evensong) at 6.45pm. Another of Slaney Poole's innovations was a monthly parish magazine which first appeared in 1889.



*Rev'd Frederic Slaney Poole, c1890  
(State Library of South Australia, B9864)*

Slaney Poole was unimpressed with the run-down state of St John's and even considered returning to England. His decision to stay and to pull the church out of the mire was to prove a turning point in its history. Because of building developments within the city of Adelaide there was a growth in population around St John's and therefore a renewed interest in it. Income therefore increased and enabled a building program which created some of the fine facilities we associate with the church today. These improvements included a new organ which was built by Johann Wolff in 1875.



*St John's new parsonage, c1886  
(State Library of South Australia, B9861)*

In 1882 it was decided that the parsonage on East Terrace should be sold and a new one constructed in St John's Street next to the church. This was a substantial two-storey house with a balcony spanning the main façade. It was completed in 1884. Two years later in 1886, three new classrooms were added on the eastern side of the Hall for the school.

## **The church building is condemned**

In 1886 St John's original trust deeds were revoked and the church was incorporated under 'The Corporation of St John's Act-1886', a private Act of Parliament. Under this act St John's was a corporation vested in its seatholders: those had rented a pew. The vestry was a meeting of seatholders called for the purpose of conducting the church's business and only seatholders could hold the office of churchwarden.

During this year, the Adelaide City Council condemned the church building as unsafe and ordered its demolition.

This was wise, given Slaney Poole reminiscences in the *South Australian Register*:

‘I do not think that I have ever entered a church which presented so woebegone an appearance as St John’s did to me on my first inspection of it. To begin with some of the walls were out of plumb, and in several places on the walls were cracks through which daylight showed itself, and weather stains were everywhere. ... The floor of the church was ... ravaged with white ants.’

The roof leaked so badly that members of the congregation are said to have used umbrellas in the church when it rained.

The last service at St John’s prior to its demolition was held on 21 November 1886. It was observed that although many of the parishioners thought a new church should be built some were opposed. They were attached to the old place and wanted it to remain as a landmark, as it was one of the oldest religious buildings in the colony.

### **St John’s rises from the rubble**

Slaney Poole was determined to have the new church built in one major project. Although it placed the parish in considerable debt for over a decade, present-day parishioners and the Adelaide community at large must be grateful for the legacy of such a fine building. Plans for the new church were prepared by the architect George Holwell. A member of the congregation, William Rogers, was appointed to build the church in the nineteenth-century Gothic style of sandstone and brick.

The walls were constructed of sandstone rubble and (unusually) were tuck-pointed. The fine tower, which still dominates this residential area, integrated well with the rest of the church with its angled buttresses.

The Bishop of Adelaide, G.W. Kennion, laid the foundation stone on 14 May 1887 and on 6 October of the same year consecrated the building.

Underneath the stone was placed a sealed bottle containing copies of the daily papers and documents relating to the origin of the church.

At Slaney Poole's instigation, it was decided to establish a mission church in the western part of the parish, in an area deemed to be one of the poorest and spiritually neglected in the city. He therefore arranged for the purchase of a block of land in Moore Street. As an economy it was proposed to use bricks and timbers from the demolition of St John's to build this church which was also dedicated to St John the Evangelist. It was thought that this might overcome the 'tender regret' which members of the congregation felt at the demise of their old church.

The new mission church was built in much the same style as the old church in Halifax Street. The foundation stone of the new 'Mission Chapel of Ease' was laid in December 1886 and the first service held in 1887. In 1893 the church was consecrated in the name of St Mary Magdalene by Bishop Kennion. It was the first Anglican church to be built in the city of Adelaide for over twenty-five years, becoming an independent parish in 1919.

Although the parish was blessed with a new church the parsonage was less habitable. All upstairs rooms were 'innocent' of paint or paper as on the day the house passed from the builder's hands. Slaney Poole and his wife pined



*Rev'd William Hopcraft, c1895  
(State Library of South Australia,  
B4870)*

for a veranda to protect from the solar heat and with each passing year were less able to cope with the heat. In June 1895 Slaney Poole resigned to become vicar of St Peter's, Ballarat; an offer he gladly accepted. He returned to Adelaide four years later because his increasing deafness made it impossible to continue in parish work.

The next rector was the Rev'd William Hopcraft of Port Augusta who was inducted on 6 September 1895. Hopcraft was much loved by his parishioners. His strong personality, hard work and ability as a preacher speedily filled the church. His ministry was characterised by social

welfare concerns and the need to reduce the debt incurred by the building program.

One of the most prominent parishioners at this time was Professor William Bragg – physicist, chemist, and mathematician at the University of Adelaide. At St John's he was a sidesman and a lay reader and his son Lawrence taught in the Sun school. When Bragg left Adelaide in 1908 for an academic post in England the family was farewelled by the parish; the rector praised William as a 'devoted son of the church'. In England in 1915, William and Lawrence Bragg shared a Nobel Prize in Physics for their services in the analysis of crystal structure by means of X-rays. William was knighted in 1920.

During the late 1890's a Benevolent Society was formed by women of St John's to assist the poor of the local area. The formation of this society and the church's involvement in the South Adelaide Day Nursery reflected the changing nature of the society. Women were becoming more visible in the public sphere and had very definite concerns such as childcare. Creches assisted women who were working in factories and shops.

### **The turn of the century**

A new organ was built for the church in 1902 by Josiah Dodd. This instrument was of an advanced symphonic style with a rich palette of large-scale diapasons, narrow scale strings, bold flutes, and vibrant reeds, sometimes voiced on heavy wind pressures. Dodd was the first Australian organ-builder to employ stop keys and adjustable combination actions for consoles. The organ was substantially rebuilt in 1996 by George Stephens. Its sound and the acoustics of St John's are widely admired.



*Interior of St John's Church, c1901  
(State Library of South Australia, 58330/107)*

About the same time the chancel of the church was embellished with a wrought-iron rood screen, a wide decorative frieze under the windows and a reredos of brocade wall hangings behind the altar.



*St John's Church, c1905*

*(State Library of South Australia, B71863)*

Hopcraft died prematurely on 9 June 1908. As a memorial to him the choir vestries were erected on the west side of the Parish Hall and altar rails were placed in the chancel. A covered way was erected between the vestry and the church in 1908, the money having been bequeathed by Emily Murphy as a thank offering.

The Sanctuary Guild arranged for the installation of an electric light in the sanctuary and four more in the choir stalls. The improvement eliminated the exorbitant costs of gas mantles and lamps. The whole church was lit by electricity in 1914.

The Rev'd Rupert Hewgill, was appointed rector in 1908. He was a scholar, a preacher of 'interesting' sermons, and a whimsical sense of humour. Hewgill plunged into parish work. Following a house-to-house visitation he reported that of 137 houses east of Hurtle Square, the residents of 62 had affiliation with the Church of England, attending the four Anglican churches in the city. However, it was during this time that parishioners were being lost to St John's as they began moving out into the suburbs and attending churches closer to their new homes. The notion of moving to the suburbs, whilst still attending a city church was not yet popular. In 1918 Hewgill left St John's to become rector of St Andrew's, Walkerville, a prestigious church where he remained until his retirement in 1944. He was appointed as a canon of St Peter's Cathedral in 1923.



## Adelaide responds to World War I

World War I naturally had a great impact on the social fabric of Australia with so many men volunteering to fight for King and Country. The parish tried to keep track of its young men who were fighting overseas with a regular column in the parish magazine on the whereabouts of 'Our Soldiers'. Some of them wrote to the rector with (censored) news of what they were doing. In the north porch of St John's is a list of the 75 parishioners who enlisted for war service and the 19 who died. Several of these have memorials in the church. One such is the fine neo-gothic font and baptistry presented by the Needham family in memory of their father, Richard, and mother, Emma, and their two brothers, George, and Francis, who died during the war. Another war memorial is the pair of windows, depicting St John the Evangelist and St Michael, which flank the baptistry. These are dedicated to Captain Thomas Baker DFC, who was killed on 4 November 1918, a week before the Armistice at the age of 21.

During the nineteenth century it was the practice for families to pay a quarterly or annual rent for a seat or pew in the church. These were then reserved for their use at each service, with the renter's name on a card that was inserted into a brass card holder. For those unable to pay pew rents, seats were provided at the rear of the church. The benefit of pew rents for the church was that it provided an assured income. Pew rents were much debated at this time. Many saw them as indefensible because they were barriers in Christian

fellowship and excluded poorer people from the body of the church. Moreover, some of those who rented pews were slack in paying what they owed, which reduced the church's income.



*Rev'd Horace Finnis, c1918  
(State Library of South  
Australia, B49702)*

The Rev'd Horace Percy Finnis was inducted as rector of St John's on 1 February 1918. He was keen on the abolition of pew rents. He was supported by a parish Committee for the Abolition of Pew Rents. The issue was debated at several vestry meetings. Finally, in 1920 the Easter Vestry resolved that pew rents be abolished and St John's be 'a free and open' church – a part memorial to those members of the parish who had sacrificed



their lives in the Great War. The change required an Act to be passed by the state parliament to amend the St John's Church Act of 1886. This transferred the powers that had been vested in the church's seatholders to the adult communicant members of the congregation who had signed the Vestry Roll. Finnis regarded the abolition of pew rents as one of his main achievements at St John's.

Members of the church removed the brass name-holders and moulded them into candlesticks for the altar, inscribed with the names of the 19 deceased soldiers. A brass memorial tablet was installed with the names of the 75 men from the parish who had enlisted during the war and a marble font with a carved railing was placed in the baptistry as a memorial to the fallen.

Their memory was further commemorated by a handsome leather folder, artistically printed, containing a record of the church life of each of the men. This was installed in a brass grille, designed by the People's Warden, H.E. Fuller. These memorials are still to be found in the church.

## **The post-war years**

During the 1920s St John's had its own Day School. On the closure of the Day School at St Paul's, Pulteney Street, in 1917 the bishop and the Diocesan Board of Education were keen to have another church school in the city to take its place. In 1918, therefore, a school was begun at St John's, housed in the parish hall. It took children between the ages of 5 and 14, with fees of one shilling and sixpence a week. It soon had some 50 pupils mostly from within the parish, who were taught by a head mistress and one assistant teacher. The fees did not cover the cost of running the school so the gap was filled by donations from parishioners and fund-raising events.

For a few years St John's had a curate, the Rev'd Alfred Depledge Sykes, a former Congregational minister, who was then appointed to St Cyprian's North Adelaide. The church also appointed a woman to its staff as a 'parish worker'. This was Hilda Burden, who was possibly the first Anglican woman in Adelaide to study theology.

During these years St John's had a strong musical tradition, with a large choir of men and boy. John Dempster, son of the rector of St Matthew's, Kensington, was the Choirmaster; he was also the City Organist and prominent in the musical life of Adelaide. In 1922 it was decided to install new choir stalls as a war memorial. The iron roodscreen was removed, the chancel was extended further in the nave and the pulpit was repositioned. The new stalls, in blackwood and designed by architect Walter Bagot, cost the substantial sum of 500 pounds and were dedicated in 1924.

Although the majority of the regular congregation of St John's lived beyond the boundaries of the parish, the church had many connections with the inhabitants of the south-east corner of the city. In 1922 Finniss reported that he had compiled a card index listing every household within the parish that saw itself as Church of England. Allowing for three persons in every household and adjusting for those living in the parish who attended neighbouring churches, he estimated that the number of individuals who had some connection with St John's was about 1700. This was much greater than the number of regular attenders.

The parish magazine in 1922 listed those involved with the various organisations of the church. They included churchwardens, the Sunday School Council, the Day School Council, the auditors, a Lay Reader, a Parish Worker, Sidesmen, Altar Servers, the Sunday School Superintendent, Headmistress of the Day School, Synodsmen and the Organist and Choirmaster. A total of 46 parishioners held office of some kind.

Under Finnis the worship at St John's moved in a high church direction. The term Sung Eucharist first appeared in the service register in November 1918. Lighted candles on the altar, because they were associated with Roman Catholicism, were controversial. Some parishioners threatened to leave if they were introduced. Finally, in 1922 the vestry voted to allow them as part of its war memorial. The war memorial candlesticks were dedicated by the bishop and were used for the first time at Easter 1922. Finnis, going one step further, sought to introduce the wearing of eucharistic vestments. In 1927 he presented a white linen set of vestments to the church as a thank offering for recovery after a major operation. In the parish magazine he wrote a lengthy

justification of vestments. However, the vestry was unpersuaded and deferred the proposal.

As in other parishes, the congregations were much larger at Easter and Christmas when many Anglicans who were only occasional attenders made a point of going to church. In 1920 for example, there were 333 communicants at Easter and 281 at Christmas, with four services, at 6, 7, 8 and 11am.

Finnis was a notable musician with close links with Pulteney Grammar School. As well as teaching Musical Appreciation he was instrumental in establishing scholarships there for choir boys in the cathedral choir and at St John's. He was extremely popular with the choirboys who nicknamed him 'Saucy'.

During his time at St John's Finnis helped to found St Mark's College, the first residential college at the University of Adelaide. In 1927 he resigned to become Bishop's Vicar and Precentor of St Peter's Cathedral. In 1933 he founded in Adelaide the first branch of the School of English Church Music, later renamed the Royal School of Church Music.

In November 1927 Finnis was succeeded as rector by the Rev'd Egerton North Ash who had previously been at St Mary's, Waverley, in Sydney. The parish was thriving. It had branches of the Mother's Union, the Church of England Men's Society (CEMS), the Girls' Friendly Society (GFS) and the Church of England Boys' Society (CEBS), a Girl Guide company, a Young Men's Society, a Guild of Altar Servers and Crossbearers, a Sunday school and a large choir. A Scout troop was formed in 1937. There were many social activities and annual fairs and fetes to raise funds. St John's and its organisations played an important role in the lives of the inhabitants of the south-east corner of the city, many of whom were not regular churchgoers. So did the other churches in the south-east corner, all of them located in Halifax Street: Madge Memorial Methodist Church and the Congregational and Baptist mission halls.

North Ash was imaginative and energetic. He revamped the parish magazine, which went to 500 households each month, and he inaugurated a system of District Visitors. These were women who were allocated a particular area of the parish, with the task of distributing church magazines and other papers,

collecting contributions and reporting to the rector any cases of sickness or other matters that need his attention. He created a Children's and Missionary Corner at the south-west end of the church where it was intended that children would learn about the life of Jesus and be inspired by books on the lives of great missionaries. He encouraged the youth of the parish to begin, in 1930, their own magazine *The Quest* which ran for three issues. The parish held debates between teams from the CEMS and the CEBS on topical subjects such as 'Should state parliaments be abolished?' and 'Should the church interest itself in politics?'. North Ash preached sermons on topical subjects and for Evensong sometimes advertised a 'question box' in which he answered questions that concerned Anglicans at the time. The anniversary in October each year of the laying of the church's foundation stone became a big occasion, with events spread over a week, with special preachers on Sunday and the state governor and other invited guests attending evensong. Attendances rose. At Easter 1932 there were 400 communicants.

In 1928 St John's added a deaconess to its staff. In 1920 the bishops of the Anglican Communion, meeting in England at the Lambeth Conference, endorsed the order of deaconesses as a distinct ministry in the Church. In Adelaide during the 1920s Bishop Nutter Thomas ordained several women as deaconesses to work in parishes, with a special ministry to women and children. Deaconess Winifred Mann was ordained in Adelaide in 1927 and worked at St John's until October 1928. North Ash was grateful for her assistance during his early months at St John's. However, he wanted the assistance of a clergyman so did not continue with the appointment and Deaconess Mann moved to another parish.

At this time, some parts of society were struggling because of the economic depression which was caused by the fall in wheat and wool prices in mid-1920 the Port Adelaide waterfront strike in 1928 and the Wall Street collapse in 1929. North Ash was visited daily by men and women who were suffering from poverty and destitution and sought assistance. In response, the parish established a poor fund and supported a men's hostel at Port Adelaide run by the Church of England Men's Society.



*St John's Parish Magazine, May 1929*

It also organised a scheme which placed unemployed 'church boys' from the city with farmers, for whom they worked in return for keep and a small weekly allowance. One of the casualties of the Depression was St John's Day School. The number of enrolments fell to 43 and, although the poorly paid teachers took reduced salaries, the school was compelled to close at the end of 1930.

In 1935 North Ash left St John's to become vicar of Tamworth in northern New South Wales. He was later appointed Home Secretary of the Australian Board of Missions.

### **From the Church's centenary year to 1960**

The Rev'd Eric Wylie, who succeeded North Ash as rector, was diligent but without the drive of his predecessor. His aim was 'to build up a strong and devoted body of regular communicants'. By the end of the 1930s the character of the city of Adelaide was changing. The parish's Centenary Souvenir in 1949 observed that the encroachment of factories and business premises upon the south-east portion of the city had impacted on the residential qualities of the parish, whilst the movement of the younger generations to the suburbs was also reducing the size of the regular congregation. Fortunately, a number of loyal parishioners continued to come in from the eastern and southern suburbs.

The nave of the church was beautified by the addition of a stained-glass window. This was dedicated in December 1944 in memory of Mary Anne De Vine, a faithful parishioner who had died the previous year. As Mary Anne had worked hard in support of the parish and the church's missionary work it

depicted Dorcas, or Tabitha, from Acts 9:36, a woman 'full of good works and acts of charity'.

During World War II there was a significant decline in regular attenders at St John's. Petrol rationing and other restrictions hampered regular worshippers in church attendance. In 1945, in his last report as rector, Wyllie observed that 'Almost all our young people joined one or other of the services' so that the parish's previously vigorous youth organisations had languished. In 1945 the parish magazine listed the names of some 70 men and women connected with the parish who were serving in the Forces. In the post-war years young families continued to move from the city to the new and expanding suburbs with modern homes and facilities. Mansions were difficult to maintain without servants and were therefore converted into schools, hospitals, and public offices. Between the 1940s and the 1970s the residential population of the city declined by two-thirds. In the south-east corner many dwellings were rented or turned into boarding houses.

In 1945 the Rev'd Edward Cooper, who had been an RAAF chaplain in Queensland, was appointed rector of St John's. During Cooper's incumbency there was a lively program for youth. The parish sponsored sports teams including tennis, cricket and table tennis, and started a branch of the Young Anglican Fellowship which was well supported. The chancel was full of



*Rev'd Edward Cooper*  
*State Library of South Australia*  
*94 – 13/25*

choristers. However, this level of support did not translate to the nave. From the pulpit Cooper would deplore the absence of support but of course he was preaching to the converted. Financial support for the parish continued to be a problem at a time when suburban parishes were expanding. Thus in 1948 it was decided that 'Yalambie', a property owned by the parish on East Terrace, should be sold.

Realising that the 11 am service time was no longer attractive to many people, Cooper moved the main morning service to 10am and then to 9. This was a Sung Eucharist or Parish

Communion, held every Sunday from 1947. For the next 30 years the average attendance hovered around 50, with over double that number at Christmas and Easter.

In the early 1950s the Serbian Orthodox Church, under the leadership of Father George Djonlich conducted its services at St John's. Their church community grew quickly with 120 members worshipping at St John's at that time. Eventually the Serbians built their own church on Port Road in Woodville Park.

By 1956 Cooper noted in his annual report that there was a growing number of young homeless men in the area – a situation boosted by the 'Great Flood' of the River Murray in 1956, the worst in the state's history. To aid the poor and homeless men who clustered in the area the Daughters of Charity of St Vincent de Paul opened a relief centre in Hutt Street (now called the Hutt Street Centre) in 1954.

Cooper resigned from the parish in November 1961 to become vicar of All Saints' in Preston, Melbourne.

Around 1960 St John's was incorporated by a private Act of Parliament. It was referred in the parish's own documentation as St Johns-in-the-Wilderness and remained thus until 1971 when it came under the synod's Model Trust Deed. This gave legal recognition to the parish council, comprising churchwardens and elected members. Previously it had been only an advisory body.

### **Difficult times for St John's**

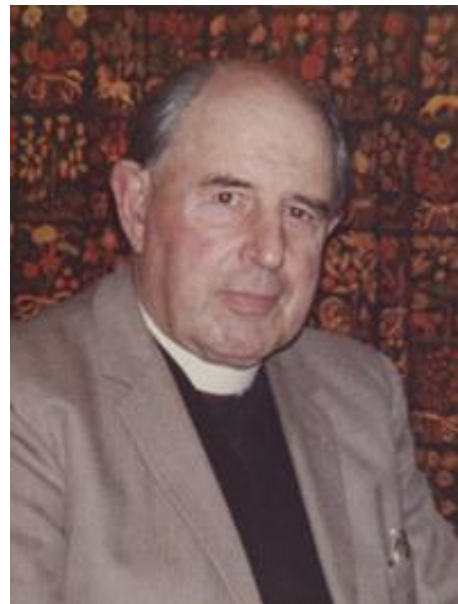
Thanks to the assistance of Canon W. R Ray, headmaster of Pulteney Grammar School, the church was able to continue without a rector until 1962 when the Rev'd James Dobbs was appointed. However, he led the church for only four months before suffering a mental breakdown. This was an exceedingly difficult time for the church, as indicated by the priest's warden's annual report:

'...I feel Brethren I can truthfully say that the 'family' of St John's has borne a cross this past year with great admiration, tenacity, and a determination to win a battle against tremendous odds. And, I feel I can



say the battle has been almost won. The past year has been one of great sadness and strife, a year when we could easily have 'gone under', taken the line of least resistance and said – 'what is the use of carrying on, let us close St John's. But no, you have all faithfully stuck to your guns, you have borne your cross and today we are here with renewed life and a will to make this a Church triumphant...'

When the Rev'd Donald Wallace was appointed to the parish in 1964, the regular income had fallen so much that he was forced to go around the district asking for donations. In 1966 he wrote to Bishop Reed proposing the possibility of St John's amalgamating with the adjacent parish of St Mary Magdalene following the resignation of its rector, Father Malcolm Lindsay. But by then the need for the St Mary Magdalene Mission as it was originally structured had ended. The Mission Hall was let to the Education Department, which operated a Special School from the building until 1979 and over the next few years most of the mission's property was sold. St Mary Magdalene's remained an independent parish with a distinctly Anglo-Catholic identity.



*Rev'd Don Wallace*  
*State Library of South Australia*  
*94 – 13/27*

While serving as rector of St John's Wallace and his wife Gwenyth invited a young Indigenous boy, Harold Thomas, to join their family. Harold was enrolled at Pultney Grammar School where he demonstrated considerable artistic talent. Harold designed the current Aboriginal flag on the table in the rectory kitchen.

By 1968 several renovations were completed at St John's to improve flooring in the church, renovate the Sunday School roof, provide new guttering in the rectory and church, paint the rectory, and stain the pews. A little later there were renovations to the sanctuary, vestry, and fellowship room. Wallace also established a memorial chapel in the south-east corner of the church, dedicated to previous parishioners who had died.

Wallace was a true humanitarian, generous to those in need and greatly loved by the members of his congregation. This was demonstrated through his care of homeless young men in the area. This initiative led in 1981 to the opening of St John's Youth Shelter for homeless boys. With help from the parishioners, it used the church hall and a side room to provide an evening meal and bunk beds. Later, federal and state government funding was provided for the shelter's continuance as an incorporated body called St John's Youth Services.

St John's Youth Services, in partnership with Housing SA and Anglicare, now provides support for homeless young people and Adelaide's only youth crisis accommodation, with apartments in Waymouth Street and Port Adelaide. The type of accommodation is regarded as a model for other similar programs. St John's parish should be proud of its parentage of this program.

### **Arrangements with the Society of the Sacred Mission**

Attendances at the church were dwindling to an average of 30 each Sunday in the mid-1970s and funding continued to be a problem.

In 1978 Wallace was approached by the Australian Provincial of the Society of the Sacred Mission (SSM) with the suggestion that the Society make St John's part of its teaching and training establishment for priests and lay people. The parish had been approached 15 years earlier with a request to become the Society's priory and parish, but the timing of this proposal did not suit St John's at the time

The proposal suited the Society as it needed a parish where final-year theological students could work. The benefit to the parish was the clerical support that would be provided to St John's. With the approval of the Archbishop Keith Rayner, an agreement was reached in October 1978 that the Society's Provincial assume responsibility for the parish. Soon afterwards a priest, lay brother and theological students came into residence.

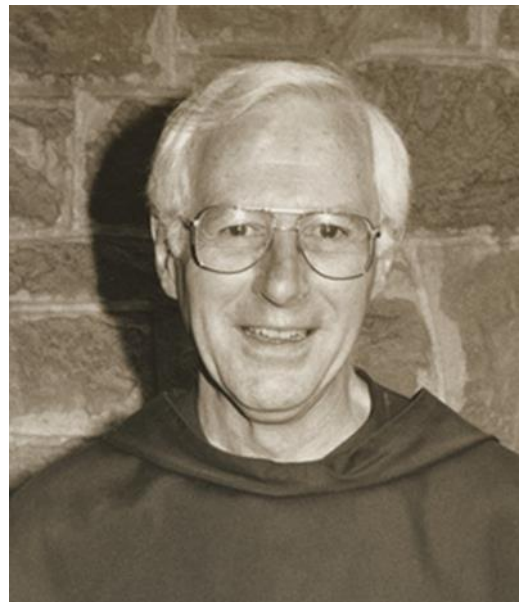
The Society of the Sacred Mission was an Anglican religious community founded in England in 1893, initially to prepare young men for missionary

service and for ordination in the Church of England at its theological college Kelham Hall, near Nottingham. In 1946, at the invitation of all but three of the Australian bishops, SSM founded a province in Australia. The diocese of Adelaide had offered SSM a house and land at Crafers – property that had been bequeathed to the church.

In 1947 this was opened as St Michael's House which was both a monastic priory and a theological college modelled on Kelham Hall. The theological college grew rapidly. It offered a course of training for young single men, extending over five years, and drew students from across Australia. The teaching staff included several scholars with international reputations. From the 1970s, however, for a variety of reasons, numbers at the college declined and its future was uncertain. The buildings, and the large library, were destroyed in the Ash Wednesday bushfires in 1983.

Following the agreement between St John's and the SSM Father Douglas Brown SSM became the priest-in-charge and the rectory became a priory. The move of SSM to St John's, with up to ten students in residence after the bushfires, injected a fresh burst of enthusiasm and energy to the church and parish. Over the years since then the congregation has benefited greatly from the involvement of SSM.

In 1982 Father Dunstan McKee SSM took over the incumbency and continued the path which had been established. Several changes occurred. A mezzanine floor was built into the Parish Hall to accommodate a large segment of SSM's newly created library to support its work in theological education. These structural changes were supervised by parishioner, Don Taylor. In worship an early innovation by SSM was a Midnight Eucharist on Christmas Eve; held for the first time in 1979. As in other parishes, the numbers attending Sunday Evensong had fallen away and in July 1986 the service was discontinued.



*Father Dunstan Mc Kee, SSM  
State Library of South Australia  
94- 13/28*

In 1983 the Dulwich Centre was established at St John's as a way of providing improved support for families in crisis both here and overseas. In collaboration with the University of Melbourne, the Centre negotiated to offer tertiary training up to Master's and PhD level in Narrative Therapy and Community work. The base for this work continues to be located at St John's.

### **The centenary of the St John's Church building**

Father Dunstan McKee SSM officiated at the centenary of the church building in 1988. People travelled from afar to be at this special celebration. He reminded his congregation of the need to be more effective builders of God's kingdom in one's daily life. In this regard he emphasised that buildings are important but are not the main priority.

The wider activities of the Society of the Sacred Mission attracted more people to join the congregation, many of them from distant suburbs. Meanwhile, the nature of the south-east corner of Adelaide was changing yet again. There was more interest in owning heritage homes, and rising petrol prices made it more beneficial to live closer to the city centre. The Adelaide City Council also offered attractive council rates at the time to encourage people to return to the city.

### **Father Christopher Myers SSM**

When Father Christopher Myers SSM became priest-in-charge of St John's in 1991 he clearly stated his priorities as worship, the arts, theological education, social justice, and community engagement. Father Christopher's prior work in the Society of the Sacred Mission had taken him to Perth, Canberra and as far afield as Japan. A six-month appointment to St John's in the early



*Father Christopher Myers, SSM, 2020*

1980s had given him an association with the parish.

Early in his ministry at St John's Father Christopher sensed that some change to the interior design and décor of the church would greatly enhance the worship. He thought the visual experience was important because of the power of beauty to move people beyond words alone.

In his thinking Father Christopher was influenced by the Second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church (1962–65) which changed the way in which Catholics worshipped. The goal was to encourage the whole people of God to participate more fully in the church's worship and sacraments.

The challenge of improving the facilities at St John's was not an easy one, requiring trust and perseverance by parish members who greatly assisted with the work. In the early years of the church building the chancel was much more ornate with a wrought iron roodscreen, a wide decorated frieze under the windows and brocade wall hangings to frame the fine altar. The rood screen was used to divide the choir from the main part of the church. In the intervening years, the walls throughout the church were whitewashed and wooden panelling installed.

Working with the congregation and other professionals familiar with heritage buildings meant that both the architectural and liturgical aspects of church life could be realised in the renovations that were carried over the next decade.

This monumental renovation program took place during the following years with professional support from Ron Danvers an architect, and Wendy Wauchope, an interior decorator. Both had the same artistic temperament as Father Christopher who was comfortable to lead the process on behalf of his parishioners.

The complete renovation of the church was undertaken at minimal cost and with significant support from the Adelaide City Council. When it was completed, the church became a focus for the arts and artistic endeavours, providing the opportunity for the community to engage with a house of worship.

Father Christopher retired in October 2016. During his time at St John's the Anglican Church in Australia agreed in 1992 to allow the ordination of women to the priesthood. Historical records show that for many years there had been discussion of this possibility, so it could be said the decision was well considered before the final agreement was reached. By the end of 1992, 90 women had been ordained as priests in the Anglican Church of Australia. By 2018 ordained female leaders in the church included 200 deacons, more than 500 priests and six bishops.

## **Redevelopment of the church buildings**

Associate Professor Ron Danvers was introduced to Father Christopher in 1991 and was captured by his vision in which beauty and music would provide inspiration for worshippers and visitors at St John's. This shared vision with Father Christopher provided the foundation of a long relationship, one that lasted until 2014. Danvers provided pro bono architectural support through his office, friends, intern students at Adelaide University, and other agencies with which he had contacts.

In the 1990's the fabric of the church was, according to Danvers, in a 'sorry state' as it was deliberately unadorned and featured a severe interior that concealed the original high decoration. During the eight years of renovation parishioners and external parties keen to assist rallied to undertake the work required. The church was repaired and painted; and TAFE students helped with the columnar marble and stencil work. A colourful reredo depicting the Archangels Michael and Gabriel was painted by James Aldridge.

It was suggested by Archbishop Ian George that, in the spirit of reform, the ironwood altar could be moved forward to enable the celebrant to face the congregation. This was achieved, with the removal of the choir stalls. A Steinway grand piano and the bishops chair were added. An Arts and Crafts William Morris-designed carpet in the centre aisle was gifted to St John's by the Society of the Sacred Mission in memory of a long-term parishioner.

Because of his work at the university Danvers was able to arrange for intern students to undertake acoustic studies, develop the architectural proportion plans and drawings. He also assisted with formal arrangements between St



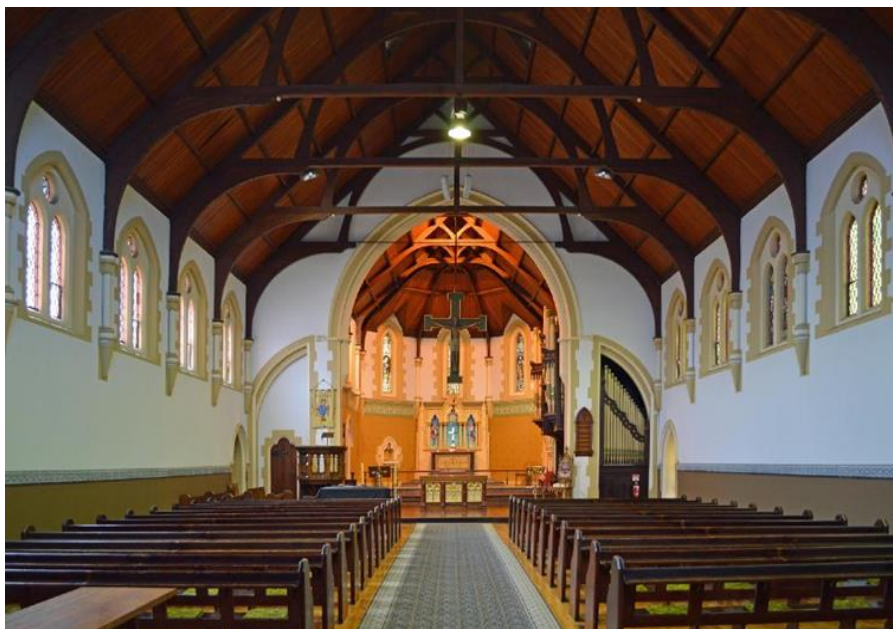
John's and Paul Stark the City Councils Heritage Architect, leading to an Incentive Scheme Grant for some of the work.

During the renovations of the church a new roof was placed on the hall and priory and they too were renovated. The garden was refreshed by the removal of some older trees and replanting's.

The internal renovations at St John's sparked the attention of the Archbishop's advisory committee which questioned their radical nature. Happily, the work was eventually supported as it was recognised that good design could breathe life into the church.

When Father Christopher finally hung the Rood, made by the members of the Little Monasteries of Bethlehem in France the church's 'keystone' was at last in place. For Danvers, the long project, and his personal spiritual journey was nearly over. His 'dream had been realised'.

The outstanding acoustics of the church make it a popular venue for concerts and recitals, and the lofty interior of the church and its garden make it attractive for weddings.



*Interior of St John's Church, 2021*

Throughout these years of renovation and restoration St John's parishioners have been the key to its success. Their commitment and support have been pivotal to the outcome .



## The appointment of a diocesan priest in 2018

Father Christopher SSM was the last professed member of the Society of Sacred Mission to be priest of St John's. The Rev'd Peter Balabanski was appointed parish priest at St John's in 2018. He had studied theology under the oversight of the Society of the Sacred Mission and so was familiar under the distinctive outlook and ethos of the SSM. St John's was one of the first churches he visited after he and his wife Vicky arrived in Adelaide from Melbourne in January 1993.

Peter had previously spent five months in Jerusalem as a guest of two members of the Society, Gilbert Sinden and Tom Brown. When Vicky came to Adelaide to take up a lectureship at the Uniting Church Theological College Peter, who was halfway through his ministry training, became the househusband and main carer of his young children. With those responsibilities he could not fit into the daily routine at St Barnabas' Anglican Theological College.



*Rev'd Peter Balabanski, 2021*

Based on his prior relationship with the Society of the Sacred Mission, Peter suggested that they might oversee the rest of his formation. The diocese of Melbourne was willing for that to happen, so he came to spend the years from 1993 to 1998 studying and training under the supervision of the members of the Society, based at St John's. Peter was ordained deacon at St John's in November 1995.

Shortly afterwards, he went to Jerusalem where he served for a year as deacon at St George's Cathedral, returning to St John's to serve as a curate in 1997 and early 1998.

When Peter received the invitation from St John's in 2017, he had been parish priest of Stirling for ten years. With the passage of time, he recognised the invitation to St John's as God's call, so he returned to Halifax Street as the parish priest.

Peter's knowledge of the church and his association with members over the years means that he understands that St John's buildings are a great pleasure and inspiration to parishioners and visitors alike. He also recognises that the present congregation has a tradition of loving hospitality and spontaneous pastoral care.

St John's is first and foremost a loving family – with all the highs and lows, joys, and tensions you'd expect to encounter in any family. But its special gift is its welcome. Peter notes that he and Vicky have felt this for themselves, and in seeing newcomers arrive, feel the warmth, and stay. It is, he says a special gift of the Spirit which he finds here to an extraordinary degree.

When asked about his priorities for the future Peter says that nurturing the Spirit's gift for hospitality and care is vital. That is his immediate priority. Then there are the extraordinary number of calls on this parish by way of connection with caring organisations – St John's Youth Services; St Mary Magdalene's Church, the Magdalene Centre, and the St Mary Magdalene Co-operative; St Luke's Whitmore Square Mission; the Hutt Street Centre; the Halifax Street Children's Centre and Preschool; St Andrew's Hospital and the Dulwich Centre. In addition, there are three or four choirs in addition to the St John's parish choir who see this place as home. There is the community store run by remarkable volunteers both from the congregation and beyond. There are connections with many universities and other groups who make use of the church and the hall. The Naval and Military Club and other groups, organisations and hopefully other schools in the local area will join that list of connections if the church's Mission Action Plan leads St John's in that direction. St John's is, he says extremely blessed to have all these links.

Peter observes that it is vital that churches build, nurture, and maintain connections with the 'outside world' – that they avoid an inward-looking culture. We are here both to worship God and to reveal God. In this sense his priorities tie in closely with Father Christopher, his predecessor.

The future for St John's is a matter for shared discernment by the whole parish family. It is to be hoped that the Mission Action Planning process being engaged in at the present time will be a foundation for the future.

### **St Johns congregation at the present day**

The National Church Life Survey of 2020 provides a snapshot of the congregation at St Johns at this time. The average age of parishioners is 71, with 69 per cent being female and 31 per cent male. 68 per cent of all parishioners have a university degree whilst 16 per cent have a trade certificate, diploma, or associate diploma. 30 per cent of the community were born overseas, and 31 per cent of the attenders have joined the congregation during the previous five years.

Congregational members are actively involved in both worship and the many activities surrounding the work of the church. Parish officers, churchwardens, a treasurer, and office staff support and guide parishioners in the day to day functioning of this busy community. Over recent years Jenny Gibb and now Barbara Murray have been pivotal to the smooth running of the St John's parish. As church secretaries they have operated in an increasingly complex and technological age to manage expertly and pastorally the parish's many ministries.

One cannot conclude this historical account without highlighting the greatest challenge for this congregation in recent times. During 2020 and 2021 the Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic impacted Australia with its frightening dangers to the health and wellbeing of the community. The closure of the church was a great shock to many parishioners, as were the many restrictions placed upon the normal practices related to worship and the functioning of this spiritual family. In response Peter and parish leaders successfully advanced an innovative approach to services through the internet and enabled the community to continue worship throughout 2020 into 2021. Happily, the church community has been blessed with the re-establishment of its in-person Sunday worship with the addition of mission outreach to the wider community through the maintenance of online services.

## Conclusion

James Farrell may have felt despondent as he came across a foundation stone rather than a building when he arrived in 1840. St John's can no longer be referred to as a church in 'the wilderness'. Rather it is surrounded by a vibrant inner urban community. New members swell the ranks of those who value the historical significance of the church building and who wish to contribute to its communities ministries in the south-east corner of the city of Adelaide.

Despite all the challenges and external pressures over the years St John's has grown to become a major spiritual gift to the city of Adelaide and one that will continue into the future.



*St John's Church and Rectory, 2018*

## Sources of historical information and images

Historical references are courtesy of:

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Adviser: Dr Caroline Adams

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