

# Address for St John's Dedication Festival

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St John's is one of a handful of congregations in Adelaide which have had a continuous existence since the early years of the colony of South Australia and, unlike most of the others, it remains on the same site. Today we celebrate its history and look forward to its future.

The original church of St John the Evangelist was only the second Anglican church to be built in Adelaide. The foundation stone was laid in October 1839, the anniversary we celebrate today, but the building was held up because of a lack of money and it was not opened until October 1841. Initially it stood by itself, quite isolated, with few houses in the area. The original church eventually fell into a bad state of repair so that finally, in 1886, it was condemned by the City Council as unsafe and was demolished.

The new church was opened in 1887 and, although changes have been made to the interior, it is the same building as we have today. The bricks and timber from the old church were used to build a mission church in a poor part of the city, in Moore Street, which opened in 1887 as St Mary Magdalene's. This has roughly the same appearance and dimensions of the old St John's.

By the 1870s the south-east corner of the city was filling up with houses – small cottages in the side streets and mansions fronting the parklands. St John's was the big church of the area but not the only one. Further west along Halifax Street was Madge Memorial Methodist Church, and Stow Memorial Congregational Church had a mission hall almost next door. However, the separate churches were not on speaking terms. It

was not until the late 1920s that the city churches began to cooperate in a procession of witness and evangelistic service on Good Friday.

St John's from the 1890s to the 1930s was a prosperous church with a congregation that was drawn both from the immediate area and from further afield. Socially it was very mixed. In those years churches were not only places for Sunday worship. In each community, they also provided sporting clubs, youth organisations, dances, choirs and groups for married women at home for whom an afternoon church group was a welcome opportunity to get out of the house and enjoy the company of others. So churches had links with many people in their area who were not regular churchgoers. From 1918 to 1930 there was a parish day school in the hall, with two or three teachers and some 70 pupils from grades 1 to 8. In the early 1920s the rector compiled a card index of the individuals who had a connection with St John's – received the parish magazine, attended occasionally, went to Sunday school, and so on – and he reached a figure of 1700.

The Reverend Egerton North Ash, who was rector from 1928, was a bundle of energy. He made the Dedication Festival a whole week of celebration. For his first one in 1929 he had special services on two Sundays at 11 and 7 with visiting preachers; on Monday and Tuesday evening there were dramatic and comic performances by the St John's Church Entertainers; there was a 'quiet afternoon' for missionary-hearted people; a special service for women at which the Lady Mayoress gave an address; and on the final Sunday evening a procession and festal evensong, attended by the Governor of South Australia and members of the Masonic Order. During the 1920s the number of Easter communicants reached a peak of over 330.

Gradually the south-east corner of the city changed. From the 1920s onwards there was a constant drift of people to the suburbs. The housing decayed and many buildings were demolished, replaced by factories and business premises. The

people who moved into the area were more transient, poorer, many of them were European migrants, and they were unlikely to join an Anglican church. The parishioners who were resident in the area declined in number and eventually the majority of the congregation was drawn from other parts of the city.

The church was saved in the late 1970s by the arrival of the Society of the Sacred Mission. Its members injected new life into the parish. The church interior we see today is a product of the vision of Father Christopher Myers.

What are some of the distinguishing features of St John's?

1. For much of the last 130+ years, since the opening of the new church in 1887, St John's has had a strong tradition of church music. In the early years there was large choir of men and boys. H. P. Finniss, who was rector in the 1920s, was a noted church musician. In recent years this tradition has been revived. The church has come to be a popular location for concerts and recitals and is therefore is widely known in Adelaide. Many people who come to concerts at this church admire the harmony of its interior.
2. Some notable people have been associated with this church. Not many churches can claim as a parishioner a professor who was later (in England, in 1915) awarded a Nobel Prize, in Physics – Sir William Bragg, jointly with his son Lawrence. William Bragg was a sidesman and lay reader here and young Lawrence was a Sunday school teacher. Many parishioners have played an important role in the public life of this city and state. They have included Charles Glover, three times Lord Mayor of Adelaide (who was also the author of the centenary history of this church) and several city councillors including in recent years the late Tony Williamson and David Plumridge. Another parishioner was Sir Henry Barwell who was state premier in the early 1920s. Jean, Lady Bonython, wife of the Methodist Sir Lavington

Bonython (who was a director of the *Advertiser*), lived around the corner at St Corantyn and was a parishioner from the time of her marriage here in 1912. But just as important in the church's history are the ordinary folk who did most of the work and the nineteen young men associated with the church – former Sunday school scholars, servers or members of the church cricket club – who were killed during the First World War. Some families, such as the Ivesons, have had a connection with the church extending over two or even three generations. The late John Lelliott was a parishioner for over seventy years.

3. Ministry of women. St John's was one of the first Anglican churches in Adelaide to have women on its paid staff. The first of them was Hilda Burden who was the Parish Worker in the early 1920s. She was the first woman in South Australia to be awarded a degree in Theology. Another was Deaconess Winifred Mann in the late 1920s. This church was a strong supporter of the ordination of women. In the 1980s it was a regular meeting place for the Adelaide branch of the Movement for the Ordination of Women, and in recent we have valued the ministry of the ordained women who are parishioners.
4. Social outreach. St John's has never been inward-looking. The people of St John's have not been concerned only with personal piety and the church world. They have sought to meet the physical needs of people of the area – relief to the unemployed during the Great Depression, Father Wallace's assistance to homeless men in the 1960s and 70s, and the shelter for homeless boys which began in 1981 and evolved into the respected St John's Youth Services. In the 1980s it provided a meeting place for a group of gay and lesbian Anglicans. It has given hospitality and support to refugees from Iran. In the present a number of individual parishioners are involved in organisations and causes that seek to redress

injustices and make a better world: promoting action on climate change, supporting refugees, and working for justice for First Nations peoples, the Community Store, and many other causes. The National Church Life Survey in 2021 showed that some 40 per cent of the congregation are involved in community service or welfare activities and value this aspect of the church.

There is much to be proud of. However, no church can live off its history. All churches these days have problems, and no one can predict their future. However, this church has shown that it can adapt. It has a faithful congregation and great resources to meet the challenges ahead.