

## **Celebrating in the Centre - the 50th and 80th Anniversaries of the John Flynn Memorial Church and Adelaide House**

‘A man is his friends’, said John Flynn, and proceeded to spread a ‘mantle of safety’ over inland Australia. He died on the 5th May 1951, and as Patrol Padre Skipper Partridge buried Flynn’s ashes in the shadow of Mt Gillen, near Alice Springs, he said of him: ‘Across the lonely places of the land he planted kindness, and from the hearts of those who call those places home, he gathered love.’

When Flynn died, working together with friends like Alf Traeger and Hudson Fysh, he had established a network of Patrol Padres, Flying Doctors, Nursing hostels, and pedal radios across Australia’s outback and remote areas. But he never built a church of bricks and mortar. He did dream it – ‘a central AIM cathedral in Alice Springs – and even purchased a lease on land in Todd St for it, but was too busy ‘building people and families’ to get around to it.

It was a gathering of some of Flynn’s friends at a memorial service that sparked the idea of building a Memorial Church in his name. Situated beside Adelaide House, the first of the Nursing Hostels Flynn designed, the John Flynn Memorial Church was built as both a shrine to the man and his vision, and a place of worship for its contemporary congregation. All sorts of dignitaries from Church and State were involved in its opening – Bob Menzies laid the Foundation Stone in 1954, and the Governor General Sir William Slim Opened the Official Dedication Service. Thousands of ordinary and extra ordinary Australians from across the country contributed their time and resources to make the dream a reality. It certainly was a church built by many hands; to name a few, the Pitjanjatjara men who quarried the stones, the Victorian Youth Group who paved the forecourt, Reg Harris who wired the building, and Mr Richards, the master builder on the project who tragically died during its construction.

The church was Opened and Dedicated as a Presbyterian Church of the AIM on Saturday the 5th May 1956, on the fifth Anniversary of John Flynn’s death: the Ernabella Choir sang, and the Service was broadcast over National radio. On Sunday the 7th May, it was handed over to the United Church of Northern Australia, an ecumenical body of Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational churches, and for many years clergy of all three – and sometimes more – denominations served the town and surrounding region.

The building of the church, however, was not an end, but a new beginning. For the past fifty years, the building has been a central focus for a human church that has spilled out into its community and across the country. The Methodist Congregation, which joined the United Church and became part of the congregation worshipping in the John Flynn Memorial Church, brought with it the bush children's hostel, Griffiths House. In time, AIM Superintendent Fred McKay saw the need not only to provide accommodation for students from the bush, but built a school for them as well, which he called St Philips College. Griffiths House continued to be a popular venue for youth Group occasions, singalongs, slide nights and cabarets on a Sunday evening. Eventually the congregation sold it to local Aboriginal groups. The site of Griffiths House is now the home of the popular Yeperenye Shopping Centre.

In the 1960s, the Congregational Church minister in the United Church in Alice Springs, Jim Downing with people like Yami Lester, developed a significant ministry with Indigenous people, resulting in the establishment of the Institute for Aboriginal Development. The 60s also saw a team ministry between four denominations – Methodist, Presbyterian, Congregational and Salvation Army – that became an internationally acclaimed model for cooperative ministry.

Throughout these years, the AIM and its successor, Frontier Services of the Uniting Church, have continued to base their Centralian Patrol Ministers in Alice Springs, providing an invaluable link between the town and those in the bush; between a congregation who meets together in person, and a scattered congregation who worship and pray in their own ways, but are one in spirit. Their other care services also have a base in town, while their workers travel far and wide to support those in remote communities. Frontier Services 'Old Timers' cottages and nursing home cares for many of those who make their final home in Alice Springs, many of whom are part of the congregation of the John Flynn Memorial Church and have lived out Flynn's vision in their active service of their communities all their lives.

Neither has Adelaide House rested on its laurels as the first Nursing Hostel in Central Australia. When the Alice Springs Hospital was built, Adelaide House became a Hostel for Bush Mothers, a birthplace for countless Territorians. In the 1960s it became a manse, until another was built on the other side of the Church. In the 1980s, with the support of Graham Bucknall, Adelaide House became a museum, and under the direction of Frances McKechnie, developed one of the earliest tourist attractions for Alice Springs, with its unique approach of first hand stories and hospitality extended to visitors over a cuppa after they had seen the displays. Adelaide House, a Home in the midst of expansive green lawns, continues to be a popular place for locals to meet, and rest awhile.

Like all congregations and faith communities, the congregation of the John Flynn Memorial Church has changed shape and focus over the years, as thousands have come to share in its life and ministry, and equally thousands have moved on in their journey and to other places. Today's congregation reflects the community in which it lives – old timers, loyal Territorians, those who came for a few months and stayed for a few years, newcomers, and short stayers. They worship on Sundays in four communities: a peaceful Communion service at 8am, a Family Service at 9.30am, an Indigenous Service at 9.30am in Mission House, and a reflective Evening Service for travelers. They are actively involved in hospitality through the ministry of Adelaide House to tourists and townfolk alike, run an Op Shop in the community, and extend friendship and support to Indigenous people both locally in the Pitjanjatjara communities.

This unique history of a Christian ministry in the heart of its community – both buildings are in the centre of the Todd St Mall, and the crosswalk area between shopping precincts – is worth celebrating. Not because it contains remarkable buildings, although it does that too, with both Adelaide House and John Flynn Memorial Church being Heritage Listed. It is worth celebrating because it has been *a place for people* for 80 years, and a worshipping community in the heart of The Alice for 50 years. It's about the people...the thousands of people who have passed this way on their life's journey, given something of themselves along the way, and become friends to us, each other, this place and the vision of a man who embodied 'faith in action'.