



God's Church and its Buildings –

Are they fit for Mission?

Extract of the Synod of South Australia Property Report 2021

The full report is available at the following link:

▶ sa.uca.org.au/property-services/2021-report

February 2021



Acknowledgement of Country

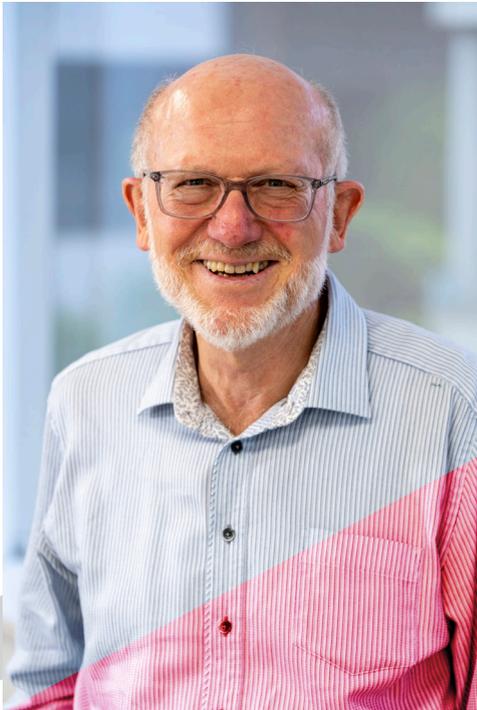
The Uniting Church in South Australia (UCSA) acknowledges and pays respect to the First Peoples, the traditional custodians who have, for thousands of years, walked on and cared for the lands on which we gather. The UCSA acknowledges and commits to the Covenant made between the Uniting Aboriginal and Islanders Christian Congress (UAICC) and Uniting Church in Australia in 1994. This Covenant is an outworking of our continued commitment and a practical expression of UCSAs commitment to empower the ministry of the UAICC.

The UCSA also acknowledges the continued deep spiritual attachment and relationship of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples to this country. We recognise that the 15th Uniting Church Assembly affirms that the First Peoples of Australia are sovereign Peoples in this land. The Uniting Church understands First Peoples' sovereignty to be 'a spiritual notion, reflecting the ancestral tie between the land and the First Peoples.'

As the Church responds to God's calling today, land is used to support its mission by providing a space for all people to encounter God. The Church stewards these resources entrusted to it, recognising they exist for the reconciling work of God. We pray that in the power of the Holy Spirit we might work together for reconciliation and justice.

For more information about the Covenant visit
sa.uca.org.au/covenanting

Letter from the Chair



The formation of the Uniting Church in 1977 provided new opportunities for the newly-created Church to engage in ministry and mission across Australia. It also provided the Church with a dilemma; a legacy of multiple church properties, many more than reasonably required by its ministry and mission. As the Church has declined in numerical strength over the intervening decades the difficulties associated with maintaining both the large number of congregations and their properties has increased.

Within the South Australian context there have been many projects and papers attempting to draw our attention to this issue; from the *Congregational Mapping* project in the early 2000's through to the *Changing Landscapes Papers* in 2013 and the *Property Viability Paper* in 2016. There have been attempts to draw the SA Synod's attention to the issue and to also engage its members in making appropriate life-giving decisions about equipping the Church sustainably for its ministry and mission in the present, and on into the future. Little has changed.

This paper is not just another paper to be read, discussed, and then consigned to the shelf alongside the others. This is a wake-up call. We cannot continue to maintain the same number of congregations and properties that we currently have if we want to be an effective Church. The Resources Board under whose auspices this report has been generated has a mandate to 'maximise financial and property resources ... for mission' and 'assist ... in allocating such resources efficiently in accordance with the mission priorities' of the Church. With our current load of congregations and properties we cannot do that at present.

This is not an issue just for the Resources Board to face. It concerns, or it should concern, every member, congregation, and Presbytery of the Uniting Church in SA. We need you all to engage with this report and face the challenges that it reveals and then to make life-giving decisions for the sake of the future of God's mission through the Uniting Church in SA.

Rob Stoner

Chair, Resources Board

Letter from the General Secretary



The Synod is a Council of the Uniting Church formed by the Assembly to have general oversight, direction and administration of the Church's worship, witness and service. It is both a privilege and a responsibility for the Synod to embrace with courage and wisdom the powers inherently invested in it. To promote and encourage the mission of the church; provide effective theological and ministerial education; and effectively supervise and manage the property and other resources within its bounds.

The Synod is also a geographic area of extraordinarily diverse but vibrant and interconnected communities of faith. Groups of people and individuals are nurtured in their faith in God through Jesus the Christ and in the presence of God's Spirit and take on many forms: chaplaincy, congregations, faith communities, employees, parish missions, Presbyteries, small and large organisations, committees and boards.

Together we seek to act in God's interest as we respond to the challenges of our world. Change is constant and the next crisis seems never too far away. In our commitment to life-long learning, living ethically and in step with the Biblical imperatives documented by the saints of old, we embrace once more the question Jesus posed as he began his teaching ministry in Mark 4: *Is a lamp brought in to be put under the bushel basket, or under the bed and not on a lampstand?* (4:21)

As we workshop this report and wrestle with the challenges it faithfully presents to the Uniting Church in SA it is important that we treat those who prepared it with respect and hear it with an openness to the opportunities it offers.

I commend this report to the Synod for your prayerful and active discernment.

Felicity Amery
General Secretary, Uniting Church in SA

Introduction

The Uniting Church in South Australia currently has 264 congregations with buildings for which they are responsible. These are many and varied but each offers a place of worship and a sense of community to those who use it. But as the buildings have aged, despite our best efforts, many have fallen behind in their upkeep. This presents risks to those who use them; risk of harm and injury, and reputational and financial risk as well.

Until now, there has been no real data about the extent of the building decline. The Property Review Report, commissioned by the Resources Board in 2017, which has included a visit to each of the 264 properties, provides the Church with a snapshot of the overall condition of all its buildings. The findings present a significant challenge for the Church as the vast majority of our buildings are not sufficiently safe. We have no choice but to address this, to keep our people safe, and to meet Government regulations and standards. However, the amount of work and the investment to achieve this is currently beyond the financial capacity of the church.

We all hope the Uniting Church in SA will thrive in the years to come, but to achieve this, our buildings must be safe for people to use. But with limited resources, how do we achieve this such that the Uniting Church in SA is an effective and sustainable church into the future? The church as a whole – the Synod of South Australia, presbyteries and congregations - needs to have important and likely difficult conversations to determine how we best move forward in providing safe places for all.

Together the Synod has the responsibility to exercise good stewardship over the Church's resources, so they continue to be used for the mission of God and the continuation of the Church into future generations. We pray for God's guidance and wisdom.



This report provides a high-level summary of key findings from the Property Review Project and is an extract of a more detailed report which is available on the Synod website at the following link:

▶ sa.uca.org.au/property-services/2021-report

and can be provided upon request by emailing:

property@sa.uca.org.au

Property in the life of the *Church*

Church buildings provide a place for giving reverence, offering hospitality and gathering community, and a space to serve and witness to others. The identity of a congregation can be closely aligned to its property; and buildings can represent the heritage and history of the families in it; their shared experiences and their sense of place.

More than bricks and mortar, the church building can be a sacred space where God is especially present and can symbolise one's faithfulness and be a meaningful part of one's faith story – where sacred events like funerals, baptisms and marriages have occurred. Church buildings can also hold wider social significance as a symbol that a community still exists, sometimes long after many other 'institutions' may have closed.

However, whilst some congregations are showing growth, energy and a strong call to mission, this is not the reality for many others that are experiencing a steady decline.



Governance *Structure*

Each congregation, through the oversight of its Church Council is responsible for the care of its property (UCA Reg 4.4.1) and the Resources Board of the Church is responsible for maximising financial and property resources available to the Synod and presbyteries for missional purposes.

Also, the Church Council and its Presbytery share responsibility to undertake an annual property review (UCA Reg 4.4.3) and regular inspections (UCA Reg 4.3.1). These activities are necessary to ensure that properties are maintained in good and safe condition.



... providing a safe place for people to encounter God, to develop relationships as part of a community and to grow in faith.



Safe Places and *Risk*

The Uniting Church affirms that all people are made in the image of God. It is committed to providing a safe place for people to encounter God, to develop relationships as part of a community and to grow in faith. This means providing a safe emotional, spiritual and physical environment for all.

Allowing people into unsafe buildings poses a significant risk to the health and well-being of all who use them and it is contrary to our values and does not meet our responsibilities.

State and Local Government provide significant concessions to churches because the land is used for religious purposes such as public worship. Whilst privately owned, these are gathering places for the benefit of the community. Whilst some church services have few people attending, the building remains open to the public, so it is an imperative that our places are safe.

A church building that is unsafe exposes those who use it, and the whole church, to significant risk. Church members carry the worry and anxiety of knowing their buildings are unsafe and it presents a reputational risk to the church whilst indicating to the public that the church is tired and does not welcome new people.

There are also financial risks associated with unsafe buildings, which include penalties for non-compliance with regulatory requirements, penalties for not meeting heritage obligations, potentially voiding insurance cover, litigation from injured persons and diminished property value.

Stewardship

As the current caretakers of the church's buildings we are compelled to steward these resources in a way that enables the mission of God and the continuation of the church into future generations. We have an imperative to make wise and intentional decisions now, so our buildings are fit for purpose to enable today's and tomorrow's mission.

We also need to recognise that by avoiding difficult decisions we can be seen to be doing nothing; we are choosing not to exercise good stewardship. Maintaining the status quo is not an option and the church is duty-bound to resolve this challenge.

Whilst the Resources Board has responsibility to assist the church steward property in accordance with the mission priorities of the church, it recognises that Church Councils make decisions regarding property at the local level and on behalf of their own community.

The Church has wrestled with the property debate for over a decade without a clear path being found. Whilst acknowledging that each congregation has its own experience of property, it has been necessary to take a 'big picture' approach and a wider view of the entire property portfolio of the Church in South Australia at this time.



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Property Review Project

The Resources Board sought to obtain a clear understanding of the condition of all buildings that the church owns and commissioned the *Property Review Project*.

Conducting an audit of the condition of properties across the state enables the church to make informed decisions moving forward.

The review sought to understand the following elements:



▶ **Building Condition** – the overall condition of the major structural elements of the building



▶ **Asbestos Safety** – to meet legislative requirements



▶ **Fire Safety** – ensuring fire safety equipment and evacuation and exit plans were in place and up-to-date



▶ **Accessibility** – to ensure access for all



▶ **Electrical Safety** – relating to wiring and equipment so-as to meet regulatory requirements



▶ **Work Health and Safety** – providing and maintaining safe, healthy and productive spaces



▶ **Building Care and Maintenance** – ensuring regular maintenance activities are undertaken



▶ **Heritage Listed Buildings** – state and local heritage are protected in South Australia and these buildings require specialist advice and specialist tradespeople.

The *Property Review Project* comprised the following steps and included the inspection of each of the 264 congregations' properties for which the Church is responsible:

1. Scoping of UCSA Properties
2. Site Inspections
3. Property Management Plan (providing individual Buildings Safety Reports)
4. Implementation
5. Reporting.

The site inspections have yielded a large amount of data and multi-page Buildings Safety Reports have been produced for each congregation under the key themes mentioned above.

The outcomes are complex to consider and also present a legal responsibility as well as an act of stewardship, pastoral care and mission.

What we *learned*

The property review process used a consistent grading technique across the portfolio by implementing a traffic light system of red, yellow and green, where red indicates a below target grading; yellow indicates a grading that is near, but below target; and green indicates a grading that is on target or better than target.

As a result of the property review process, the following broad outcomes have been observed:

- ▶ 84% of Uniting Church buildings in SA are over 50 years old and nearly 40% are over 100 years old
- ▶ 6% of congregations achieved a green rating, 57% yellow and 37% red
- ▶ More than a third of buildings achieved a red grading
- ▶ Less than 10% of heritage listed properties achieved a green rating
- ▶ Building Condition: 12% of congregations achieved a green rating, 77% yellow and 11% red
- ▶ Asbestos Safety: 15% of congregations achieved a green rating, 15% yellow and 70% red
- ▶ Accessibility: 26% of congregations achieved a green rating, 38% yellow and 36% red
- ▶ Fire safety: 18% of congregations achieved a green rating, 34% yellow and 48% red
- ▶ Electrical Safety: 22% of congregations achieved a green rating, 38% yellow and 40% red.

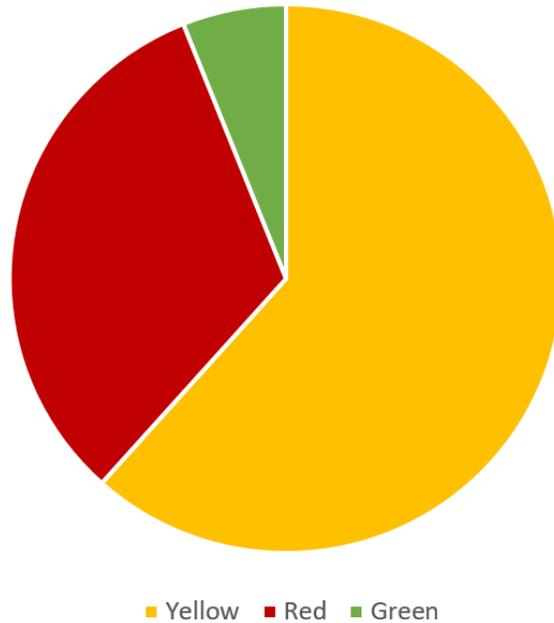


6% of congregations
achieved a green rating,
57% yellow and 37% red



Cost estimate to bring all properties to a green rating is \$30.7m

Overall Safety Score



6% Green
57% Yellow
37% Red

Overall, the financial implications from the initial assessment are significant.

Inspections have identified many safety (compliance) matters that require rectification. Estimated costs have been applied to the buildings to bring them to a suitable safety standard. Each congregation's *Buildings Safety Report* is an estimate of the rectification costs to achieve a green rating as well as a detailed forecast of the funding that would be required to ensure on-going building maintenance.

The estimated cost overall to move all buildings to a green rating (this includes heritage and non-heritage listed buildings) is \$30.7m.

Synod *Finances*

The Church does not have the financial capacity to rectify and maintain all of its properties. The annual independently audited financial statements verify that the Synod does not have discretionary monies to allocate to the care and attention of all of the church properties in South Australia.

Since 2015 the *Mission and Service Fund* has operated within a balanced budget as it strives to remain sustainable. There are some funds under investment which are necessary to provide investment returns that enable the operation of the Synod. Any reduction in these investments, for either operating or capital expenditure will impact the future operation of the Synod which would cease should those funds be fully expended.

Also, there is a limited building compliance fund outlined in the *Property Sale Proceeds Policy*, which has, in the past, contributed to urgent and necessary building compliance issues.

Further to this, if a church property is sold, the Synod is not in a position to use the proceeds at its discretion. The use of sale proceeds is disbursed in accordance with the *Property Sales Proceeds Policy* current at the time the *Application to Sell* was approved.

The policy outlines that proceeds are to be reinvested into capital rather than into recurrent expenditure. This principle ensures good stewardship and provides resources into the future for the long-term sustainability of the mission of the church.



Key Findings

It is understood that to consider the closure of a church undermines the years of ministry, faith forming experiences and vital community that congregations provide. Some feel that faith has been let down if there is no building that places Christianity in the centre of its community. However, it is equally important to understand that the church is not the building, rather the church is its people.

Closing a church can also be viewed as a sign of good stewardship as the church's resources continue to be used for the mission of God and the continuation of the church into future generations.

Key Findings from the *Property Review Project*:

- The Church is compelled to provide properties that are safe for all people who utilise them
- Each Congregation is doing its best to maintain its property, with declining resources
- There is no Synod-wide systematic, regular maintenance plan in place to ensure properties remain in good repair
- Our buildings are ageing and declining
- We are trying to maintain more properties than are needed on a regular basis and this is placing a significant burden on our volunteers
- All church properties require work to make them safe – only 6% of church properties achieved a green rating for overall safety
- The estimated cost to bring all congregation properties to a safe condition is over \$30m
- The average maintenance cost per congregation is \$18,000 per annum
- On average it costs four times more to maintain a State heritage listed building than one that is not
- The Church does not have the financial capacity to rectify and maintain all of its properties
- Buildings can be extremely helpful to congregations in how they live out their mission
- Buildings which are intended to enhance mission, can in some cases detract or distract from mission.

Next steps

This paper is a synopsis of the larger *Property Review Report* (February 2021) and is designed to provide an executive summary of the main issues derived from the initial review.

The Chair of the Resources Board, Rob Stoner has guided the *Property Review Project* and the General Secretary, Rev Felicity Amery carries the overall strategic direction of the Synod.

Both Rob and Felicity will present a range of proposals to the 2020 Synod meeting.

Acknowledgements

This paper is an extract of a much larger Property Report and was initiated by the Resources Board in collaboration with the Property Committee. The members of the Resources Board, Property Committee and Resources Ministry Centre have a strong and committed passion for the future life and mission of the Church.

Congregations have generously opened their doors to allow the property inspections. As part of this process they have shared their stories and experiences and have been candid about the challenges they face. Each congregation is thanked for their contribution to this project.

Many others have made significant contributions to the *Property Review Project* and the preparation of this paper – thank you.





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Synod of South Australia

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