

Uniting Aboriginal & Islander Christian Congress

1. Introduction

Ken Sumner, the SA Congress State Development Officer, begins this report with reflections which were initially prepared for the SA Regional Council. It begins with a reminder that over the last 12 months, Ken has also been one of the National Co-Chairs of the UAICC, since Rev. Mark Kickett left the national role. Ken also advises that our former Congress SA Chair, Sean Weetra has left SA to take up a position with Congress in Victoria. Following Ken's reflections, we have reports from each of our ministry centres, and as an appendix, just in case you did not read it in New Times, the story as written by David Houston of the opening of the Oodnadatta Church building in May 2025.

2. Report from Congress State Development Officer

2.1 Introduction

Over the past fifteen months, my role as State Development Officer has been significantly impacted by additional responsibilities undertaken at the national level of the Uniting Aboriginal & Islander Christian Congress (UAICC).

Following the resignation of the National Chairperson, I was called by the National Executive to serve as Interim Co-Chair of the National UAICC. This has been an important and necessary responsibility during a period of transition and renewal within Congress nationally. While this role has required a considerable investment of time, energy, and attention, it has provided an opportunity to contribute to the ongoing strengthening of Congress across Australia.

At the national level, significant work is currently underway to review and restructure the operations and governance of the National Office. These changes are vital to ensuring that Congress remains sustainable, effective, and responsive to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities into the future.

2.2 South Australia Activities

The big news from Congress in SA, is that we have a new Regional Council chairperson, following the departure of Sean Weetra in May to work with Congress in Victoria as their State Development Officer. Our new chairperson is Jordan Sumner, who was Sean's deputy, and our new deputy chair is Rhane Lester. We give thanks to God, that we have capable young adults able to provide good leadership and pastoral care to the Congress in SA. We are also grateful for the contribution that Sean made to the church and Congress in SA, and we wish him every blessing with Congress ministry in Victoria.

Within South Australia, much of my work, along with our Resource Officer Ian Dempster, during this reporting period has focused on maintaining the day-to-day functions of the State Office and supporting the ongoing operations of our ministry centres. Given the demands of the Interim Co-Chair role nationally, the emphasis has been on ensuring continuity, stability, and support for existing ministries and relationships.

Routine responsibilities have included administration, communication, support for ministry activities, and responding to matters arising within our Congress communities and ministry centres.

2.3 Relationship with the Synod of South Australia

An important focus during this period has been maintaining and strengthening the relationship between Congress South Australia and the Synod of South Australia.

This relationship continues to require intentional engagement and ongoing dialogue. While there have been challenges, there remains a strong commitment to working collaboratively and respectfully together as partners within the Uniting Church. Building trust, clarifying expectations, and identifying shared priorities continue to be important areas of focus.

2.4 Future Directions

As we look ahead, it is becoming increasingly clear that Congress South Australia must undertake a process of renewal and strategic planning.

A priority for the coming period will be the restructuring of the State Office to ensure that our governance, ministry priorities, and operational structures are fit for purpose and able to meet future challenges.

In conjunction with this work, there is a need to develop a comprehensive five-year strategic plan aligned with the Synod of South Australia's Shaping the Future framework. Such a plan will provide clear direction for Congress in South Australia, strengthen accountability, support ministry development, and identify opportunities for growth and partnership.

This strategic planning process will seek to honour the vision and calling of Congress while ensuring that our work remains focused on serving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, strengthening communities, nurturing leadership, and contributing to the mission of the Uniting Church.

2.5 Conclusion

The past twelve months have been marked by significant responsibilities at both the national and state levels. While much of the work within South Australia has centred on maintaining existing operations, important foundations have been laid for future development and renewal.

I remain committed to supporting Congress South Australia as we continue to strengthen our ministry, deepen our relationships, and plan strategically for the years ahead.

2.6 Key Priorities for the Next Coming Months

2.6.1. State Office Review and Restructuring

Undertake a review of the current structure, functions, and governance arrangements of the South Australian Congress office. The aim will be to ensure that our structures are sustainable, fit for purpose, and capable of supporting the ministry and mission of Congress into the future.

2.6.2. Development of a Five-Year Strategic Plan

Commence the development of a five-year strategic plan for Congress South Australia that aligns with the Synod of South Australia's Shaping the Future framework. This process will seek input from Congress members, ministry leaders, and key stakeholders to establish clear priorities, goals, and measures of success.

2.6.3. Strengthening Relationships with the Synod

Continue to build and strengthen relationships with the Synod of South Australia through regular engagement, open communication, and collaborative ministry opportunities. Particular attention will be given to ensuring Congress perspectives and priorities are heard and incorporated into broader church planning and decision-making.

2.6.4. Supporting Ministry Centres and Local Communities

Provide ongoing support to ministry centres and local Congress communities, encouraging ministry development, leadership growth, and community engagement. Efforts will focus on maintaining existing ministries while identifying opportunities for future growth and sustainability.

2.6.5. National Congress Leadership and Transition

Continue to fulfil responsibilities as Interim Co-Chair of the National UAICC while supporting the transition and restructuring processes currently underway at the national level. This work seeks to strengthen the long-term governance, effectiveness, and sustainability of Congress across Australia.

2.6.6. Leadership Development and Succession Planning

Explore opportunities for leadership development within South Australia, with a focus on identifying, mentoring, and supporting emerging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders for ministry, governance, and community leadership roles.

2.7 Closing Reflection

As Congress South Australia moves into a new season of planning and renewal, there is an opportunity to strengthen our foundations, clarify our vision, and build a sustainable future for ministry. Through faithful leadership, strong partnerships, and a commitment to serving our communities, we continue to work towards a future where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices, culture, spirituality, and leadership are valued and celebrated within the life and mission of the Congress and the Uniting Church.

3. Reports from Ministry Centres

3.1 Murraylands Ministry

Rev. Hohaia Matthews has continued to faithfully serve in the Murraylands region of Congress at Murray Bridge. Life has changed dramatically for Hohaia and the community with the passing of his wonderful partner in ministry, Aunty Dawn. Through their marriage of over 50 years, they forged a wonderful partnership in ministry and service. Everyone who met Dawn felt that they were loved and accepted. This was Dawn's great gift, which displayed the love of Jesus for all people, especially for those who were struggling with issues in their lives.

Uniting Foundation funding for ministry in the Murray Bridge region also ceased late last year. The Uniting Foundation had funded two positions: Hohaia's position as a part time minister for two years, and a youth and children's worker position in Raukkan and Murray Bridge for a number of years. Most recently Melissa Sumner has been working in this position over the last two years in Murray Bridge.

In its foundations the UAICC emphasized a wholistic approach to ministry, and this is seen through the faith community's community involvement which include:

- The Shared Table, which is connected to the Foodbank voucher program, minus the paperwork for clients
- Foodbank deliveries every Thursday, with the Long Riders Christian Motorcycle Club
- A community rugby league program that has now expanded to include juniors' connections to the community. This is the hub of our work with 80 – 150 participants.
- A community and family barbecue on Wednesday night
- A women's community catch-up on Wednesdays

3.1.1 Congress Participation in the SA Synod Trip to South Korea

Sean Weetra and Jordan Sumner went as Congress representatives on the SA Synod visit to the Presbyterian Church of the Republic of Korea (PROK) on May 15th to May 27th along with nine other participants.

As Sean travelled he was aware that as an Aboriginal man he was carrying the stories, values and responsibilities entrusted to him by his ancestors. He returned home with a deepened conviction of the importance of relationships, and that across all cultures and languages, "people long for the same things: belonging, dignity, justice and peace."

Jordan Sumner, reflected on the resilience, faith, hospitality, relationships and the shared stories of struggle, survival and hope that reveal some similarities of Korean history and that of the First Peoples of Australia. Jordan affirms that the Creator weaves "threads of love across cultures and boundaries" – a reminder that Christ's love transcends differences.

3.2 Port Augusta Ministry

Pastor John & Ruth Saulo left Port Augusta in January 2025, after 4 years of faithful service. One of the highlights for Ruth was the reopening of the Op Shop, while for John it was preaching at other churches in town, and ministering to the seasonal Pacifica workers who came to church from the tomato farm.

Rev. Dr. Denise Champion came back as Port Augusta minister on a part-time basis after she finished her contract as Theologian in Residence at the Uniting College. After Denise was beset by illness, with surgery in September, Rhanee Lester was appointed part time to provide supply ministry to the community. Denise's illness has slowed the work on the Adnyamathanha Bible Translation Project (funded by the Uniting Foundation), but now that she is in recovery mode, planning to continue this project has commenced.

The Congress church at Willsden is busy during all five weekdays with the Op Shop open on three days of the week, while Men's & Women's Community groups run on the other days in partnership with UnitingCare Country. There have been several break-ins at the hall over the last twelve months, which has necessitated the need to upgrade security. The church and hall are no longer fit for purpose, so Congress requested Rev. Peter McDonald to conduct a review of the site and ministry in 2025. Congress now needs to develop plans to begin implementing some of the recommendations from the report.

A highlight for members of Port Augusta Congress is family and community members assisting Denise with the delivery of the "Yarta Wandatha" Uniting College subject on country in the Flinders Ranges.

3.3 Salisbury (Anangu) Ministry

Pastor Melissa Thompson continues to provide faithful ministry to the Anangu Congregation at Salisbury North. It is the only church in Adelaide that provides a worshipping place for the Anangu from the APY lands in their first language, the Pitjantjatjara language. Melissa receives great support from David Wright, Sally McPherson and Pastor Julia Lennon when she is in the city.

During the week Melissa has two Bible studies at the church, as some members are unable to make one of the studies due to health needs such as dialysis or other health appointments. Many of the church members face financial challenges, so some come to church and other meetings needing breakfast. The church also operates a bus to pick people up for worship, as people do not have their own transport, and it can be difficult to get to Salisbury North on public transport. There is always a need for more help with bus driving.

One of the highlights of the year is a combined multicultural service with members of other churches. The Salisbury North site provides a space for some of these groups to meet. Currently this includes African and Samoan groups.

Pastor Melissa is also a member of the SA Voice to Parliament, as an elected representative from the APY Lands. One of her areas of expertise is with the issues of housing and homelessness, which are

two big areas of concern for First Nations people. She participates in meetings with the police, government officials and the wider community on these issues.

3.4 Oodnadatta (Bush Chaplaincy) Ministry

Mother' Day, May 11th 2025 will be remembered as a special day by the Congress Faith Community in Oodnadatta, as that was the day that the new church building was officially opened with a big celebration including worship and a community meal. Please see the attached document, written by Rev. David Houston as it appeared in "New Times" in December 2025 for a full report.

The church opening was preceded by an Outback Links Work Party led by Bush Chaplain Sunny Kadaparambil with great support from the National Frontier Services staff including National Director, Rob Floyd, Uniting Church National President who preached at the opening celebration, Rev. Charissa Suli, and SA Uniting Church Moderator, Rev. Peter Morel.

Congress is grateful that the Uniting Foundation continues to support the Oodnadatta community with the foundation enabling the employment of a youth & children's worker, Dayla Warren to provide activities from the church premises. They are also looking to employ a men's worker to help look after and develop the property. Thanks to everyone in the SA Synod who helped make the new Oodnadatta church building possible.

More recent events to highlight include the support of SA Churches to the February storms and rain in northern SA, when Oodnadatta was cut off by floods to transport from the outside world. The community at Oodnadatta is very grateful to all those churches, fellowships and individuals who assisted by providing food at this time, as the town had run out of food.

3.4.1. Repatriation & Reburial of an Aboriginal Stockman

Twelve months after the church opening, our Oodnadatta Bush Chaplain, Julia Lennon with the support of Jill Doolan, the bush chaplain from Finke / Aputula participated in a repatriation and reburial of a relative who was an Aboriginal stockman near Mt. Dare (close to the NT border). Thomas Cowell died in 1959 and was buried locally, but as the grave was exposed by flooding in 1966 (and with the police not knowing who his family was) his body was transferred to the care of the SA Museum.

In late May 2026, a group of elders including Raymond Finn and Julia, collected his remains with a ceremony from the SA Museum site at Walkley Heights and began the long drive to Mt. Dare. A few days later Julia led in prayers and songs at Mt. Dare before they went to Witjara National Park for the reburial. Julia led singing again using her electronic keyboard out in the bush. Anna Russo (Aboriginal Heritage and Repatriation Manager) from the SA Museum said the music, singing, prayers and ceremony was a highlight for her in returning Mr. Cowell to his country.

Ken Sumner, SA Congress State Development Officer

Ian Dempster, SA Congress Resource Officer

June 2026

APPENDIX to UAICC Report

Julia's Dream ... Renewal and Hope for Her Oodnadatta Community.

Rev David Houston

I was inspired ... So wrote Rob Floyd the National Director of Frontier Services on leaving



this historic isolated town following the Opening and Dedication of the new Church.

....Inspired by the vastness and beauty of this remarkable country ... inspired by what is possible when we come together across all the different parts of our church and beyond with a shared vision and a desire to show Christ's love

in the world

He continued his reflection – *“a dream has been realised in Oodnadatta, as a new church and garden was opened, brought to life through faith, vision and the joyful collaboration of many hands and hearts.”*(Photo – Frontier Services)

Oodnadatta is a small town of mostly First Nations people, located on Arabana land about 1000km north of Adelaide. Once a stop on the famous Ghan Railway, the town is now bypassed by the train with the decommissioned rails, still embedded in the hard dirt, a reminder of this legacy. Today, it is the start of the famous Oodnadatta Track attracts people looking for adventure and a chance to experience the inland of this huge continent.

A fair stretch of the road is unsealed, passing through red gibber desert, no trees visible and barely a small shrub or tuft of grass in sight. Once there, the small town welcomes you with the iconic Pink Roadhouse, and more importantly, one block across, the new church with a large white cross displayed clearly, welded together from steel to withstand the harsh climate. Add to these landmarks one shop, a small hotel, and a school with fewer than 20 children, and you've quickly covered a large portion of the town's community infrastructure.

Julia's Dream... The church has been an amazing project. Dreamed of by Pastor Julia Lennon. For over 20 years, First Nations Bush Chaplain Julia has faithfully served its people. Without a permanent space, she led Sunday school and services from lounge rooms, sheds and open paddocks, often under harsh outback conditions. Her quiet, engaging presence within the Opening Service reflected her



profound belief in the presence of God within this special event and her community's future. Her singing and sacred dance with the children, her praying, her background story and participation in the Service was part of the inspiration of the moment that Rob Floyd describes. In this photo Pastor Julia is on the President's left. Reverend Charissa and Julis are leading the congregation in singing the hymn 'Blessed Assurance' with its message, *'This is my story, this is my song, praising my Saviour all the day long'*. In introducing the hymn, the President said, Julia's dream was her story and her song' (Photo - Frontier Services)

After the Service, Julia said, *"This church isn't just a building. It stands on land with deep meaning and serves as a place for healing, connection, culture and country."* This was a reference to the Church being built on the land where the first Colebrook Home had been established in 1924 by the UAM or United Aborigines Mission. It became the first of the locations where a Colebrook Home received Aboriginal children removed from the families by the policy of the State Government of the day.

While Colebrook moved to Quorn in 1927 and to Eden Hills in 1944, Oodnadatta will always be a special place for the descendants of those affected by that policy. This is the place where separation from family, land and culture began and continued for years. Indeed, in September of 1934 Lois O'Donoghue aged 2, along with her sister Amy (4) and Violet (6) were taken from their mother Lily who lived in a Camp on the outskirts of Oodnadatta, and she would not see her mother again for 30 years. Lois (or Lowitja) refers to the deep sadness that 'forced separation' brought to her people in her biography, *'Lowitja'* written by Stuart Rintoul and published in 2020. She describes the harsh removal conditions that existed for all Aboriginal and half-caste children from 1909 under the Department for Aborigines established by the South Australian Government.

Pastor Julia's belief is that 100 years later, the new Church will be a place of healing and restoration for her people. She said, *"This is sacred ground and now. it's a place where people can heal, belong and believe again."* ... *"We've walked a long road to get here and now our young people will carry it forward."*

Reflecting on the journey across the 20 years of her ministry, she went on to say, *“We never imagined we’d have a building. We just knew we needed a place to gather, to worship and to hold community events. Now that it’s here, it feels like hope and a home for the future. Even for locals who aren’t churchgoers, they know it is a place of peace and community where all are welcome.”*

Helping the Dream Come true ... The South Australian Regional Council of Congress (UAICC) believed in Julia’s dream and began raising funds 10 years ago, and, along with the South Australian Synod, managed the project from inception to completion. Frontier Services has supported the project by funding Julia’s ministry and accessing grants provided by philanthropic partners who were inspired by her vision. This additional funding has allowed for a kitchen on the side of the church, a satellite link and four computers for the community to access and learn, and a community garden as a place of gathering, sanctuary and learning about food plants and native flora. An actual oasis in the desert. Good and ready resource for a deserving people.

The Service was a mix of unhurried, ordered segments of welcome, story, prayer, praise, scripture and proclamation ... Pastor Julia welcomed First Nations people from many places, led her young people in a sacred dance with song and prayer; Ian Dempster, Support Officer to the SA Congress of UAICC welcomed people from near and far, and described some of the great background stories of preparation for the day: Rev Ken Sumner, the State Development Officer of UAICC in South Australia, presented the greeting message of the Rev Mark Kickett, the Assembly UAICC Chairperson centering on the words from Isaiah 43:19 ‘The Lord says. Behold, I am doing a new thing in this place’. They were words of inspiration for what was happening in Oodnadatta. And Bush Chaplain Rev Sunil (Sunny) Kadaparambil from the Parkin-Sturt Patrol moved seamlessly behind the scenes to ensure the Service orders and microphones were ready for the participants on what was a hot and windy day. The congregation was seated under three very large, erected shade spaces set in place the day before.



The inspiring message from the Assembly President, The Rev Charissa Suli, was full of affirmation and encouragement for this new moment in the Oodnadatta community and the wider Uniting Church family. Speaking of Pastor Julia and her Faith community, the President said... *‘For twenty years they have waited, they have hoped and they have kept the faith. And Oodnadatta I want you to know this day is not just about a building but a people and a promise and the presence of God. And I want you also to know you are inspiring the whole nation to take seriously what it means to walk together, to tell the truth, and to seek justice, and so weave Christ’s love across cultures and boundaries.’* [And later after affirming the life stories of two outstanding women leaders, Pastor Julia, and Kunyi, an Artist, published Storyteller and Stolen Generation child] *‘Indeed, this Church is not just a building but a sign of who God is ... God is a shepherd who walks with you, a hero who restores you, and a creator who brings life from dry land.’* [then to the wider Church] *‘Friends as we look to the next generation, we must also reflect on what it means for us as a Church*

and as Christians, locally and nationally, to truly walk together ... this is a holy moment for the whole Church'. (Photo - Frontier Services)

The celebration of Holy Communion carried a rich image of a congregation coming from the four corners of the country. People with great love and interest in this moment were recognising together the presence of Christ and the 'new thing' God was doing in Oodnadatta. The SA Moderator, Rev. Peter Morel and the Assembly President, shared the conduct of this special observance.

Remember - there is a story to this place ... When speaking of the new church, Pastor Julia said, '[It] *isn't just a building. It is 'church ground'. It stands on land with deep meaning and serves as a place for healing, connection, culture and country.*'



Her words speak to turning the earlier 'forced removal of children's history around by seeing both the new Church and Garden as sacred spaces that will provide hope in the healing and connection with culture and country that will be felt by all who come and spend time in this 'special place'.

The Bush and Arid Land Garden
– a special space to gather and a Healing Place for all who visit... (Photo Frontier Services)

Rob Floyd described how in the week preceding the opening of the church, Frontier Services Bush Chaplain, Rev Sunny Kadaparambil, led a team of about ten Frontier Services' wonderful Outback Links volunteers in establishing an arid land garden with built shaded areas, fire pits and wicking food crop garden beds. And safe spaces for recreation, storytelling, cultural gatherings and reflection – particularly between elders and young people. As he witnessed the children doing some of the early planting he said, 'This is what *Frontier Services* is all about; walking alongside remote communities, supporting local leaders and cultural histories and helping people build the future they both desire and deserve.' The Links Volunteers aim to visit again about April next year to work with the local men and set a reticulated watering system in place.

Sustained SA Synod, Mission Fellowship and Congress Support ...

Ian Dempster, the SA Congress's Resource Officer described in his earlier reporting the spirit and intent of the commitment of South Australian congregations in their support 'to make all things new' for the wonderful community. The Mission Fellowship Group Members gifted 80 chairs and multi purpose folding tables. Members from Blackwood made the lectern of Acacia Blackwood timber, from Noarlunga - the Communion Table, (see the earlier photo) and a member from Rosefield has made a Chalice and plate for Communion. With



the immediate future in mind the Congress will be able to employ a part time men's worker and a part time youth and children's worker, thanks to the generosity of the SA Synod's Uniting Foundation. The men's worker will mix and meet with the men in the town, and create a team to look after the community garden with the children from the school. And, among the tomatoes, fruit trees and olive trees, native shrubs and bushes, there will be a separate area set aside for a monument and fountain as a place of reflection. When the fountain is built in the next stage by the Frontier Services Link Team, the waters will flow as people come, think, pray and find healing. support the building this 'special place' [Photo from Frontier Services]



A Joyful Summary Reflection. The Moderator, Rev Peter Morel on his return to Adelaide said *"I'm deeply grateful and privileged to have participated in the opening of the Oodnadatta Church, meeting Pastor Julia and working with the Outback Links Work Party on the wonderful Garden 'gathering space'. It was a significant time of community and joyful*

celebrations as we partnered across the life of the local community, UAICC, Frontiers Services/Assembly, and Synod. For every story told there are many people, especially the Property Team, who contributed to bring this project to fruition'. (The Moderator is here with the President, Rev Charissa Suli and Rev. Ken Sumner -photo from Frontier Services)

Sources: 1. Rob Floyd in UCA Frontier Services Website Report June 2025 2. Ian Dempster in UAICC South Australian Web Report May 2024 3. The Opening Service Recording 11th May 2025. For the reader's interest: The Service can be viewed on Vimeo link on the UCA Frontier Services website.



The Uniting Church in Australia
Synod of South Australia