



Thinking through A Theology of Property

An analysis of the
responses to
*A Theology
of Property*
for a pilgrim people



This booklet was prepared for the Synod meeting of the Uniting Church Synod of Victoria and Tasmania in May 2010.

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Introduction

Property is a vital issue for most congregations. In finding solutions to sometimes thorny property-related challenges, listening to the voices of church members is essential.

The booklet A Theology of Property was launched at Synod in 2008. Following this, in 2009, Presbyteries forwarded a copy of the document to all congregations and asked them to respond to a series of questions.

Church councils and congregations were asked to consider four key questions:

- 1 What property issues do you face as you live as the people of God in the world?
- 2 What would it mean for you as a congregation to be property-less?
- 3 What possibilities emerge when we think of ourselves as the church with or without property?
- 4 In your local context, what are you proclaiming in your use and management of property?

The picture to emerge from the responses shows many common threads. It also reveals several unusual and inventive perspectives people have on property use. The aim was not to find the one right answer to these questions, but to understand how the Uniting Church community is thinking about property.

Responses to each question are presented with quotes from congregations. As you read these, think about how your own congregation responded to or might respond. What are the property issues facing your congregation and how would you address them?

The names of the respondent congregations have been deliberately left out. Instead, they are categorised by geographical area. This is to respect the privacy of those who took part, and to show that there may be similar responses from congregations in similar situations. The categories are: city, inner urban, outer urban, urban fringe, regional, regional centre and rural.

Using this booklet

Responses to the four questions have been divided into topics, with a number of quotes from congregations. The quotes are reprinted in full, with only minor grammatical changes in square brackets [like this].

Following the topics are reflections and questions to facilitate discussion within your congregation.

If there are issues not raised that you feel are important, or if you have any ideas you would like to share with us, please send them to Property and Insurance Services at the Synod Office, 130 Little Collins St, Melbourne 3000 or ring Property and Insurance Services on 9251 5949 or email synod@victas.uca.org.au.



1

Question one

What property issues do you face as you live as the people of God in the world?



The responses to this first question were very positive, as congregations made the connection between property and place in the lives of many of its members. The issue was explored in many varied and interesting ways.

“I am always thankful to have church doors open for me wherever I have lived.” (City)

Yet people did not shy away from discussing the difficulty of balancing the demands of property with the needs of a community. Many congregations felt torn between spending money on property or on mission work. Responses ranged from the pros and cons of property maintenance to the church’s contribution to the local streetscape.

Hot topics

Maintenance

Finding funds to maintain older church buildings is often very difficult. Newer buildings have lower maintenance costs. Those with a heritage overlay have the highest.

“How much do we do ourselves, and how much do we get others to do?” (Rural)

“Some see these [funding property improvements or funding outreach projects] as competing priorities while others see them as complementary parts of congregational life and witness.” (Inner urban)

“There is difficulty in finding people and finance to keep up necessary maintenance.” (Inner urban)

But the building can show the wider community what the church means, and that the buildings matter.

“Our core challenge is to ensure that the material resources we hold as property assets, and/or the capital locked up in them, are deployed so as to best support the mission of the church.” (Inner urban)

“By maintaining [church buildings] in good condition we show to the wider community that the church and all it represents mean a lot to her members.” (Urban fringe)

“We are proclaiming God’s love and care to all people by providing a safe, clean and functional place for them to find fellowship, care and God’s amazing grace.”

Legal requirements and OH&S

The safety of community members is very important. Rules and regulations reflect our concern with health and safety at home, in the work place and in areas where we gather as a community.

“The need to maintain a safe, friendly sanctuary for worship and faith-based initiatives in the community. This may be very relevant as one faces the harsh climactic and cultural realities of Australia.” (Urban fringe)

“More stringent occupational health and safety requirements and the threat of litigation are also very likely to result in a reduced volunteer input in the future.” (Outer urban)

Property use. How and by whom?

Many congregations share their property with community groups. The relationship can be highly beneficial for both parties. The church provides a safe and welcoming space where groups can gather. The groups contribute income for building maintenance or mission

work. Sharing space also connects a congregation to the wider community.

“We face the issue of how to find time and space for the many community groups and church activities which use all our different facilities. Community usage of our buildings is high every day of the week.” (Urban fringe)

“How can we make it more interesting for people outside the church? The unchanging building gives the people [who do not attend] an impression that nothing has changed and faith belongs in the past.” (Inner urban)

“Maintaining our buildings for community groups to use, so that income can be maintained.” (Inner urban)

Sense of community

Property can provide a focus for a community. It can be a beacon for the community and show that there are people in the area who share a set of beliefs.

“Property is both a place of assembly for us and a means of connection to our community.” (Regional)

“Our culture determines that we function better with a building as the focal point for a community. We think it is essential to maintain the building in some form – to form a basis for our worship.” (City)

Streetscape

All church buildings are public buildings. They are part of the physical landscape and streetscape and contribute to the look and feel of the town or suburb. Buildings need to relate to and contribute something to the streetscape. That is why maintenance is important. The challenge to congregations is to keep buildings relevant to the times.

“[We face the issue of] keeping the property relevant and viable to be

abreast of changes [and] developments in our society” (Inner urban)

Reflections

A number of responses mention the constant pressure of property maintenance and OH&S requirements. This raises the question of the alternative of renting. But if renting a worship space replaces property ownership, the rental cost may soon outweigh the savings made by avoiding maintenance costs.

Building use requires a balance between being a tool for ministry and providing rental income for a congregation. Rental money can go towards both property maintenance and mission work.

Many people noted the importance of the visual statement that a recognisable church building makes in their community. This does not replace the work that congregations do in the community, but adds an important visual message. Church buildings proclaim Christ and the congregation within the community in a way that can enhance the statement made by the church’s community work.

Respondents highlighted the importance of place for them as a community. Church buildings have a historical and emotional value for the congregation and often beyond. By sharing the buildings, the congregation can spread that sense of belonging into the wider community?

Theologically we are invited to rethink our approach to our worship spaces. According to the gospel of John (note, for example, chapter 4 about the clearing of the Temple) it is Jesus Christ who is proclaimed as the ‘place’ where God resides. The Easter Christ usurps the function of the Temple as sacred space.

In this sense, it is not the church building which is the focus as the house of God but the person of Jesus Christ, who makes himself known in Word and Sacrament.

However when we come together to worship God and gather around Jesus Christ we need a place to do this. And if this place is a building, then with this place comes issues of maintenance, legal requirements, OH&S, as well as the opportunity to share property with community groups provide a focus for the community.

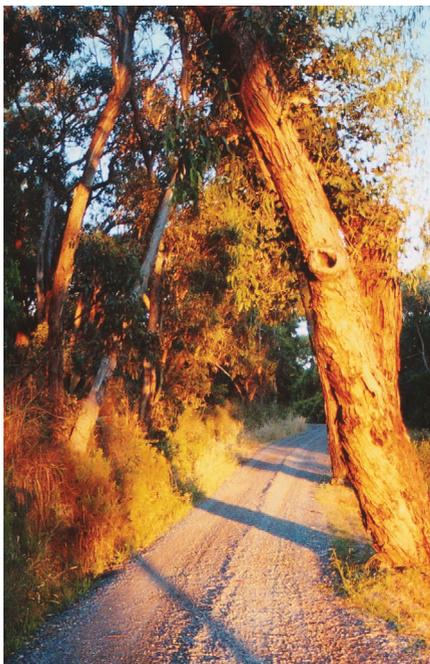
For further consideration:

- If we say that the Easter Jesus is now the true ‘place of worship’, what are the implications for our ‘places of worship’? What are the demands this can make on our time and resources?
- Are there ways in which you think that the maintenance, OH&S and legal requirements could be reduced for your congregation (while still meeting statutory requirements)?
- Are there more ways in which we can use our property to increase our relationship with the community?

2

Question two

What would it mean for you as a congregation to be property-less?



“God does not change, even if our buildings do.” (Inner urban)

Being a church with or without property was a very hot issue. Many respondents explored the possibilities and difficulties of being a church without property. They recognised both the importance and the limitations of owning property. The responses below are split into proposals for and against being a church with property, and for and against being without property.

Hot topics

Church with property – for and against

Many responses recognised that a church with property was a neutral meeting place for all members. It allowed for flexibility for the congregation within the community.

“There would still be a need for a ‘meeting place’ in some form. We consider it is far better to maintain a facility we already have.” (Rural)

“A church with its own property has flexibility to run its own worship, programs and outreach in a variety of ways according to changing needs in the area.” (Urban fringe)

Some responses recognised that this could provide the opportunity to find new models of worship and connection.

“I don’t believe it matters whether or not we have property except for convenience.” (Rural)

“Challenging – but it could lead to ecumenical services and different types of worship – could be very positive.” (Rural)

Church without property – for and against

The idea of a home church was very popular amongst those looking to move on from older forms of worship. Some saw the church buildings as reinforcing older styles of church going that had lost relevance in the modern world.

“We would meet in each other’s homes ... but the love and care of each other and growing in faith in the context of a community would survive, maybe flourish.” (City)

“It would remove a layer of overhead cost, and the argument could be made that this would free financial resources that could be made available for new mission initiatives of a property-less kind, either locally or elsewhere.” (Inner urban)

However, some responses noted the potential limitations of being property-less. They reflected on the hidden costs of hiring property for worship and mission work.

“[We would be] unable to provide hospitality to a large number of community groups that cannot easily afford commercial rates of hire, such as the choir, quilters, Red Cross, etc.” (Rural)

“We would lose the public face of our church; sometimes even seeing a church is comforting and a proclamation that Christians live in the town.” (Regional)

The experiences of property-less congregations

When discussing these ideas, it is worth hearing from those congregations that have experienced church life without property.

“When [a property] is not your own, you have to keep things in boxes and it is difficult to have an attractive worship area when you must set up and take down every time you use it. Things get lost, go missing, get used up and dirty.” (Inner urban)

“Acknowledging that the church is the people and not the property, for us to be property-less would mean a return to the earlier days of being almost a non-identity in the community. This is because the visible presence of the ‘church’ is a powerful factor.” (Outer urban)

“[We experienced] the loss of part of our identity. The loss of a sign of our existence in the community.” (Rural)

“When the church building was being redeveloped, the congregation went offsite to an auditorium at a nearby secondary school ...It is questionable whether the required congregation effort/interest could be sustained on a permanent basis.” (Outer urban)

Reflections

The call of the Gospel is to surrender all that we have, to take up our cross, and to follow Christ. It is in the loss of all things that we gain the life of the Gospel. Or rather, it is because we have, in Christ, been engraced with the life of the Gospel that we are free from the worship of possessions and at liberty to surrender all things.

The responses to Question two all shared the same underlying belief that the church is not just the buildings and possessions. A church is also a combination of all the attitudes, behaviours and connections that

the congregation makes and maintains.

Many people suggested that their property-less congregation would continue to function as a house church. This response raises interesting questions. How would the day-to-day running of the church be administered? How would the congregation ensure connection between services? Who would take responsibility for the set up and running of services each week?

Some responses recognised that smaller congregations could merge into one larger congregation. This could cut down maintenance costs and create a more vibrant congregation. This may create a problem of ministering to a smaller geographical area and creating pockets of the community without access to a church. But the concentration of numbers, energy and expertise may compensate for this by ensuring that work is carried out more effectively and efficiently.

Congregations which have experienced being property-less remind us that although it is possible, there are hidden costs. They also make us consider the difference between being property-less as in a church without walls, and being property-less as being a church without trappings. We are not just administering a building but everything that is housed within it.

Finally, the consideration of being property-less also brought up the issue of stewardship of a church.

“[We have a] sense of responsibility for good stewardship of properties handed down to us from the members of several former congregations.” (Inner urban)

Not only did people feel responsible for the church handed down to them, but they felt a sense of responsibility for what they are handing on to future generations of Uniting Church adherents.

For further consideration:

- Would the size of your worshipping community make a difference to the possibility of a house church with your congregation?
- Would your congregation gather as smaller cells?
- Is there a difference between using personal space or public space for worship?
- How does the call to take up our cross and follow Christ impact on our attitude to being a property-less congregation? Are there ways we can do this and retain our property?



3

Question three

What possibilities emerge when we think of ourselves as the church with or without property?



Following on from Question two, Question three asks what you would do after accepting the position of being a church with or without property. How would your church conduct its business and continue its mission work after solving, one way or the other, the issues of property?

“Thinking in this way reminds us that the Church owns property as a resource that serves a higher purpose and not an end in itself.” (Inner urban)

“Property should be seen as the ‘servant’, a useful servant, but still a servant.” (Outer urban)

Hot topics

Possibilities of church with property – for and against

A congregation that embraces the fact of property is able to use the spaces to strengthen the connections between each member and with the community.

“[The church building allows us to] grow our own community and provides a good basis for developing new areas of mission, or to provide a broader range of community programs and services within a common suite of buildings.” (Outer urban)

“Maintaining a church ... unites the members and gives them a proud sense of ownership. Having a worship space as well as utility areas assists in broadening ministry to include hospitality - worship

and friendship are catered for.” (Rural)

However, there is always the danger that the buildings themselves become more important than serving the community. Though the church building is a symbol of God in the community, it is not the actual work of God.

“We would have to think a lot more about what it means to be a community of faith in an inner urban context. We could break out of the model of worship that a traditional church building imposes. What form of worship really suits a small intimate community of dedicated people?” (Inner urban)

“This would free us from the worry of maintaining property - may God bless the property committee!” (City)

Possibilities of church without property – for and against

The cost in time and money of maintaining property can be a millstone for many congregations. Some felt that they would be better off forgoing these costs and focusing on the community.

“Our properties can be a millstone around our necks. Without property, those spending time and energy on their maintenance may (or may not) choose to give their time to other areas of mission.” (Inner urban)

“There are possibilities of providing services to the wider community in cooperation with other churches in our network.” (Outer urban)

“We could meet in small groups or travel to be with others to worship as the Church is its people not the buildings.” (Rural)

“Without property, we would consider the creation of house churches and/or property sharing with other congregations

(UC or other).” (Inner urban)

In some congregations, however, the feeling was that without property they would struggle to do the work of God.

“With property we could function as a group doing service to the community, both Christian and non-Christian. Without property we could not.” (Inner urban)

“If there was no building there may not be any assurance that God’s work (God’s people) was always there.” (Inner urban)

Reflections

In the *Basis of Union*, the church is defined as the community which lives between the time of Christ’s death and resurrection and the time of the final consummation of the kingdom which has come in Christ.

On the way, the church has no abiding city but seeks a city which is to come. It has no home to call its own. Its home is in the life to come which is already present in Christ.

In our church, property is owned and managed collectively rather than individually. By sharing the responsibilities of stewardship the church community gains a sense of belonging. Property is a representation that we are a part of something that started before us and will continue beyond us.

A theme that emerged in the responses was whether we should be thinking about ‘how’ we have property, rather than ‘why’ we have property. As a church, we can explore how best to use the property we have in maintaining our congregation and doing meaningful work within our communities. But we should still find the space to reflect on the possibilities of functioning without buildings as such.

For further consideration:

- How do our practices show that our property is collectively owned?
- Can we use the property we have responsibility for effectively to maintain our congregation and do meaningful work within our community?
- What might be the impact on having or not having property of our understanding of the church as having 'no home to call its own'?

4

Question four

In your local context, what are you proclaiming in your use and management of property?



“We hoped that faithful witness would always in some way live regardless of property and that keeping property would never be the first priority.” (Regional)

Although property is a symbol of God and a beacon to the wider community, it is not an end in itself. Having and maintaining property is only an aid to the church’s mission. If we choose to keep and maintain property, then it is through this stewardship that we proclaim our commitment to God and do God’s work in the community.

Hot topics

Proclamation

Many responses recognised that church buildings represent a presence in the community, and in that sense are a constant proclamation of the word of God. They can welcome the community to come and share in the blessings of fellowship.

“The church is present in the community as a welcoming, worshipping Christian fellowship.” (Outer urban)

“[We are proclaiming] that the Christian church, particularly the Uniting Church, cares about people, is open and welcoming, is willing to share resources that are kept in good condition, attractive to visit, pleasant to use.” (Inner urban)

“We are proclaiming that the church is alive today. By having a church building and regular services, new residents or visitors have a contact point with the church which would be lost if we met in a home.” (Regional)

Building use

However, the choices made in the use of buildings are important. Community use still needs to reflect the values of the congregation. The relationship is mutually beneficial, not disadvantaging one or the other.

“Use of buildings for events which include people outside the congregation [is important]. Worship feeds us in order to go out and proclaim through our other activities.” (Rural)

“[Our] buildings are well used and maintained and used by community groups. It would be a great loss as we use it a lot for catering. [The] money raised is put back into the hall for its upkeep.” (Rural)

Congregation

Current church members are not just stewards of the building for today. They continue in the footsteps of past congregation members and leave the church and its buildings for the next generations to carry on. In some cases carrying on as a congregation may mean moving to newer or smaller church buildings, but the continuity of the congregation and its work in the community lies at the core of all decision making.

“Having started attending Sunday School in 1946 and having regularly attended Methodist churches since, I have supported various churches financially, on committees, working bees, maintenance and upkeep. It would be a disappointment if buildings were sold.” (City)

“The buildings demonstrate a past form of church, both in theology and practical

use. We have tried to modernise in ways that we can afford, but the large building doesn't really suit the purpose of a smaller contemporary congregation.” (Rural)

“We recognise that the church buildings are not the property of the local congregation. We are stewards of the property and, as the study suggests, in all our dealings with it we are striving to point to the kingdom of God.” (Inner urban)

Community

Church buildings have value in the eyes of the community as far as they connect the congregation with the community. An inhospitable building can distance the congregation from the community as can lack of programming. Many responses highlighted the need for suitable buildings to engage with the community.

“We believe we are welcoming to visitors and newcomers in our worship services. We would not have the same mission and be the same congregation without property.” (Regional centre)

“We have a ‘home’ and a ‘face’, and therefore people know where to find us.” (Regional)

“We wish to proclaim that we are hospitable people and have facilities which can easily provide such hospitality in a friendly way and with comfort.” (Inner urban)

Reflections

Although it can be many things, an important aspect of property is its ability to proclaim the presence of God within a community. Church buildings make statements about the validity of Christian values and belonging.

It is important that our buildings are open and welcoming. But this is only the start. To speak of an ‘open church’ is to speak

not of a church building with open doors for people to enter, but of a community of people who live in such a way that they are open to the Word of God and find their joy in praising and serving God in the world. How we behave and interact with each other and the community is the key to being an 'open church'.

The importance of opening up church buildings has been recognised in some suburban and country areas where the church property may be the only available public building for community use. Commercial hiring costs can be prohibitive, and the ubiquitous church hall is often the only place where small or not-for-profit groups can afford to operate. Congregations recognised the invaluable service that church buildings play in maintaining the existence of many local and community groups.

The balance of congregational and community needs is important. If the buildings are used for income generation at the expense of congregational needs, people can feel as though the sense of the church's mission has been lost. However, the income is vital in providing finances to maintain the building. A dilapidated building can be unwelcoming to the community, and give the appearance of a church that is irrelevant to the modern world. This is a matter of balance and being realistic about the buildings we have and the maintenance we can afford.

Finally, perhaps we should not use the term 'property' to refer to the physical buildings of the church. Many congregations implied that the term carries financial and private ownership implications that are at odds with the values of a Christian church. Perhaps

we need to find another term that reflects the collective ownership exercised by the Uniting Church.

For further consideration:

- How can we more clearly use our property to proclaim that the church is alive today, that Jesus is risen?
- Do we have a process to review regularly our policy on the use of buildings?
- What alternative term could we use to reflect the collective ownership ethos of the Uniting Church?
- How do we proclaim that we are an open church in our attitudes and behaviors?
- How do we proclaim that we are a community of people who are open to the Word of God and find our joy in praising and serving God in the world?



