

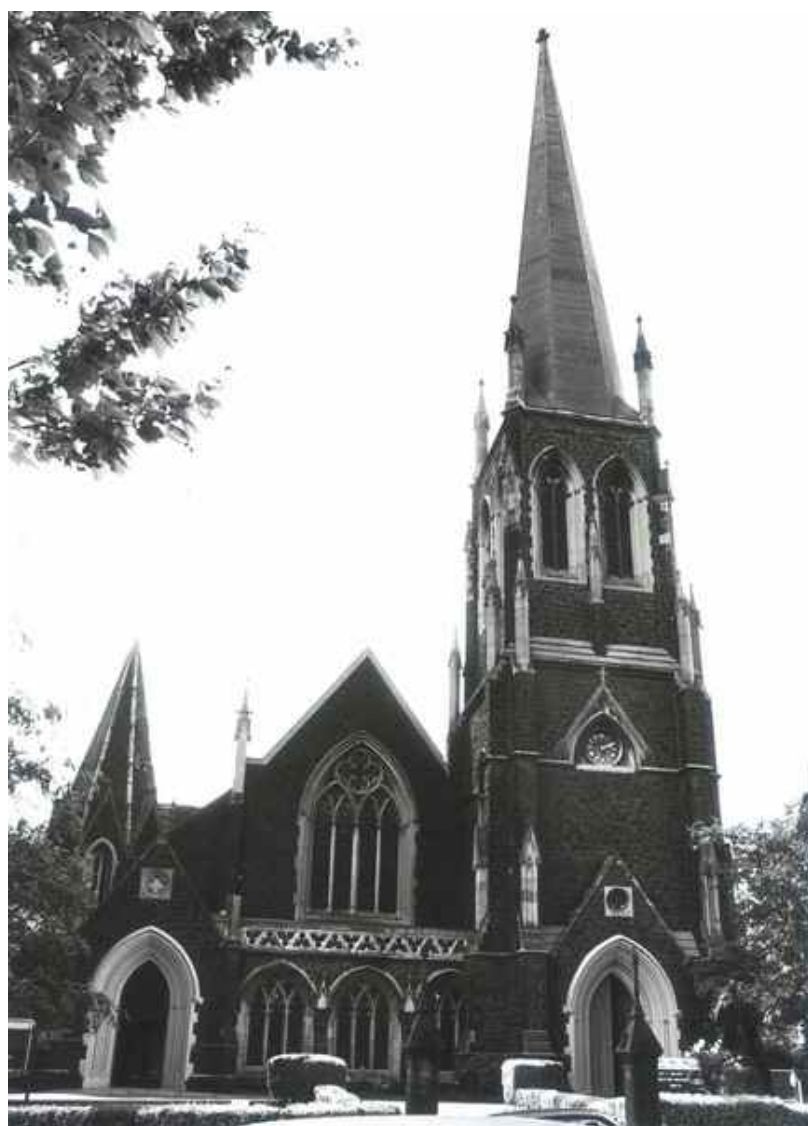
W WESLEY PLACE

The history of Wesley Place

Wesleyan Methodists were integral to the founding of Melbourne. Wesleyans are believed to have conducted the city's first Christian worship and first service with an ordained minister.

As Melbourne grew during the Gold Rush era, the Wesleyans who had been operating from a chapel in Collins St, decided to build a bigger church on Lonsdale St.

A Gothic Revival design by renowned architect Joseph Reed, who is also responsible for Melbourne Town Hall and the Royal Exhibition Building, was chosen but not without some controversy about it being too ornate.



Work commenced on Wesley Church in 1857 and it was opened in 1858. Its associated buildings were completed in 1859.

Wesley Church can claim to have the first spire, large pipe organ and imported tree, a 144-year-old olive that still produces fruit, in Victoria.

In 1869, Wesley Church commissioned a Chinese-speaking congregation, which took the name Gospel Hall and met on Little Bourke St up until the 1970s, when it began its present-day arrangement of also sharing Wesley Church facilities.

By the 1890s the church's neighbourhood was notorious for its slum conditions and desperate urban poverty, leading the congregation to create Wesley Central Mission in 1893, to help the marginalised and disadvantaged.

The social welfare agency later became Wesley Mission Victoria, whose CEO Paul Linossier was the first CEO of Uniting VicTas when 24 UCA community services including Wesley Mission formed the one organisation in 2016.



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As illustrious as this history is, by the late 20th Century the church and associated buildings had seen much better days with a focus on the needs of vulnerable people leading to neglect of the old buildings.

Wesley Church's Transition Officer, Leonie Barber says: "For 50 years it has been clear that we needed to do something fairly major because of the inadequacy of the site for its purposes. All onsite offices were substandard."

"Each building had its own difficulties - malfunctioning lifts, plumbing problems, rising damp, leaking rooves, dysfunctional air-conditioning, flooding areas, trees growing in the spouting, pigeons roosting, and blocked old drains.

"Because of the endless maintenance needs, it made resource management sense to replace sub-standard buildings that were neither fit for the workforce, nor for contemporary missional use."

The more significant, or at least prohibitively expensive, problem was repair and maintenance of the Church and other heritage-listed buildings.

Leonie said the congregation determined that they did not want funds destined for the needy to be consumed by maintaining buildings.

However, they did apply for National Heritage Grants, which require that recipients match the amount given.

"The magnitude of the restoration project was way beyond anything in the National Heritage Grants system," Leonie said, noting that to properly restore the church would soak up an entire year's worth of the grants given out nationally.

"Also, we didn't have anywhere near the resources to match whatever was received by that means. It had become pretty clear that something drastic had to happen that didn't rely on the public purse.

"In my role within the congregation, I tested all the other ways of doing this over a 20-year period and we realised we needed the help of big capital in order to retain the heritage."

The congregation decided it needed to enter a commercial partnership with a developer.

In 2012, Leonie joined the newly formed Wesley Place Project Control Group, chaired by Synod Property Services, which has overseen the current development at all stages.

Leonie said the congregation had made the major decision they could not go it alone or even in partnership with the then Wesley Mission Victoria.

"With a lot of deliberation, it was requested by the congregation that Synod take the lead on this, and Wesley Mission agreed" she said.

"There was a general collective realisation that we had to think big if it was to be done properly.



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“We had a lot of authorities with an interest in what was done and how it is done. That has meant that the supervision has to be of a very high grade.”

The tendering for the project required that a developer would need to understand the church’s ethos and meet missional and community goals for the site.

In 2014, Wesley Church and Synod announced Leighton Property was their preferred partner.

“Mission objectives have been considered along every step of this journey,” Wesley Minister Alistair Macrae said at the time.

“For example, we want to ensure that the space enables relationships between people, that its uses are consistent with the values of the Uniting Church and we reflect God’s concern for the environment.”

In 2016, Charter Hall acquired the project from Leighton while it was in approval stage and signed an historic 125-year ground lease with the Uniting Church Synod of Victoria and Tasmania.

As part of the deal, Charter Hall committed to restoring the church and four other heritage-listed buildings – the Schoolhouse, Nicholas Hall, the Manse and the Caretaker’s Cottage.

This restoration work has almost been completed at the reported cost of \$20 million, though work on Nicholas Hall will come later.



“Charter Hall are owner-occupiers so their attention to detail and the life after they finish construction is apparent,” Leonie said.

“For Charter Hall this is unique, they’ve just given so much to the heritage element of it. Yes, it is required by the permits but I do think they have gone the extra mile.”

Watch a short video about the Wesley Place partnership between Charter Hall and the Wesley Church congregation: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3XYEyHt1Dws>



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Unfortunately, Wesley Church and the Chinese-speaking Gospel Hall congregation were only able to meet in the revamped church for a few months before COVID-19 hit, but Leonie said the restoration had been well received.

“The best thing is the light,” Leonie said.

“Because the windows have all been restored and cleaned the amount of light they let in now transforms the church interior on a sunny day. That’s assisted, in fact, by reflection off the glass façade of the new office tower.

“It’s a lovely warm space due to the new carpet colour, the glorious restored stained glass and the flexible seating we have been able to introduce around a core of moveable pews.

“We really love being in a space that now caters well for children and finally has a kitchenette. For 162 years there has been just one cold tap in the building. Also, our musicians are happy with the improved acoustics.”

As part of the 125-year lease, Charter Hall provides a sinking fund that pays for the church’s repairs and maintenance. They also are responsible for general grounds maintenance and site security.

“That means we are not spending all that time worrying and pouring money into maintaining buildings and still not keeping up with it,” Leonie said.

“It’s not just financial resources, emotional and spiritual resources get poured into just maintaining the drains and roof and so on. Whereas in this situation we have a sinking fund that takes care of the cost of that. So, we have been freed from the burden of decaying buildings to get on with being a church.”



Leonie said the church was more front and centre than it had been in the previous cluster of buildings.

“It’s very visible up and down the street because they have made the ground floor of the tower of glass and you see the reflection as well in the facade,” she said.

“There will be nothing built in

front of Nicholas Hall, where Wesley House was previously.

“Now when I mention Wesley Church to people, they might have some idea of where it is when they drive past there.”



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Leonie said the congregation were particularly grateful for the work of Property Services and SEMZ consultancy group, who were engaged as intermediaries between the church and the private sector.

“Many, many people have contributed to the project but these were our chief negotiators for the excellent result that has been achieved,” Leonie said.

As an “amateur” in property development, Leonie said she had learnt a lot during the Wesley Place process.

“It was a long struggle to reach the conclusion that only by entering into a partnership with big finance that the proper restoration could happen,” she said.

“By doing that we have opened the site up to the whole community, whereas before it had become dangerous and scary.

“But it requires having a sense of confidence in the way the world works to take the risks.

“In a sense, the church was not taking a risk here, what was being exchanged was a solid financial transaction. However, it is thinking on a scale that is beyond most of us.”



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