



Uniting Church in Australia  
SYNOD OF VICTORIA AND TASMANIA

# A Theology of Property for a pilgrim people



A project of the Synod of Victoria  
and Tasmania Property Board

September 2008





## Introduction

The Uniting Church is at a pivotal moment in our short history. Many challenges we face relate to church property. Decisions about property are often complex and highly emotional due to the historical connections many people have with particular places. Hence such decisions can be formidable undertakings. Many of these challenges will remain with us for years to come.

This paper is not intended to solve all these problems. It aims to provide a theological framework to assist the decision making process. It is a resource for reflection, discussion and study in congregations and other church bodies.

It has been prepared by a task group commissioned by the synod property board to assist with decisions about property.

The word property in this paper refers to sites, buildings and their contents which are owned by the Uniting Church and whose upkeep is the responsibility of local congregations.





## Part 1

# Background

Since the churches united in 1977, the whole Uniting Church has faced many property questions – what to keep, what to sell and how best to use. The church has sought to approach these questions from a Christian point of view. We want to use our properties for the worship of God and the mission of God. So we seek to discern God's will.

Over the years there has been some good discussion. We have been stimulated by resources such as *Property and Grief* by Graeme Griffin, *Theology of Property* by Ian Williams, *Living Stones: Theological Guidelines for Uniting Church Buildings* by Robert Gribben and *Bricks and Mortar – A Guide for Church Building Committees* by Dean Crouch and Michael Sawyer.

We are entering a new era of challenge across the church. Attendances are declining and buildings are deteriorating. Properties are often an emotional and financial burden rather than resources for mission. Building maintenance is now the third largest budget item for local congregations across the church. Decisions about property are often restricted by what can we afford. And we must comply with complex state and federal laws.

There are major challenges about how, in response to the gospel, we might reform the life of the church and decide what buildings serve us best. Hearing the Word of God, understanding the times, facing their challenges and making strategic changes are not simple tasks. They require patient listening, careful discerning, persistent prayer, openness to new learning and a readiness to be led in new directions.

The church needs a clear theology of property so that advice given or decisions made are well founded.

## Questions include:

What does the Word of God say about property and buildings?

What is the nature of the present cultural context for mission?

Who are we as a people of God?

What is the core purpose of the Uniting Church?

What is the place of property in the community of faith?

Is a dedicated space necessary or desirable for worship and identity in the community?

What do we mean by 'ownership' of property?

How might we decide about property so we remain open to God's future?

What are the implications of these questions for the practical issues of mission in local congregations, in agencies, in presbyteries and in synods?

## Three sections follow:

- 1 The wider cultural context which has shaped the church in the past and the changing cultural context in which we find ourselves. Refer part two.
- 2 The importance of places of God for the church. Refer part three.
- 3 A theological understanding of the nature of the church and how property may be used in the service of the gospel. Refer part four.

Interspersed through the paper are questions for discussion to encourage readers to work through the issues in their local situation.



## Part 2

# The Uniting Church then and now

## 2.1 The Past – God at the centre

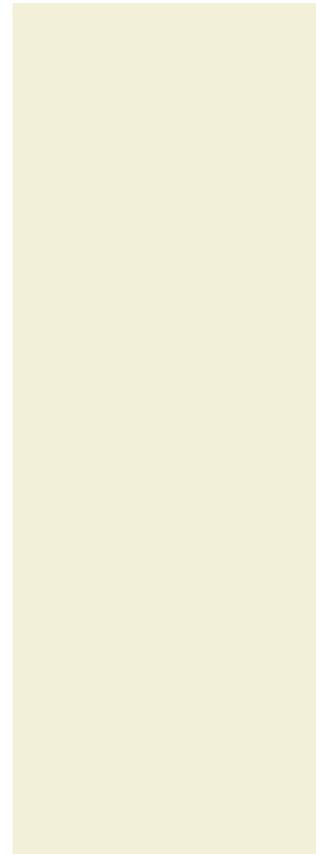
There have been significant cultural shifts in Australia over recent decades. Attitudes, behaviour and beliefs have changed.

There was once general acceptance that God exists, that God is at the centre of our world and that most people believed in God.

From these premises, it followed that

- every community had a church; many communities had several
- most people 'belonged' to a church even if they seldom attended
- the church's authority extended over members – and over society
- the church was central to society: Sundays were Sabbath days, rites of passage (birth, marriage and death) belonged to the church
- loyal members attended church regularly and everyone attended at Easter and Christmas
- politicians were Christian and operated with Christian values
- the church ran social and sporting activities for all ages
- the church provided a wide range of social services, including schools, hospitals and charities
- Christianity was the only public faith
- church structures, buildings and liturgy were permanent
- the word 'sacred' was applicable to church buildings.

This past era is within the living memory of many churchgoers today. It has given general form to Australian church life.



## Case studies

### 'Every community had a church'

Ballarat with its twelve Uniting Church congregations reflects the time when every community had a church. Within a small geographical area, some churches are very large and many are heritage listed. These buildings are now much larger than the congregations that worship there and place a significant strain on the resources of Ballarat congregations.

### 'The church was central'

The long established place of **Scots Church** as one of the oldest churches in **Hobart** is reflected in its ancient box pews. While appropriate for an earlier era, the congregation decided to replace its ancient box pews with chairs. This would make the building more welcoming, more accessible to people with disabilities and more suitable for contemporary worship. After applying for permits the local council refused permission on heritage grounds. The congregation has to use the old pews, although they are not suitable for today's worship.

## Questions for Discussion

What are your own memories of your church when you were a child?

In what ways do you consider your own church building 'sacred', and why?

What are some of the major changes for the local or wider church in the last generation?

Which of these changes do you consider welcome and which are not?



## 2.2 The Present – God on the Edge

The era of the centrality of God has been fast disappearing, replaced by an era we call modernism.

A main assumption of this new era is contained in the statement; I am. The human self is now at the centre and God has been pushed to the edge.

God on the edge implies a church on the edge. This means that:

- the church is no longer central in most people's lives
- attendance at worship and involvement in church activities are optional and irregular
- fewer people choose membership
- Sunday offers many options apart from church
- there are civil marriages, birth rites and funerals
- the authority of the church diminishes while the authority of people over their own lives increases
- politicians are no longer assumed to be Christian
- society and its media distance themselves from a Christian milieu and values
- the church is understood to exist more to 'satisfy the people' in a 'feel good' or 'self-authenticating' society
- greater denominational choice means a wider array of churches
- the form of church life of the past seems to be dying leading many to regard the church as old-fashioned, belonging to the past
- we now have many small, ageing congregations with burdensome buildings to maintain and demanding health and safety regulations with which to comply.

Yet it remains true that all major religions in Australia continue to affirm the importance of having buildings as a focus for community identity.



## Case study

### 'Burdensome buildings'

Uniting Church members in **Campbelltown**, Tasmania, have been unable to maintain the old Presbyterian church. So the building will be sold. The elderly congregation now meets in an aged care facility's chapel. The organ – imported from Scotland in the early 1800s and the only one of its kind in the southern hemisphere – will be relocated to a heritage building nearby.

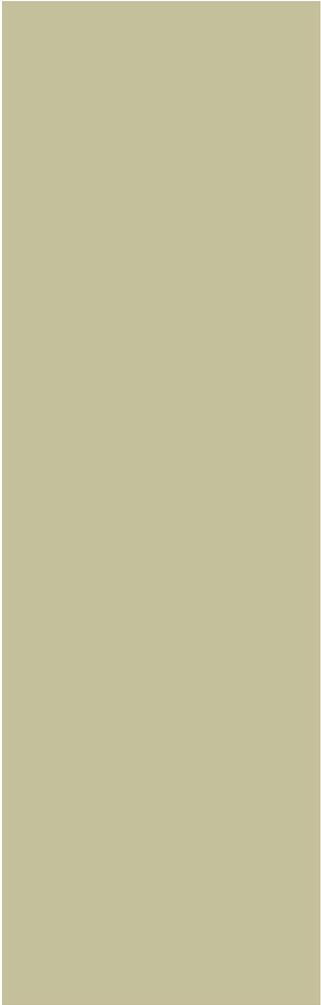
## Questions for Discussion

In what circumstances, if any, do you think that you might choose to give up your church building?

If you chose to give up your church building and relocate to another centre of worship...

- a) What would be the most difficult thing about doing this?
- b) What would be important for you to take with you from your present church building and why?
- c) What would shape your decision to join a new worshipping community?

How might money from property sales be best used?



## 2.3 The Future – Belief in God as one of the choices

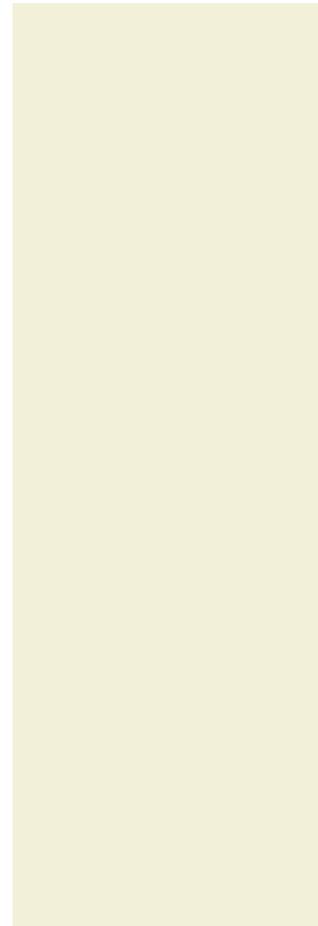
The post-modern era is the most recent in Australia’s cultural history. This movement is sometimes dated from the loss of confidence in the Christian story following the second world war and the Holocaust in Germany. It questions scientific rationality and seeks voices and perspectives as sources of authority other than traditional sources. Making choices and valuing differences have become markers of post-modern cultural identity.

This development presents both difficulties and opportunities for the church. On the one hand the Christian story is seen as one among many stories and cannot claim special privilege or authority in our society. On the other hand post-modern acceptance of diverse ‘truths’ and many ‘ways of knowing’ makes more room for religious belief in general, including Christian belief. Our era is marked by the common search for a personal do-it-yourself spirituality. It is a culture of options with belief in God as one of many possible options.

Anticipating the future church

It is not easy to anticipate the future shape of the church. But indications are that:

- the church’s place in Australian society will be as one faith group in a society of many faiths
- the church will be marginal to the main interests and activities of our society
- there will be a diversity of forms and styles of church life
- denominational loyalty will decline
- congregations will increasingly depend on lay leadership
- there will be fewer resources to maintain church structures, activities and buildings
- some church communities will have only a loose connection with buildings.



## Case studies

### ‘Spiritual journeys’

**Northcote** Chalice located in Melbourne’s inner north, respects the “individual spiritual journeys of all people, all communities and all faith traditions.” Members believe that creativity is a significant pathway for many to nurture their spirituality and community connectedness. So the church works closely with creative arts groups, local traders, the City of Darebin, and local community groups. It emphasises social justice, supports refugees, advocates for peace and strives for harmony with other religions. Chalice’s website provides advice that people “seeking a more traditional or family oriented worship service” may find that elsewhere.

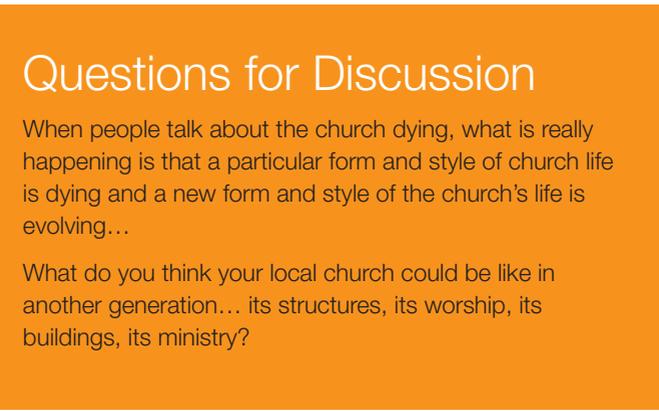
### ‘New forms of ministry’

Augustine Uniting community in **Hawthorn** embraces new forms of ministry which it strives to make spiritually holistic and relevant to a sceptical world. Programs link contemplative spirituality, social engagement, arts, celebration and community. Partnerships have been established with other groups to form a learning centre that provides for sustainable personal, communal and global well-being. One strong focus is on personal balance in life and work.

## Questions for Discussion

When people talk about the church dying, what is really happening is that a particular form and style of church life is dying and a new form and style of the church’s life is evolving...

What do you think your local church could be like in another generation... its structures, its worship, its buildings, its ministry?





## Part 3

# The Uniting Church – A pilgrim people

### 3.1 On the Way

When the Basis of Union affirmed we are a pilgrim people, always on the way, it linked the UC to a long Christian tradition of pilgrimage. We are moving towards a future promised by God while holding to the presence of God with us now. The metaphor of pilgrimage underpins the tension in Christian history between a sense of place and of placelessness, between understanding God's place as here or local on the one hand and beyond or universal on the other. Christian scripture and tradition invite us to see the particular buildings that carry our local stories as 'sites of the sacred'. These invite us in towards God and send us out with God to the ends of the earth. The centripetal and centrifugal forces that draw in and propel out are hallmarks of sacred places. Questions about how a particular place supports both dimensions of mission, the encounter with God and the witness to God, need to be part of understanding the dynamics of sacred places in Christian communities.

### Case study

#### 'Moving and growing'

Twelve years ago the 35 year-old Korean church in **Armidale** moved to an old Methodist property in **Malvern**. Their previous Presbyterian building had become too small for the growing church. It then acquired another Methodist property nearby. The number of worshippers has since grown from about 130 to 800 and is still expanding. Sunday attendees come from many parts of the city and country. The church now faces many serious size-related problems. These include parking which requires uniformed parking attendants to manage.

### 3.2 Places of God: this place and every place

Christians have understood the places of God in many ways. Christian theology has always affirmed the importance of the material world. But Christian history has been wary of identifying sacred places and has tended, in the West especially, to emphasise time rather than place in discussions of how human beings interact with God. In Jesus believers found not a temple or a promised land, but a person. In early Christian tradition places were sacred because of their connection with Jesus and the events of his life. Old boundaries of the sacred were pushed outwards to include sinners, the poor and the outcast. The first Christian martyr Stephen is remembered in Acts 7 enraging the people with reminders of their heritage as 'aliens in a foreign land' and declaring that 'the Most High does not live in houses made by men'.

The apostolic church was concerned with movement from 'home' outwards to the wider world. It was when in transit, 'on the way' to Emmaus, or to Damascus, that the early church remembered radical encounters with the risen Christ. In the early Christian centuries, holy men and women became places of pilgrimage in themselves as the holiness of the people of God overtook interest in places. The tombs of the martyrs and the desert huts of living saints were sought out. The people in those places, rather than the place itself, offered models of radical discipleship.

Augustine made a related distinction at the end of this period as Christianity adapted to a privileged place in the Roman Empire. He warned strongly against identifying the 'city of God' with the 'earthly city' or 'the world of places'. God's realm of spiritual realities was in parallel to but outside the unstable realm of politics and culture. Augustine's sharp distinction influenced centuries of Western thought on the divide between secular and sacred history. With this came a suspicion, picked up by the sixteenth century reformers among others, of the idea that earthly places might mediate God.

On the other hand, particular places have been significant in Christian history. Landscapes and locations have fired spiritual imagination as places of encounters with God. Athanasius records that when Antony of Egypt found his remote hill in Thebaid, 'as if stirred by God, [he] fell in love with the place'.



Other beautiful and wild places have been identified as a 'map of paradise' by holy seekers since then. The built environment has been important also. Monastic complexes, Gothic cathedrals, Puritan villages and Shaker communities are examples of theological architecture. All these were designed with an awareness of how buildings can speak of God.

Particular places are part of the memory of conversion stories. They have shaped powerful encounters with God. Paul was at a particular point on the road to Damascus. Augustine heard the lines that changed his life in a garden outside Milan. John Wesley was 'strangely warmed' at a prayer meeting in Aldersgate Street. Dietrich Bonhoeffer understood a call to 'religionless Christianity' in Tegel Prison. Thomas Merton suddenly found that God infused all the world on a street corner in Louisville. Other places would have shaped those experiences differently and we would remember them differently. This connection between places of encounter with God and the stories of those encounters is part of the sense of the sacred that also attaches to many church buildings.

Within the Christian awareness of the significance of place, there is a paradoxical insistence that God can be found in every place. The desert fathers who fled spiritual danger in the cities actually advised people to stay where they were called to be, to recognise that the holy place is always here, in this place. In the monastic centuries this stability, of commitment to the particular place and community was affirmed strongly. Holy men and women were expected to recognise that until they could find God in that particular place they would not find God anywhere else. Through the centuries the spiritual advice has been that utopia – literally meaning 'no place' – does not exist over the next hill. The holy place is always recognised here.



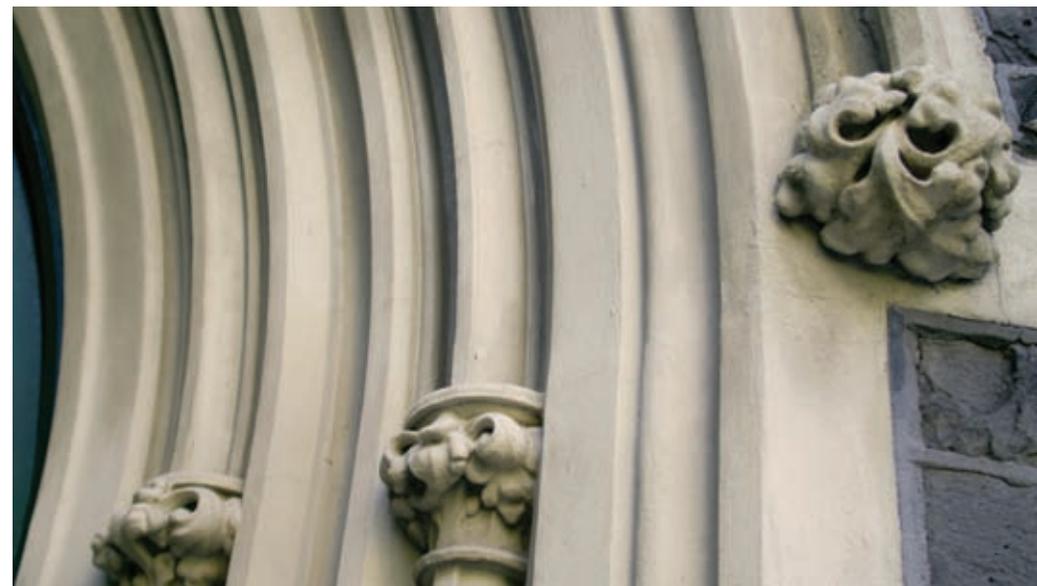
## Case studies

### 'Landscape as places of encounter with God'

October 2007 saw the first of a series of prayer bushwalks organised by the Uniting Church in Tasmania. The *Earth pilgrimage* walks are times when participants seek to be open to the presence of God found in and through nature. Walkers seek to grow in their understanding of themselves as part of creation. The first walk was on the forested slopes of Mt Wellington above Hobart with nine participants. The walk lasted three hours, involved a visit to O'Grady's Falls and allowed times for silent prayer and reflection.

### 'Homes as places of encounter with God'

The small congregation at **Bagdad** in Tasmania's southern midlands found the large sandstone church building too empty and cold in winter. They sold the property and now hold Sunday services in private homes. The congregation has since grown.





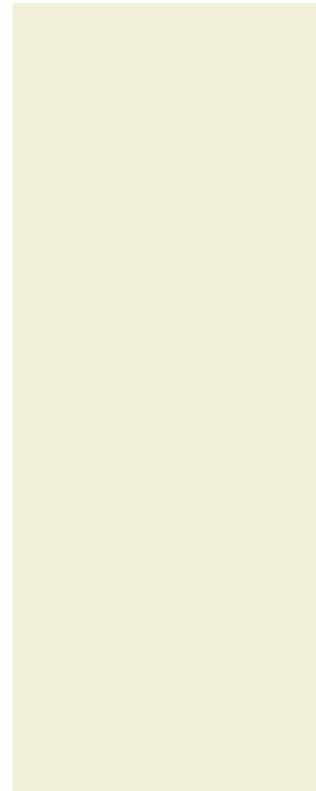
### 3.3 Place, community and story

As the modern world increasingly values mobility and change over stability, commentators are paying more attention to the dynamics of place. They have noted that the shared memory of stories are often what makes a particular place special or sacred. These define it as place rather than just space. This applies not only to church buildings but to schools, family homes, public buildings and other sites of significant events.

Telling the stories is a way of participating in the meaning of the place, continuing to define it, and of shaping commitment to it. Usually it is those who do not know the stories of a place who are not committed to it and not at home in it. Newcomers, travellers, tourists, sea changers, hobby farmers all sit in a different relationship to the stories of a place that is home to a steady community. Whether and how stories enlarge and grow around a place is one hallmark of its sacredness in a community.

A place without stories is never sacred. Without stories there is no place, the site is a non-place. This term was first used by French anthropologist Marc Augé. His work points out the non-places of the modern world where there is no real community. He argues that in non-places we could be 'anywhere'. In supermarkets, airports, in front of a computer screen or in a traffic jam we are at the same time 'everywhere and nowhere'. These non-places do not connect with the individual identities of the people who are there. There are no relationships lived out there and hence no memories or stories formed.

The non-places of the new global village run the risk of forgetting that human beings have bodies. To create meaning we need to be somewhere.



## Case studies

### 'Place of sanctuary in the city'

In 1999 **St Michael's** church in **Melbourne** city started Mingary – what it calls 'a peaceful sanctuary for people of all religions and cultures'. Open from 8.00 to 5.00 weekdays and 8.00 to 1.00 Sundays Mingary offers escape from the rush and pressure of city life for quiet personal reflection. Mingary also offers confidential professional counselling for a range of issues. It seeks particularly to offer healing, restoration and empowerment for victims of trauma and tragedy.

### 'Adding to the story of place'

The old chapel in **Ross** is only used occasionally for church services or funerals, but being on the busy tourist road between Launceston and Hobart it is opened to visitors every day. Large numbers of people visit the church and the collection box takes three or four thousand dollars a year. This pays for much of the building's upkeep.

## Questions for Discussion

How do you understand the image of the UC being 'a pilgrim people, always on the way'? What does this image suggest in relation to ownership of property?

Is there a place that is 'sacred' for you? What makes it sacred?

Take some time to sit in your church building. What do you notice? What draws you in? What sends you out? What is 'storied' here?

If there were a need for your congregation to move, how could the stories be honoured? What does it mean that to say that 'without stories there is no place'?

## Part 4

# Theology of property

## 4.1 The main issue

Property is part of the Uniting Church's life. The present situation and foreseeable future include the ownership, maintenance, acquisition, sales, management and utilization of properties. But how are we to think theologically about property? What is the place of property in the present life of the church? What would a theology of property look like?

## 4.2 Freedom from property

A theology of property is forced upon us by the fact that God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit gathers, builds up and sends us out in real times and concrete places. Although the work of God in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit is not bound to property, the church has acquired properties as places where it gathers as the people of God. It has therefore bound itself to property. The church is constituted, however, in the work of the triune God and not on its ownership or non-ownership of property.

It is therefore possible to imagine theologically a propertyless church. But it is not theologically sound to imagine a church that does not exist in time and place in the world. With or without property the church can still be the church. Hence the church is free to think of itself as the people of God with or without property.

*The church is a pilgrim people, always on the way towards a promised goal; here the church does not have a continuing city but seeks one to come...Through human witness in word and action, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ reaches out to command attention and awaken faith; he calls people into the fellowship of his sufferings, to be the disciples of a crucified Lord; in his own strange way Christ constitutes, rules and renews them as his church [para. 3 & 4 of *The Basis of Union*].*

## Case studies

### 'With or without property the church can still be the church'

More than 100 people from many places embraced the stillness and silence of worship in a paddock in **Central Victoria** in 2007. No one explained that this was a day of stillness or that they could light candles or write their own prayers quietly. They simply observed this happening around them and entered into the experience themselves. For one, this was her first time in worshipping in decades. This service was born of the conviction that people are yearning to explore their spirituality, if given accessible space for them to do so.

### 'Needs change'

Once a thriving gold rush area, **Mount Beckworth**, near Clunes, boasted an impressive solid bluestone church. Built in 1879 this was no doubt greatly appreciated by the generations who attended its weddings, baptisms, funerals, Sunday school and worship services. As the gold rush ended and the population's needs changed, the church moved on to be in different places. All that remains of the Mount Beckworth church now are crumbling stones in a paddock.

## Discussion

Discuss the property issues that you face as you live as the people of God in the world.

Reflect on what it would mean for you as a congregation or church agency to be property-less.

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



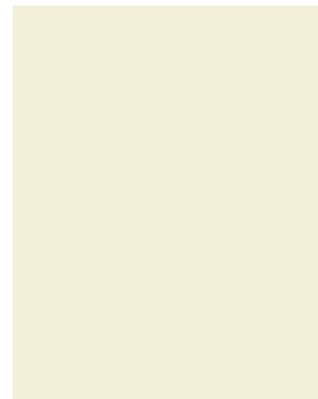
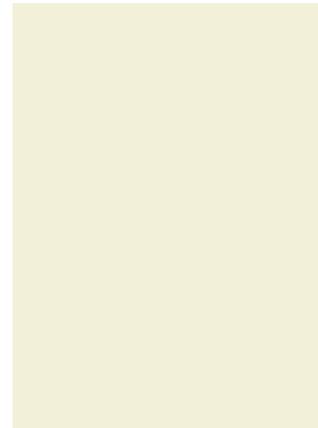
### 4.3 Property is bound to mission

Although the church as the work of God can be separated from property, the property of the church cannot be theologically thought of apart from the Christian community. Church property is not an end in itself, but has a purpose and function. These are to support the life of the community of Christ. But the life of the church is also not an end in itself, but has a purpose and function. Put simply, the church serves God.

The starting point for a theology of property therefore is the Christian understanding of

- (1) the function of property in the context of mission and
- (2) the church's faith in God as the One served in all that the church is and does.

Our faith in the triune God defines the mission of the church, which is the context in which property is to be understood.



## Case study

### 'Property not an end in itself'

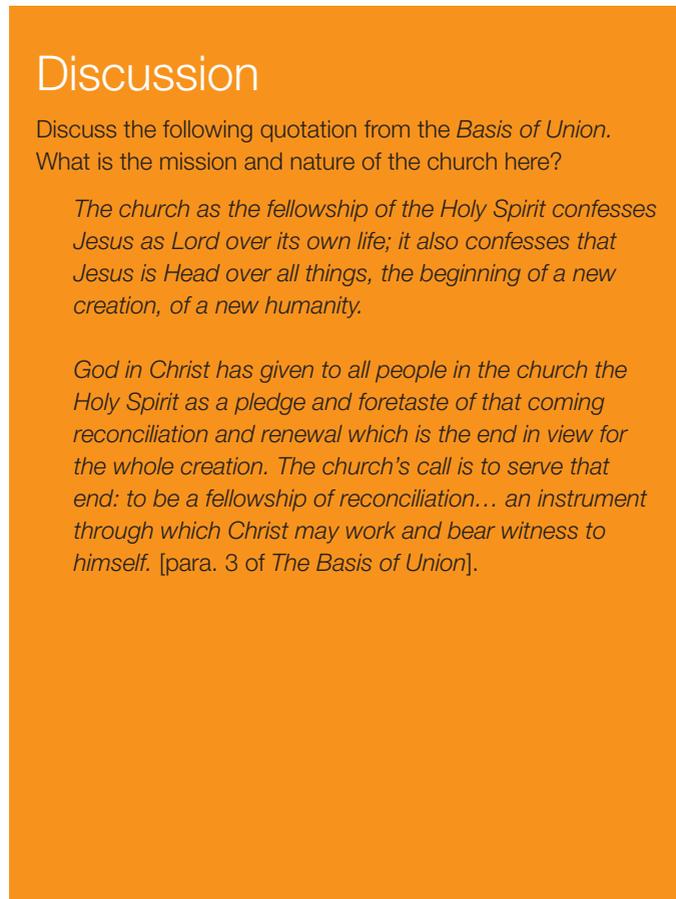
The **Church of St Mark the Evangelist** in **North Melbourne** was founded in 1854. A 500 seat building was completed by the Presbyterians in 1858, then replaced by a 900 seat building in 1868. Today the church has an active congregation which engages in a wide range of community and social justice activities and the adjacent cottage is home to Hotham Parish Mission.

## Discussion

Discuss the following quotation from the *Basis of Union*.  
What is the mission and nature of the church here?

*The church as the fellowship of the Holy Spirit confesses Jesus as Lord over its own life; it also confesses that Jesus is Head over all things, the beginning of a new creation, of a new humanity.*

*God in Christ has given to all people in the church the Holy Spirit as a pledge and foretaste of that coming reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole creation. The church's call is to serve that end: to be a fellowship of reconciliation... an instrument through which Christ may work and bear witness to himself. [para. 3 of *The Basis of Union*].*





#### 4.4 Property as proclamation

It follows from our acceptance that church property is bound to mission that properties serve the purpose of witness. This means how we use, manage and maintain properties are not the domain only of the finance or maintenance committees. Rather, they are part of the mission of God in the world. Property usage witnesses to the kingdom of God in Jesus Christ.

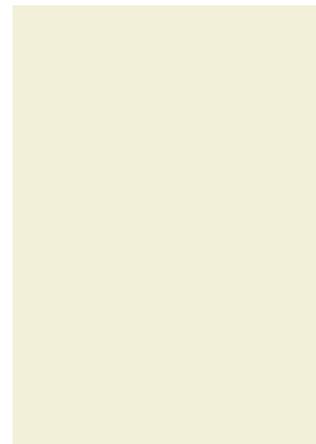
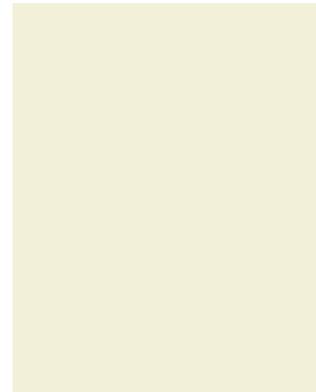
Property is not the church's 'possession' or 'gift from God' that is to be used 'wisely' by the church. Instead, it is an opportunity to witness to the new cosmic order constituted in the reconciling work of Christ. This means that the church's thinking about property should not follow the dominant economic rationalism of the day. Church property is not a 'resource' to be 'used wisely' according to the world's standards of good management. All our dealings with property should point to the kingdom of God. The criterion for the faithful use of property is therefore its efficacy in proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ. Property is both a place and a form of proclamation.

### Case studies

#### 'Proclaiming in non church properties'

In a deliberate move to proclaim its commitment to the environment, the church at **Fitzroy** will sell its old property to build a new place within the nearby CERES environment park. The congregation believes this makes an important theological statement and also has great practical advantages. The space is not identifiable as Christian and can be put to a range of uses by diverse groups.

In **Trafalgar** the Uniting Church and the Rotary Club now run a men's shed in the former girl guides' hall which they rent for a nominal sum. The shed is open two afternoons a week for men, mainly retired from various walks of life, to share their skills and work on community projects.



## Discussion

What difference does it make to think of property as a form of proclamation?

Discuss the following statement: 'The criterion for the faithful use of property is therefore its efficacy in proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ.'

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

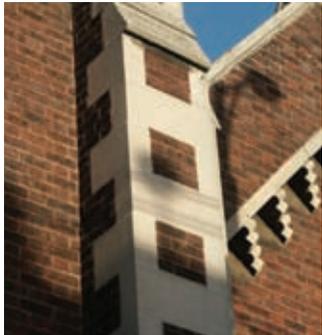
#### 4.5 Deciding in worship

The UC faces many complex property issues. These include maintenance costs, heritage compliance, access for all abilities, safety, complying with new laws and the emotional connections people have to property. How are we to deal with these while witnessing to the reconciliation of the world in Jesus Christ?

No single all encompassing principle applies to all property questions. Every issue requires a specific decision. However, decisions made in the life of the church are not made in a vacuum. They are made within a theological framework of our understanding of God and the church's mission. If property is positioned in the context of the mission of the church, then decisions about property become part of the worshiping life of the Christian community.

The way we decide about property is first and foremost a prayerful listening and encountering of the Word of God. Speaking and hearing the Word of God takes place in the context of the Christian community. As we gather in worship we are empowered through Word and Sacrament for the commission of Jesus to be his witnesses. The starting point for making decisions about property is therefore worshipping together.

*The Word of God on whom salvation depends is to be heard and known from Scripture appropriated in the worshipping and witnessing life of the church. The Uniting Church lays upon its members the serious duty of reading the Scriptures, commits its ministers to preach from these and to administer the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper as effective signs of the Gospel set forth in the Scriptures [para 5 of The Basis of Union].*



## Case study

### 'Discerning property priorities'

After the congregations of St Andrew's **Brunswick** and **Brunswick South-West** combined recently, decisions had to be made about the future usage of several buildings. Thus began a process of group discernment with many steps of participation. This took place over a number of months and included seminars, discussion, information and above all, preaching and prayerful reflection during worship.

## Discussion

What difference does it make to think of property issues in the context of worship in the gathered community of Christ?

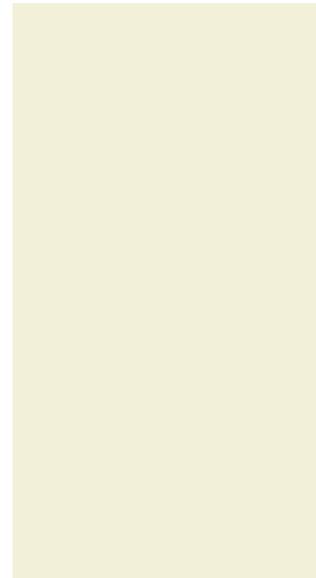
Is this starting point for making decisions about property helpful in your situation?

How can Presbyteries and Synods apply approach?

### 4.6 Deciding in community

Decisions about church properties are not merely the concern of an individual congregation. They are the responsibility of the whole church. No individual part of the church 'owns' property or has a 'right' to property. All church property is the commonwealth of the community of Christ to serve its purpose in proclaiming the gospel.

The entire church is, therefore, responsible for using and managing property. This means decisions about property are not made in isolation, but in relation to one another as the community of Christ. The Uniting Church is governed in such a way that various councils of the church have oversight of different property matters. At every council of the church, however, the Word of God is to be heard and obeyed.



Each council with responsibility for property is to ask the following questions:

- What is the witness to the world proclaimed in our management and use of property?
- Does our witness serve the gospel?
- How is the commonwealth of the church to serve the purpose of the gospel?

*The Uniting Church acknowledges that Christ alone is supreme in his church, and that he may speak to it through any of its councils. It is the task of every council to wait upon God's Word, and to obey God's will in the matters allocated to its oversight. Each council will recognise the limits of its own authority and give heed to other councils of the church, so that the whole body of believers may be united by mutual submission in the service of the Gospel.*  
[para 15 of *The Basis of Union*].



## Case study

### 'Possibilities arise through being in community'

Six years ago the **Karingal** Lutherans sold their church property to a supermarket chain. They approached the Uniting Church to see if they could use the UC buildings for worship. Agreement was reached that the UC congregation would continue Sunday worship at 9.30 and the Lutherans would use the building at 11.00. However, during the gap between the services people got to know each other. They now worship together. Differences about worship style have been resolved by discussion. Things once thought critically important became less so through talking and listening.



## 4.7 Deciding in the world

The church exists in historical, social, cultural and economic contexts. It lives in the world in this 'time between.'

*The church lives between the time of Christ's death and resurrection and the final consummation of all things which Christ will bring; the church is a pilgrim people, always on the way towards a promised goal; here the church does not have a continuing city but seeks one to come.*

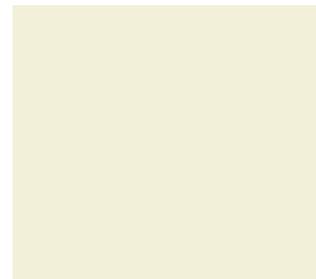
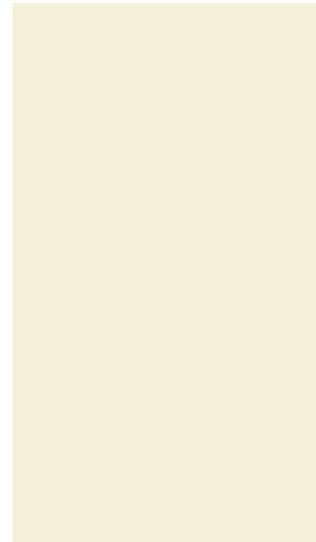
[para. 3 of *The Basis of Union*]

But it lives in the world as the people of God testifying to Christ crucified and risen and the world reconciled in him. This means that the church lives in an uncomfortable tension of being in and for the world, but not being of the world.

In relation to property, this tension is all too obvious. The church believes in justice and supporting the marginalized and the poor. However, we possess substantial wealth in property and other resources, while millions of people live in poverty and die of preventable diseases. Likewise, we believe that we are a 'pilgrim people' whose future is in God, and yet we continue to plan financially and invest for the future financial security of the church. Whose witness does our management of property serve? Are there issues of 'power' which need to be addressed?

It would be easy to dismiss these tensions and contradictions as something we just have to live with. But to accept contradictions passively is to decide actively not to live with the tension. Living in tension means we cannot ignore the contradictions of the life and proclamation of the church. Instead, when we face them we must cry out 'Lord have mercy', and with this cry turn anew to the Lord who has returned the world to himself.

This does not necessarily mean that the church is to sell all its properties and give the money to the poor. Neither does it mean that the church should apply the economic 'wisdom' of the world. What it does mean is that we take seriously our use of property in witnessing to the triune God and the church's missionary purpose. When our understanding of property is placed in the context of the life and mission of the church, then it is placed in the context of our call to follow Jesus Christ.



## Case study

### 'In the world but not of it'

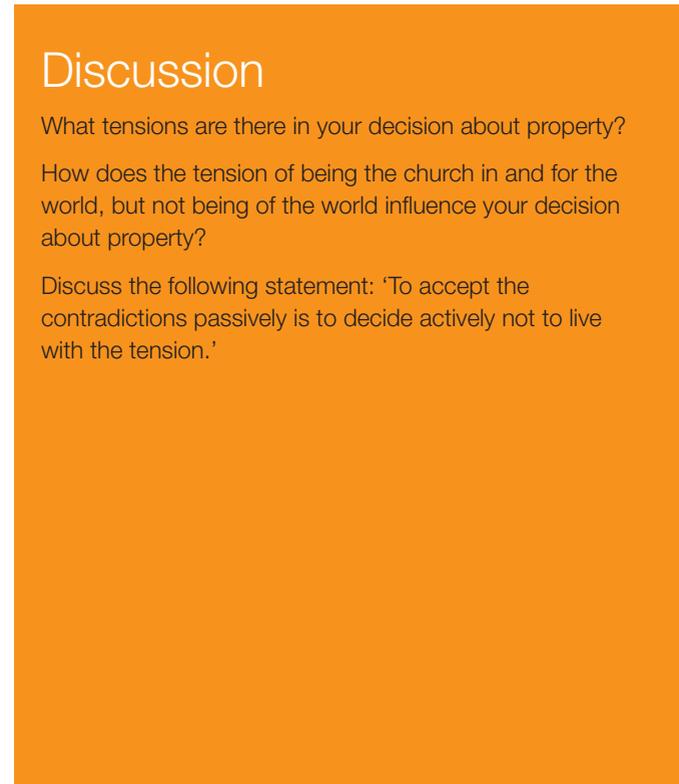
The proposed redevelopment of the **Wesley Precinct** generate new approaches to ministry and mission with Synod Operations moving to the site to join the Wesley congregation, Gospel Hall and Wesley Mission on the site. Vision workshops in 2006 decided on nine principles to guide the redevelopment: that the precinct should have a cross-cultural focus, have flexible use, promote equity of relationships, be financially viable, encompass multiple forms of ministry, have an evolutionary development, be open to new partners, honour the gifts of the past and have a human scale.

## Discussion

What tensions are there in your decision about property?

How does the tension of being the church in and for the world, but not being of the world influence your decision about property?

Discuss the following statement: 'To accept the contradictions passively is to decide actively not to live with the tension.'





## Part 5

# Conclusion

Difficult decisions on the use of our properties confront us. This paper seeks to provide a theological framework to assist this challenging decision making process.

First, we must be aware of our ever-changing cultural context. Property serves the church in different ways in different historical situations. Our current cultural context presents us with challenges different from those of twenty years ago. As a result, we are forced to reconsider the purpose of property for the current mission of the church.

Second, there have been various Christian understandings of the importance of place as well as placelessness in the history of the church. While we recognise that God is everywhere, particular places have been understood to be important. Church places are important because of what has happened and continues to happen in them. But we are a pilgrim people moving towards a future with God. We are free, therefore, to think creatively about place and placelessness in our present context.

Finally, we are also free to think of ourselves as the people of God with or without property. Church property is bound to the mission of the church. It is a means to the end which is the mission of the church in witnessing to God.

May God bless our discerning and our struggles; may we hear the call of Jesus to be 'my witnesses'; and may God's Spirit empower us to decide about property for the sake of the gospel.

## Prayer

*O Lord our God, in Jesus Christ your Son you have come to us in your grace and mercy, to bring life to the world, to bring healing to the nations, and to set our sights on your coming Kingdom.*

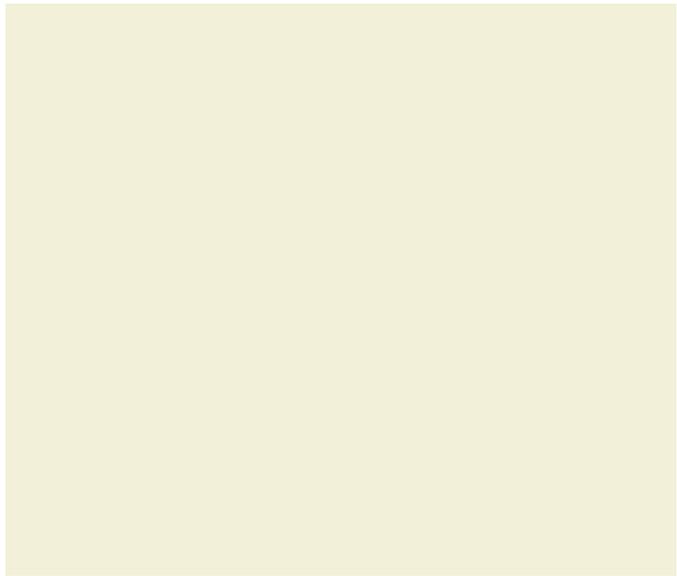
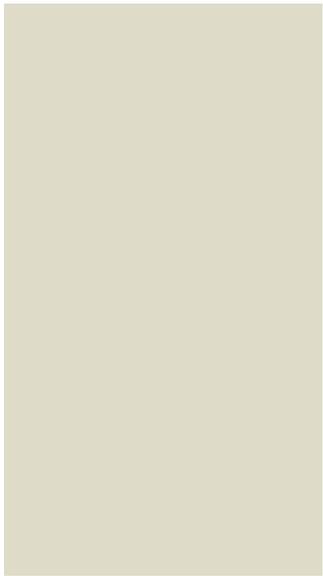
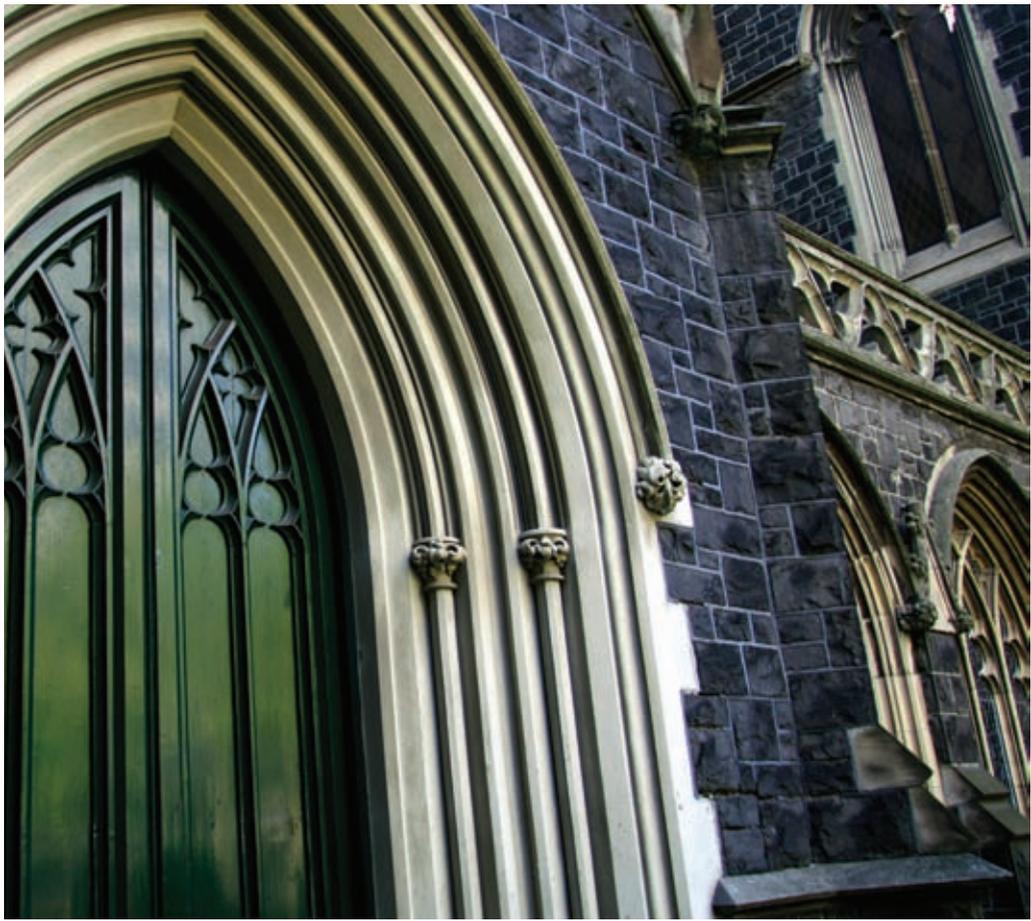
*Help us to be faithful to your mission in the world.*

*Make us grateful for what is past, and hopeful for what is to come.*

*Liberate us from all captivity that we may serve you in humility and joy, until at last, our restless hearts find their eternal rest in you. Amen.*

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