

Kaimai Presbytery

Toward a Theology of Property

UNDER PRESSURE

Local congregations and the presbytery currently face many challenges that relate to church property. Several realities are impacting our ability to care for and use our buildings:

- mounting maintenance and insurance costs,
- rising compliance requirements,
- strengthening buildings to cover earthquake risk, and
- changing purposes for the use of church buildings.

Many decisions about property are before us, and such decisions are often complex, difficult and emotionally charged. Do we maintain buildings, strengthen them, develop them, close them, sell them, or ignore them? In many places these demands are being faced with less people and financial resources to cover associated costs. A sense of burden regarding buildings is widespread.

SOME THEOLOGICAL OBSERVATIONS

We understand and affirm that we are the people of God, dependant on his grace in all things, and responsible stewards of all his gifts. *The world and all that is in it belong to God, and all who live in it are his. (Psalm 24:1)* We are the people of God, living in relationship with the risen Christ and in the power of his Spirit. As God's people we are called to honour him in the whole of life and to work with him in his mission to the world.

From his grace and in our response we are to be people of faith. In all the varying circumstances that life brings, including issues regarding church buildings, we are called to renew our trust in the Lord. In order to make decisions about property we need to hear afresh the Word of God, understand well the times, be open to new learnings and have a readiness to be led in new directions. The following observations seek to provide a theological framework for our decision making.

1. When many of our church buildings were erected there was widespread identity with these facilities – people of the community generally owned a Christian worldview, valued 'their' church, participated to a greater or lesser extent, and appreciated its pastoral care. Buildings also made a visual statement affirming a spiritual component to life – a symbol of God in the community.
2. Today the church – its liturgies, social services, its buildings, etc. - are on the margins of the community's thinking and practice. For many the church is there in case of need (like the Fire Service) rather than a central feature of life, and there is little obligation to support it. This context means that church buildings need to have differing purposes from those of previous generations.
3. The Christian Tradition affirms the importance of buildings as a focus for Christian identity, belonging, body life and as a base for mission. This reflects the importance of place in Christian experience – physical places where God's grace has been experienced and many attest to repeated experiences in particular church buildings. Buildings can become sacred places, perhaps 'thin places' (Celtic understanding), and places where faith and a shared story is corporately experienced and worship is expressed. This is a key reason for the strong emotional attachment to buildings.
4. The Christian tradition also affirms the importance of Christians being a pilgrim people - always on the way toward a future promised by God. We are pilgrims sent forth by God as co-workers in his mission of reconciliation, transformation and redemption of the world – his kingdom come. Church buildings are part of our present life, but if there is bondage to them then God's people have ceased to be pilgrims. Christians are citizens of another world, journeying toward the Promised Land, longing for another place – 'the Holy City, the New Jerusalem'.
5. There is a tension between this sense of place and of placeless-ness, of being drawn in toward God in worship here and sent out with God in mission to the ends of the earth. We are used to the former being enacted in church buildings, but the church can be the church with or without property.

6. Presbyterian theology of property helps express our theology. Ownership of buildings is held by the Church Property Trustees witnessing to the understanding that the present local congregation does not own the buildings but rather holds them on trust – appreciating the vision and investment of previous generations and being good stewards of those buildings for the life and mission of those who follow. Ultimately church buildings belong to God and not to us – they are God's resources for his work.
7. Christian stewardship of property should also reflect the consistent biblical testimony to care for the poor and needy. Following Christ and owning the values and practices of his kingdom, the church identifies with and shares its resources with the poor.
8. In the Presbyterian Church there are enormous resources locked up in church land and buildings. Similarly the enormous financial resources from property sales held in investment accounts. Both raise serious questions about God-honouring stewardship of resources.

SOME GUIDING PRINCIPLES

1. Church property belongs to God and therefore decision making about property and buildings needs to be undergirded with a prayerful listening and an encountering of the Word of God.
2. While the church will always be located in some place, buildings are not essential to being church. ~~Local congregations are therefore free to think freely about property.~~ This includes the possibility of selling property and buildings.
3. While church buildings support the worship and life of the community of Christ, this community has the purpose of sharing in God's work in the world. Property is a resource for God's work in mission. The context of the church is a rapidly changing world, and a needy world. Decisions about buildings should be made in the light of the church's mission in the world and not only for the survival or security of the local faith community. If listening to God comes first, then listening to the world comes second.
4. Buildings from the past reflect the context and purposes of that time and thereby may be hindering effective work in today's context. God's pilgrim people are called to free themselves from these hindrances, re-developing church buildings with creativity and innovation for missional purposes.
5. Local communities also change. Shifts in population or land use give legitimate reasons for selling buildings and preparing for or planting missional work elsewhere. However in general the continuity of the local congregation and its work in the community is a key issue in decision making about church buildings.
6. Typically the whole local community of faith, past and present, have participated in the development and maintenance of church buildings. Consultation and decisions about the future should likewise include the whole faith community and not the leadership body alone.
7. Church buildings are in the hands of a present community of stewards – the whole church. These stewards are local (congregation) and regional (presbytery) and national (Church Property Trustees). No individual part of the church 'owns' or has 'rights' to property, and therefore decisions about property is made in relation to all parts of the community of Christ. Given this broad stewardship the presbytery needs to be engaged early in any deliberations about property.
8. Decisions about property should be determined primarily by the purposes and values of the Christ's kingdom, and the engagement of the church with the gospel. Decision making about church buildings is not finally determined by the world's standards of good management.
9. Architecture is important. It is true that we shape our buildings and thereafter they shape us. Church buildings are not an end in themselves and their history or architecture is insufficient reason for holding them. Visually and practically buildings should express the hospitality of the congregation to the community.

10. Financial realities always effect decision making about church buildings. On one hand care needs to be taken to ensure that fund raising activities (e.g. rentals by community groups) do not compromise congregational use of buildings or kingdom values. On the other hand sufficient time and resource needs to be invested in planning to ensure quality outcomes from decision making.

11. In the light of the above **the Kaimai Presbytery will give priority to:**

- a. Building proposals for maintenance, for development of existing complexes and for new initiatives that have a missional purpose.
- b. Building proposals that reflect the Missional Directions of the Presbytery. This includes the commitment to greater co-operation and partnerships across parishes and also the possibility of joint use agreements with other churches.
- c. Building proposals that are commensurate with the number of people in the congregation and anticipated numbers of people being served in mission. This is a priority over financial capacity. It is unlikely that the presbytery would support a proposal to spend a large amount of money renovating a kitchen for the use of 20 people.
- d. Building proposals where the design allows for multi-purpose use through the week. Compared for example with proposals that relate to weekly Sunday worship alone.
- e. Building or other proposals that free up the large resources held in property or investments from property.
- f. Building proposals that allow for sale or demolition rather than retaining empty buildings. In addition presbytery will not countenance buildings remaining closed and empty long term.
- g. Building proposals that

Parishes should note that when property proposals are submitted to Presbytery for consideration the 'Supplementary Questions' explaining the missional purposes of the proposals will be a crucial document in presbytery decision making.

