

# A Theological Reflection on Church property in the Diocese of Dunedin: Conversations That Count



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Over the last two decades the number of people who identify themselves with being Christian has declined dramatically.<sup>i</sup> This has been the general trend for the Anglican church and other mainstream denominations. There are a few newer denomination (or non-denominational) churches that appear to be growing and catering for young adults and teenagers, however they would be an exception to this rule. The truth of the matter is that the Church is in a new era where it does not hold the same spiritual, social and political authority that it once did. This is not in of itself a bad thing, but it is new and puts the church in a place that it has not been since Christendom.

This opens several questions that need to be looked at:

- What does it look like to be a Christian now?
- What is our church going to look like in 10 years, 20 years or 100 years?
- What is our model of church going to look like?
- How will we allocate our resources (money, building etc)?
- How do we interact with a world who don't hold the same ideologies?

**This all comes back to the question of change.** What do we want the church to look like in the future? We have a moment right now to decided what we want the church to be in the future. We can see from the past the church in what every form is constantly changing. Whether it be the locations of worship (houses – churches) or the language we worship in (Latin – English) or the structure of the church (orthodoxy - reformation). The church constantly changes, and we need to have the hard conversations now, these are the conversations that count.

**One such conversations is what to do with our buildings.**

The bible has two major opinions about churches (or temples) and these come out between the old

testament and the new testament. The old testament places an importance on synagogues and the temple at Jerusalem. However, the New Testament places the importance on the person as the temple of God. This shift of perspective is important to note when we are discussing our own temples (churches). To hold onto a New Testament understanding of church we need to move past physical buildings and look at the spiritual.

The word church in the new testament (used 114 times) is a translation of a Greek word ekklesia, which means

1. gathering of citizens called out from their homes into some public place, an assembly
  - a. an assembly of the people convened at the public place of the council for the purpose of deliberating
  - b. the assembly of the Israelites
  - c. any gathering or throng of individuals assembled by chance.
2. in a Christian sense
  - a. an assembly of Christians gathered for worship in a religious meeting
  - b. a company of Christians (who acknowledge Jesus as Lord through baptism) who observe their own religious rites, hold their own religious meetings, and manage their own affairs, according to regulations prescribed for ordering this body's life.
  - c. those who anywhere, in a city, village, constitute such a company and are united into one body
  - d. the whole body of Christians scattered throughout the earth (the Church Universal)
  - e. the assembly of faithful Christians already dead and received into heaven<sup>ii</sup>

This definition does not describe the church as a building, temple or meeting place but as a gathering of people for a common purpose. The writers of the New Testament saw the church as a community of the

followers of Jesus, not the buildings in which they gathered in. So, can a building that is not used for worship be a church? In the biblical sense, no, as it is the people who gather to worship that makes the building a church. However, it does mean that a church can be anywhere people gather to worship God (in a house, rented hall or outdoors).

What, then, are the implications for our physical churches.? It appears that unless a church is being used for worship regularly then it is no longer a church, but a building that has previously been used for that purpose. The question then is: are we an organisation that is here to preserve heritage buildings that are not used, or are we an organisation that can use these resources in a new way to spread the good news of Christ?

Another biblical consideration is the **parable of the talents** (Matthew 25:14). In this story the Master has given each person a Talent (money) and they are asked to use it wisely. The first two do so and they produce more talents, but the third buried what was given so that it was unable to be deployed. **What are we doing with our buildings?** Are we the third character i.e. just keeping our buildings as they have been for decades, or are we using our what we have in creative way to help grow the kingdom of God?

## Two Types of Assets

There are two potential types of church assets: **Church Property and Church Sanctuaries.**

**Church property** includes any land and associated improvements that are owned by the church. They can have different functions e.g. to help provide income, clergy of other accommodation, offices and/or areas for community gathering for social or educational activity (halls). These building function as resources for the church community to use in their ministries. A question to ask is: **are these buildings best serving your ministry or are they hindering it?**

If the building is hindering your ministry then a couple of considerations should be taken before thinking of selling the property.

- Leasing the building for income
- Repurposing the building for better ministry or more income
- Working in partnership with another organisation around the use of the property
- Demolishing the building and rebuilding

**A consecrated Church Sanctuary** provides a physical space to worship God. One of the important aspects to church building is that we are stewards of the church building which comes with its own Whakapapa and history. The Church Sanctuary is also a sacred space which has been set aside for the purpose of worshipping God. So, before any decision is made about this building, significant consideration needs to be made especially around what is happening in local contexts. If this church sanctuary is not being used for its function as a place for Gods people to gather and worship, are we holding onto it for the sake of having it?

Any decisions around the future use of Church Sanctuaries and other properties can generate strong emotional responses. For many of us they become a second home, a place we are safe, loved and in community with other. So, to talk about changing or selling the buildings affects us emotionally (as it should). It is important therefore to take this discussion sensitively and in the love of Christ when talking with others about this topic.

In all things we give this decision to God in prayer:

*Heavenly Father, we come into your presence placing our burdens at your feet. We ask you to help us with decisions that need to be made to so that your kingdom can be here on earth as in heaven. Lord Jesus Christ who promised your Spirit to be with us to the end of time, help us to consider and decide wisely. May our hearts not be hardened to receive Your word. May our eyes not be blinded, so we can see your truth and be obedient to Your will. Amen.*

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<sup>i</sup> Tony Wright, 6 June 2017, <https://www.newshub.co.nz/home/new-zealand/2017/02/losing-our-religion-kiwis-losing-the-faith-in-record-numbers.html>

<sup>ii</sup> Thayer and Smith. "Greek Lexicon entry for Ekklesia". "The NAS New Testament Greek Lexicon". 1999. <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/nas/ekklesia.html>