

**CONGREGATION OF MARK THE EVANGELIST
CHURCH COUNCIL**

MTEF Project SRN 0275

Summary of Responses to Invitation for Further Information

The purpose of this note is to summarise the eight responses from ten members to Church Council's invitation for requests for further information following the Congregational Meeting held on 23 October. This summary is presented under headings arising from the emails received. The dot points are the requests or views from members, slightly edited or combined. The 'Comments' represent the thinking of Church Council in response.

1. Serious examination of strong minority views

- Those with strong minority views need to know that we really took their views seriously.
- How much do we spend, in both extra time and money, to show we've considered all the views?

Comment:

The strongly held views of some members of the congregation, the grounds for these views, and the possibility that these views will continue to be held, are acknowledged with respect. Those with strong minority views indicated at the 23 October meeting that their views had been heard. They have since expressed their appreciation for being contacted by phone and being given the opportunity to identify additional information that may help their and the congregation's discernment. Church Council has seriously endeavoured to make sure that all of the requests for further information have been addressed.

2. Education Department involvement

- Could we have a clearer view of what the Education Department might be interested in?
- Would any public authority buy such clearly religious buildings in this secular age, particularly when they require millions of dollars of public money to be spent before they can be used in any way at all?
- Could we propose an idea to the Education Department about a middle school for grades 5-8 at our site?

Comment:

To clarify the possibility of Education Department involvement, Church Council has resolved to base its enquiry to the Department on the minimal Mark the Evangelist requirements under Option 5.a., namely that the sale must include Union Memorial Church (UMC), and must return the going market value of the part of the site to be divested. More detail will be presented in the preamble to the Proposal being presented to the next Congregational Meeting. Discussions with the Victorian School Building Authority are ongoing and the Congregation will be kept informed of developments. The specific use of the site could be raised when the enquiry is taken up formally by the Education Department.

3. Other third party involvement

- Could we start exploring options with the planning department of the Melbourne City Council?
- Is Melbourne City Council interested in co-developing the site with regard to any of the 'restore' options?
- Are there any educational groups interested in developing or occupying part of the space with regard to any of the 'restore' options? This should extend to approaching likely private providers.

Comment:

Questions have been raised about the possible involvement of other parties on the site including the Melbourne City Council and educational groups including private providers. Education Department interest is being explored first, so that what we learn from this approach can inform other potential approaches. Discussions with the Victorian School Building Authority are ongoing and the Congregation will be kept informed of developments.

4. Heritage buildings

- Are we confident of the heritage and architectural advice received so far, and do we have sufficient specific advice in these areas?
- Could we seek independent advice, including the costs and benefits, on the likelihood of Heritage Victoria letting us remove or coat the steeple, and add a second floor to Union Memorial Church to expand its usage and free up the Hall for alternative development use?

Comment:

SEMZ Property Advisory is the primary consultant which Synod Property Services recommended us to use. This Property Services recommendation was based on positive Synod experience with this consultant on other Uniting Church property development projects. Mark the Evangelist had previously had a very positive experience with one of the partners of SEMZ. By means of a transparent selection process, SEMZ subcontracted for heritage, planning and architectural consultancy services. The MTEF Project Control Group (with MtE, Presbytery and Synod membership) has had no reason to question the soundness of the consultancy advice being provided to Mark the Evangelist. The specific advice received so far is regarded as adequate for the current stage of the Mark the Evangelist Futures Project. Mark the Evangelist has been commended by Presbytery and former Synod office observers for the thoroughness of its feasibility study and the full extent of congregational participation which has been facilitated. Separate independent advice is seen as unnecessary and would be hard to justify as a further expense. The exploration of alternative ways of restoring the church is not necessary at this stage given the 23 October indication of majority support for proceeding with Option 5.a. which involves divesting the church.

5. Option 5.a.

- Even the best design could not make those 3 buildings large enough or really convenient.
- If UMC was sold to a commercial developer, then Option 5.a. becomes very difficult. We would have no control over how UMC would be used. It could be impossible being next to it in its new form.
- The question 'who will be our neighbours, and can we live with them?' could be helped by further conversation with the Education Department.
- Can we keep more of the property under Option 5.a. as a money making enterprise or for further mission?

- This option does not represent faithful stewardship of the resources entrusted to us and therefore cannot be supported in any way.
- Once the questions raised have been explored, if the majority still prefer Option 5.a., that outcome would be acceptable.

Comment:

The three buildings being retained under Option 5.a. will present a range of positive affordable opportunities for development which are summarised in the last point of the rationale for the Proposal to be presented to the next Congregational Meeting. In the process of renovating these three buildings every endeavour will be pursued to maximise the revenue or mission opportunities of those buildings. ‘Faithful stewardship of resources’ means different things to different members. For some faithful stewardship involves restoring the church; for others it means not spending funds on the heritage requirements imposed by society at large. In relation to the use by MtE of additional buildings beyond the three buildings retained under Option 5.a., the non-viable Option 3.3 has demonstrated that there is insufficient return from ‘developing and retaining’ alternatives to justify that way of proceeding. Church Council is currently pursuing the possibility of the Education Department being our neighbour. Beyond that, the complexion of our neighbour is one of the risks that a preference for Option 5.a. involves.

6. The ‘Restore UMC’ Options

- The restoration of Union Memorial Church is the highest priority, so Options 6.a., 6.b. and 7.a. are preferred.
- Option 6.a. is too expensive – it leaves us with an unacceptable deficit.
- Are there ways in which the operational budget can be reduced to make Option 6.a. more viable?
- For Options 6.a. or 7.a., we have to cut the costs of the church to us or, through what we do to it, to liberate some other income generating part of whatever of the property we retain.
- On Option 6.b., there is no stomach for a ‘develop and sell’ approach.
- Any possibility of the virtues of Option 7.a. being presented have been eliminated by the ‘hard’ focus on Option 5.a.. There seems to have been an element of ‘railroading’ in considering only Option 5.a..
- In relation to Option 7.a., the church hall and supper room remain much more valuable to a developer or the Department of Education than the UMC building itself.
- Under Option 7.a. the church building could be enhanced by a joining structure to the cottage, with improved toilet facilities and kitchen in the modified cottage and joining structure, leaving space inside the church building for offices or the development of better youth facilities.

Comment:

Options 6.a., 6.b., and 7.a. have all been analysed on the basis of minimising the cost of the renovation of Union Memorial Church. The negative financial viability of Option 7.a. already takes into account the higher value of the Hall and the Supper Room as compared with UMC. Improved toilet facilities and kitchen in the modified cottage and joining structure would enhance Option 7.a. but that is likely to reduce further its financial viability. Options 6.a. and 6.b. include the potential for maximising income from buildings when they are not in use by the Congregation. For Option 6.a. to reach a balanced budget in 2021, around \$134,000 would need to be cut from the budget of Mark the Evangelist including Hotham Mission, which in 2017 is expected to total \$580,000. Alternatively, Option 6.a. would need to bring in extra

income, but that does not seem feasible because that would require further development of UMC or the Hall which would incur additional offsetting costs. The advantages of options such as 7.a. are outlined to the same extent as those for other options in the Strategic Property Options Analysis Report. They were not the focus of attention or discussion at the 23 October Congregational Meeting because a significant number of members had already indicated their preference for Option 5.a. in the small discussion groups. We are continuing to focus on Option 5.a. because a majority of those at the 23 October meeting indicated their preference for this option. The only ‘restore’ option that is currently financially viable is Option 6.b. and that depends on developing and then selling at commercial rates the northern two thirds of the site.

7. Option 1

- Selling the whole site and moving to another permanent site in North Melbourne sounds very interesting.

Comment:

It appears that if Option 5.a. were not to be preferred by the Congregation, Option 1 may be the next in priority for some members, but be strongly opposed by others.

8. Budget reduction for Financial Sustainability

- How does Church Council intend to hold to the principle of linked worship and mission, when the proposed funding arrangements permanently put the mission at arms length from the worship?
- Why does Church Council believe that the Hotham Mission budget should be protected while worship resources are savagely cut?

Comment:

The relationship between the Congregation and its ‘incorporated’ agency is determined by the UCHM Constitution which is approved by the Congregation. The Congregation determines the UCHM budget. The Interest Only Mission Fund (IOMF) is only the vehicle being used to channel that portion of the property sale proceeds decided by the Congregation into mission activities.

While UMC can be seen as a worship resource, it was not one of the “deal breaker” requirements indicated in congregational conversations, which were identified as preserving the integrity and identity of MtE and the maintenance of UCHM at a level comparable to its present operations. Option 5.a. honours these intentions within a balanced budget for the Congregation and UCHM as a whole.

9. Communication

- Communicate to the Congregation more clearly.

Comment:

Church Council has endeavoured to maximise effective communication with the Congregation. A considerable amount of effort has been devoted during meetings - formal and informal, large and small - and on the website to ensure that feasibility study information is accessible and widely shared. A number of the most recent (constructive) delays to the feasibility study process have been due to Church Council recognition and implementation of views and ideas expressed by the Congregation. The responses in this summary are the latest example of Church Council’s encouragement of maximum two-way communication.

10. Vision for the Future

- What grand/radical/salty things do we believe we ‘as future saints’ are called to do and how can we use our current unique opportunities to make them happen?

Comment:

This is a key question and was the starting point for our feasibility study. Before engaging a consultant we were determined to endeavour to spell out our vision of a “Mark the Evangelist Future”. Have we been ‘grand, radical, or salty’ enough? That is a continuing challenge for the Congregation and more attention will be devoted to it as we firm up our preference based in no small part on the financial feasibility of what we want and are able to do as a Church community.

**Church Council
6 November 2016**