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The Christian Church owns and operates from some of the most appealing and attractive heritage buildings in the world. However it has been suggested that the Church has building stock that has lasted well beyond its socially useful life; that it did not have the required flexibility to respond to a changing society.

In many cases the street image of the Church is that it belongs to a bygone age. Whilst the relevance of faith may be timeless, the society in which we live our lives has changed a lot since the days when those buildings were built as shining examples of their contemporary architecture.

Future Proofing The Church's Property

Forward planning is either:

- Building in flexibility, or
- Having a clear long-term plan...or both.



St John's Highton has a long-term masterplan to add a cafe on its street frontage to create an immediate connection to the public who visit nearby facilities like the kindergarten and bowls club. This is planned to be attractive, transparent easily accessible.

Focussing on Mission and Usage

30% of the world's population is Christian; 61% of Australians cite Christianity as their religious affiliation and 33% of Australians consider themselves to be Christians. Yet just 1.6m out of 23m attend church*. So where are the other 6m Australian Christians?

So how do we build for the future?

We re-think how people gather and why. We predict, we forecast, we plan long-term, we don't build for today but for tomorrow. Consider that most buildings built today will have a life of perhaps 90 years on average. So the middle of their life may be 45 years away into the future. What will Australian society be like in 2057?

What are the certainties?

The resources of this world are being depleted. Our buildings should consume less and contribute more to the ecology. The building that is expensive to run will be a millstone to our successors. This may partly be tackled by reducing energy use and therefore cost, or by on-site generation. It may be by greening the suburbs to replenish our oxygen and other green initiatives.

Will people still meet physically? I think so. Personal contact using all five senses will always be the best, but virtual meeting will happen more too. Digital technology is already helping to personalise education. There are many other elements that we could consider and predict.

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What does this mean in practical terms?

It means that we should be making buildings that are adaptable. We should take time to think ahead. Look at what has changed in the past 50 years and expect it to change as much again in the next 20 due to accelerating pace of change.

Ask what is the building or land for? Apart from shelter and comfort from extremes of climate it will be a refuge and a venue for relationships. It is also an expression of what is meaningful to us. This may include the heritage that we have from those who've been before us. Our buildings will be places for different activities: work, play, living, learning, manufacturing, watching, exercising, worshipping, talking, performing, supporting, contemplating and praying. All based in mission.



Outdoor community celebration at an American church provides an easy way-in for guests

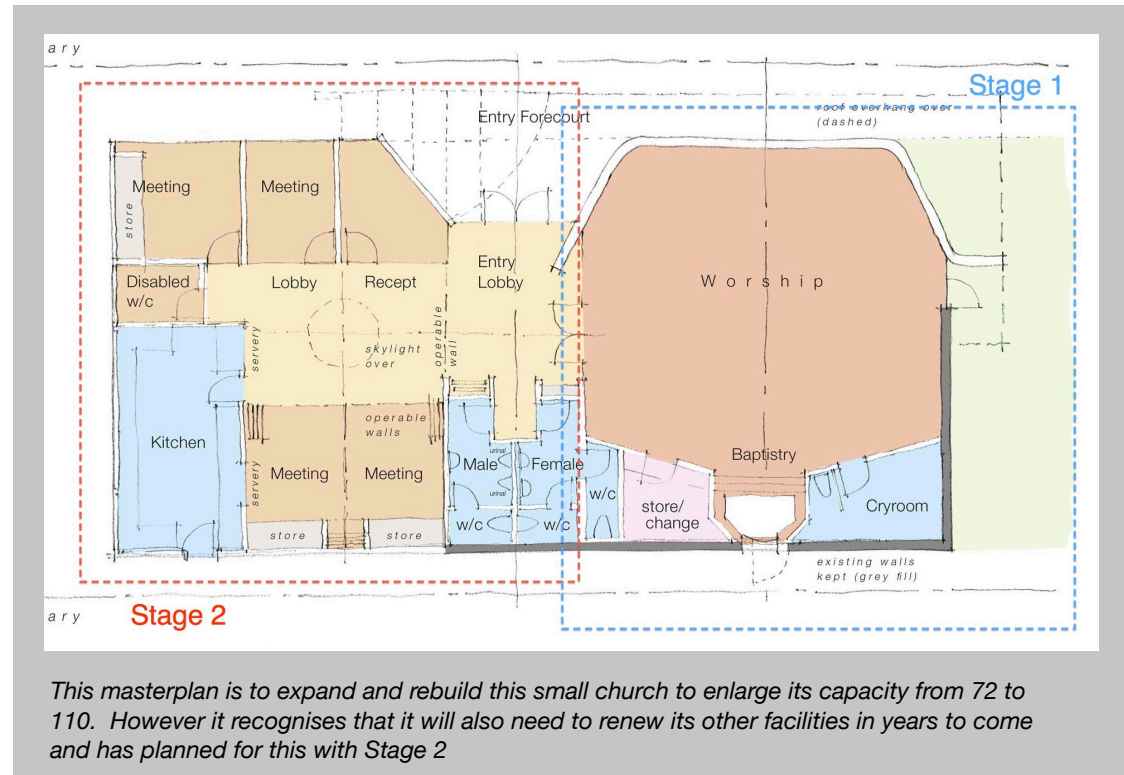
What do we risk without a master plan?

The risk is that valuable funds will be spent on an item of property that may be in the wrong place for the future. It could then stand as a barrier to achieving long-term mission goals because no one wants to undo the work that has been done with the best of intentions.

So how do we go about it?

Brainstorm a brief for the future to meet the needs that you can predict. Get some professional help to make a master plan, particularly with creative lateral thinking around your current building stock. Build in some flexibility to accommodate the currently unpredictable.

Once you have developed a master plan you can focus on the parts that are needed first and how this integrates. Ask your architect to consider principles of welcome, hospitality, gathering size and intimacy together with efficiency and economy. This will also apply equally to the external spaces around the building.



Engage the youth group and young adults in the process. This is known in the business world as succession planning.

Next month: Christmas Edition.

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* *McCrindle Research & ABS Census 2011*