Church properties and heritage issues

What is heritage?

Heritage is evidence of our history. It consists of those places and objects that we as a community have inherited from the past and want to hand on to future generations. Our heritage gives us a sense of living history and provides a physical link to the work and way of life of earlier generations. It enriches our lives and helps us to understand who we are today.

Church properties as heritage

It is very understandable that we have a strong sense of attachment to our church properties. They are filled with associations and memories, rites of passage, experiences of worship and spiritual growth and the people with whom we shared them. In these places and spaces we have shared community, made profound decisions that have shaped our lives and invested our energy in serving God and our community in many ways.

How do we discern that a church property should be registered as a heritage listed property?

There is no simple, single answer. The people of God are called both to provide places of worship where a congregation can be settled long enough to reap a harvest, and also to be a pilgrim people on the way. We have the examples from Scripture of those who built temples for God’s glory and marked places where they encountered the living God – and also the call to leave everything and follow Christ. There is a tension between honouring the gifts and inheritance from our ancestors and making a new future possible for our descendants.

If a congregation is considering whether to explore the path of heritage listing, some prior questions could be:

- What was the original vision of those who built this property or provided this land?
- What would they hope for the continuing ministry in this place?
- Do we share that original vision, or have we been called to a very different kind of ministry that needs quite different facilities?
- Could heritage listing enhance or limit further ministry? How? (It is useful to explore the myths that surround this question and to establish the facts about heritage listing. State and territory heritage bodies have documents of ‘frequently asked questions’ to assist this process.)
- What has happened in this place that makes this particular property significant? What have been our defining stories?
- Does this property have significance for the wider community? Why?
The National Assembly Historical Reference Committee recommends to the Assembly Standing Committee that:

1. All synods create and maintain an on-line and photographic register of heritage listed properties, including movable property, e.g. organs, stained glass windows, which exist within their synod. (This should include all levels of heritage listings – national, state and local.)

2. All synods include a section on heritage issues in their Property Manual and/or as a separate brochure available to presbyteries and congregations. Synods may also give consideration to offering other resources on heritage issues such as seminars in rural and urban contexts.

3. All synods include the following information in the section on heritage issues in their Property Manual (and/or published as a separate brochure available to presbyteries and congregations):
   - Presbyteries and congregations have a responsibility to inform themselves about the heritage listings of the properties for which they are responsible.

   - Presbyteries and congregations can do this by accessing [insert web address of Synod heritage listed property register] or state or territory government heritage databases.

   - The title of the relevant contact person in each Synod. (This person should be able to explain to presbyteries and congregations the implications of being responsible for a heritage listed property. They should also be able to direct presbyteries and congregations to relevant state or territory government heritage publications.)

   - If a Synod, Presbytery or Congregation is responsible for a property or part of a property which isn’t heritage listed but which the responsible body thinks should be, they must consult the relevant contact person in each Synod for advice. They should also consult the relevant state or territory government heritage listing guidelines.