

Discussion Paper

St Thomas' Church, Meeanee



History:

In 1886, Meeanee resident George Rymer donated a section of his land that was "Given upon trust that the same shall be used as a site for a church for the celebration of divine worship according to the rites and ceremonies of the Church of England in New Zealand." In little as a year later, St Thomas' church had been built, the space being consecrated on 26 May 1887.

Built according to plans from the Clere and Clere company of Wellington, St Thomas' is one of the few remaining, unaltered and in use Frederick de Jersey Clere churches. These churches are noted for their gothic style mixed with a sympathy for the New Zealand context, being built in local timber and designed for our climate and earthquake risk. This is perhaps why, following the 1931 Earthquake, the church was said to have "stood the strain remarkably well".

St Thomas' church was planted as a daughter church of All Saints' church in Taradale, with services undertaken by the Vicar of All Saints' or assistants since its consecration. Daughter churches were typically planted in locations from which it was hard to access the parish's main church centre. Alongside St Thomas', St Michael's in Puketapu, St Peter's in Greenmeadows and the Church Hall in Pakowhai all represented a church need to reach communities that otherwise would not be able to attend services.

With access to private transport and the ease of travel created by road network development, attendance at St Thomas', as with many of these daughter churches, began to decline. This prompted the parish in as early as the 1920's to consider moving St Thomas' to a new site in Greenmeadows where population growth demanded a church presence.

Present Situation

Over the past ten years, attendance at St Thomas' Church has declined significantly. Where once a congregation of 30 to 40 could be expected, average numbers now sit somewhere around 7 with many being attendees at All Saints' who simply wish to see the life of the church continue. When we consider the original purposes for building St Thomas' as the desire to provide space for the people of Meeanee to worship according to the rites and customs of the Church of England in New Zealand, we must be honest that this is not presently happening.

Without this mission imperative, the significant expenses that accompany ownership and good stewardship of St Thomas' are becoming a significant burden upon the wider Anglican community in Taradale and Meeanee, who have other building and maintenance challenges to overcome.

With rates expenses, insurance and ongoing planned maintenance, the plant represents monthly expenses of approximately \$500. This is without the addition of stipend expenses for services, which would be approximately \$500 further a month.

To ensure good stewardship of the resources we have, Taradale Anglican Church is seeking parish and community guidance as to the best path for the future of St Thomas'.

The Church Plant

At this moment, the church plant of St Thomas' is in a positive state of maintenance. While there are small leaks and small repairs and maintenance jobs, the overall building is sound. This is in large part the result of the generous fundraising and work of the Meeanee Community in the early 2000's.

As a site of possible development, however, there is significant remedial work that would need to be done were it to be anything more than a church building. There is presently no septic system on site, meaning hospitality and services will be limited in scope. There is water access, but it is understood this is drawn from the neighbouring property. The wiring of the building is not sufficient for more than what is presently in it. There is a common tale of fuses blowing when the jug is boiled while the heaters are on. These limitations mean significant expense would need to be directed toward St Thomas' were we to offer 'more' than we presently do.

Alongside this investment, there is a reality that the space does not represent how the church today functions. St Thomas' was designed according to a traditional model of attending to enjoy a service, after which attendees would return home. Contemporary church practice places as much emphasis on the gathering before and after the service, these being places of mutual encouragement, care, and fellowship. This reality leads us to the position where, were we planting a church community in Meeanee today, we would not likely use St Thomas'.

The Discussion

Our intention in speaking with the parish community and the community of Meeanee is to see what the general will is regarding the building. It is not outside of possibility for us to adequately maintain St Thomas' and to provide worship in the space. However, to do so will come at a cost to other church properties and possibly staffing levels in the wider parish. The maintenance of St Thomas', as with the leadership of worship, is funded from the generous giving of the parish's worshipping community and the rental of facilities at All Saints' Church. There are no endowments or centralised trusts that will fund its upkeep.

Reflections from Meetings

Gathering of the St Thomas' community, Sunday, 6 February 2022:

Following worship, a conversation was had about the possibilities for St Thomas' church. There was an overall recognition of diminished attendance and the energy needed to keep things going. Suggestions were made that the plant be expanded and developed to allow for more use and for greater accommodation of hospitality. With the infrastructure limitations, this would come at a price the parish cannot afford and would not resolve the ongoing expenses of the plant. The overall reflection of the meeting was that if we are not able to maintain it, we should work toward transferring ownership to a party that can maintain it, and preferably in a form in-keeping with its heritage. Regarding the worship of the community at St Thomas', it was decided that we would continue in the pattern of two services a month until Easter and then reassess what was offered.

Parish Forum Meeting, All Saints' Church, Sunday 13 February 2022

At this gathering, consideration was given to the possible future growth of the parish and the need to think strategically about the possibilities for St Thomas'. If our church community grew, we may need the space for worship and gathering. It was noted that, while this perspective is a good one and strategic consideration needs to be given to future mission and ministry, the use of St Thomas' for such a purpose still meets the limitations of the infrastructure of the plant. The overall reflection of the parish forum meeting was that time had perhaps come that we find another party to maintain St Thomas' Church.

Community Meeting, St Thomas' Church, Sunday 06 March 2022

Following a leaflet drop around the Meeanee Community signalling a meeting date and time to discuss the future of St Thomas' church, 3 members of the Meeanee community attended. Outlining the situation we find ourselves in, as discussed above, the residents in attendance were sympathetic. They recognised the nature of community in Meeanee had changed and that attendance and connection had changed as a result. It was noted that many of the 'old guard' were no longer resident. Recognising that the plant was not sustainable for the church, the meeting noted that its preference would be for the church to remain on site as a marker of history, though it needn't be a consecrated space. It was noted that should the church be moved, an appropriate marker at All Saints' church to note St Thomas' existence and history would be appropriate. The meeting did not note any particular need for a physical Anglican church space in Meeanee, but appreciated that a community still gathers.

Possible Paths Ahead

The following are by no means an exhaustive list of possible paths ahead for St Thomas' church. However, they do reflect the general response we have received from both the Parish community and the worshipping community of St Thomas' church. It must be noted that none of the following decisions can be made by the Parish community and that we may only request that the Diocese of Waiapu explore possible actions for the plant and make recommendations to them.

- **Sale of St Thomas' church with or without land to a community trust.**

This would see a trust formed by those in the wider Meeanee and Napier community for the purposes of purchasing the land and building from the Anglican Diocese of Waiapu. The trust would then ensure ongoing maintenance of the building as a landmark for Meeanee and Napier. Conversation could be had regarding ongoing worship within the building with the newly formed trust by the Anglican or any other church communities.

- **Sale of St Thomas' church with or without land as a possible wedding or funeral chapel.**

While funerals and weddings are offered by the church already at St Thomas', the limitation of Christian gatherings of this type for those not part of the faith means it is not utilised often. This option would allow St Thomas' to continue its life as a space of significant gathering for personal, communal, and spiritual events, while allowing the new owner a possible revenue stream to cover the cost of maintenance and amendment.

- **Sale of St Thomas' church and/or land to a private buyer.**

St Thomas' is a category 2 listed building with Heritage New Zealand. This means that any additions or alterations must maintain an external pattern with that which is already there. This offers a degree of protection that even if it were sold to a private buyer, the façade, though amendable, would look the same.

- **A 'Friends of St Thomas' subscription.**

An option proposed is to help cover maintenance expenses with an annual subscription to a 'friends' group. This money would be contributed to Taradale Anglican Church to off-set maintenance expenses of St Thomas'. While possible, the model requires an additional level of administration to develop, promote, maintain, and seek donations toward the group. It would also mean that if the group did not fund the necessary amount or loses membership, the parish still carries the burden of the expense. This would likely simply postpone the options above a few years, but not resolve the underlying problems.

- **That Taradale Anglican Church fund the maintenance of St Thomas**

If it is the will of the Parish community to fund the maintenance of St Thomas' church it is a task we will undertake. This will have come from a strategic decision that either the space itself or its historic nature is of value to the church community and so the willingness to fund this work from offerings is present.

Possible motions for a Parish Special General Meeting.

Following release of this document, it will be advertised that the parish will hold a Special General Meeting following the Parish Annual General Meeting on Sunday 20 March. This Special General Meeting will be to address the future of St Thomas' Church, and allow space for parishioners to

make their voice known following the release of this document. Following that discussion, the following motion will be put:

- That the Anglican Parish of Taradale forward this document to the Anglican Diocese of Waiapu and request a diocesan review of St Thomas' Church.

Or, if this motion fails to pass;

- That the Anglican Parish of Taradale recommend that Vestry budget sufficient expenses toward the short-term and long-term maintenance of St Thomas' Church.