

Statement from the Church Council in Australia and the Board of the Swedish Church Australia

*The Church Board's Council for the Church of Sweden Abroad's recommendation (2025-08-25) to the Church Board on the sale of the property in Melbourne Toorak House.*

The Church Council in Australia, as well as the Board of the Swedish Church Australia Ltd, have received minutes from a meeting as of 2025-08-25 where the Church Board is recommended to make a decision that the focus of the property in Melbourne is the sale and acquisition of new premises. In the event of the liquidation of the property, the congregation will need assistance acquiring new premises if it is not possible to find an ecumenical collaborator. There may also be a need for support in acquiring staff housing. It is the Council's opinion that the entire process of decommissioning and new acquisitions needs to take place with good foresight, in close interaction and close dialogue between the church office in Uppsala and the parish, the Church of Sweden Australia.

To our surprise, this recommendation seems to completely ignore the facts presented by the Assembly, over a long period and in several different forums, regarding the Toorak House property in Melbourne.

The Church Council and the Board question the extent to which the Church Board's Council for the Church of Sweden abroad has had the opportunity to give a full council as the documentation, in addition to the congregation's opinion, is relatively malnourished: for example, no investigator has visited the congregation and its property.

In particular, the congregation would like to point out that in light of the comprehensive description of the various outcomes that the congregation has provided in the short and long term, sales are only one of several. The recommendation should therefore be justified with slightly more developed perspectives to reflect the complexity that the issue contains. The Church Council and the Board of the Church of Sweden in Australia see this as a sign of shortcomings in the preparation process and want to emphasise that a "cut and paste" answer would probably constitute a poor basis for a decision - a decision that has devastating consequences for the future of the church.

The recommendation specifies the need for support for the acquisition of new premises. The congregation notes that there are no serious calculations of the costs of re-establishing the congregation, despite the fact that these are in the documentation that the congregation has shared in its statement. Even if it is estimated that the church, with a sale, would lose three-quarters of its activities and members, the re-establishment entails very high costs that are not reflected in the recommendation.

The congregation therefore requests a serious calculation of the financial contribution (in terms of both time/effort and financial cost) needed for this re-establishment if the Church Board's council for the Church of Sweden abroad has a different estimate than the cautious 30-40 million Australian dollars that the congregation has made locally.

In addition to the costs that a re-establishment of the business in new premises in Melbourne entails, the perception of the costs and possible profits as well as the time that a sale of the property may require, appears to be somewhat optimistic. Considering how complicated and costly a sale and acquisition of new premises would be, there is a great risk that expectations of what the financial gain will be, in the end, are unrealistic. None of this is mentioned in the recommendation for direction. Regarding the sale of the property, we would like to point out in particular the following:

Both the house and some trees in the garden are heritage listed at both local and state level. Toorak House is Victoria's first government building. The house is the only larger house left from the time before the gold rush in the 1850s (Melbourne was founded in 1835). The importance for the surrounding community and its historical significance cannot therefore be underestimated and a sale will not go unnoticed. Our assessment is that a sale will provoke reactions and a discussion about who will be allowed to buy it will start. The governor (head of state in the state of Victoria) has a strong interest in the building. As a parish, we have a commitment to work in our local community and a large part of this is to make Victoria's citizens their historic buildings accessible.

The valuation of the property from 2023 seems somewhat strange and the congregation asks what this valuation is actually based on. It seems unreasonable that it was made by an appraiser with expertise in heritage listed properties in Victoria.

Although a sale can generate a profit, large parts of it will be used by fees, taxes and other costs because the rules around the sale of heritage listed houses are highly regulated in Australia. For us, it is completely unclear how the Church Board should handle selling a property and then acquiring a replacement premises when the financial difference appears to be so poorly substantiated as to what the real difference is. The church lacks a fact-based review and calculation of these parts.

It is deeply contradictory and unfortunate for a church with good finances, which is closely integrated with the surrounding society, which has a geographical location as the epicentre of all church life in Australia since 1956 and the importance it has for several generations of church members that unanchored and unclear financial calculations should overturn a living and growing church.

Finally, we would like to ask the Church Board, in light of what is described above as well as in the previous statement, to decide that the congregation should stay in Toorak House.

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