

WEEKEND AUSTRALIAN

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**THE SILENCE
BARACK OBA**

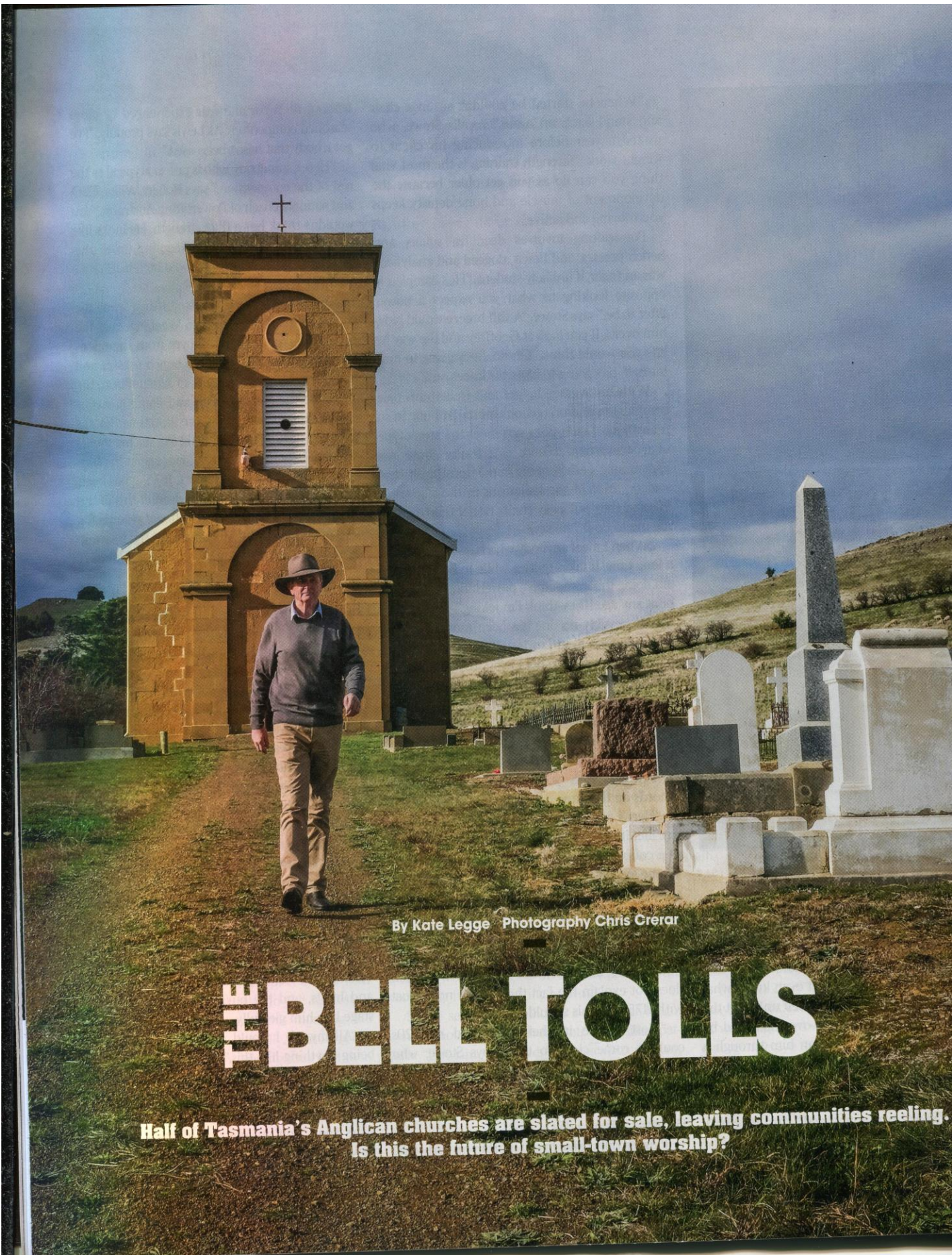
**MAX VERSTAPPE
DUTCH COUR**



By Kate Legge

To the highest bidder

IN TASMANIA, 76 CHURCHES ARE SLATED FOR SALE. REAL-ESTATE BONANZA – OR DARK SIGN OF THE TIME



By Kate Legge Photography Chris Crerar

THE BELL TOLLS

Half of Tasmania's Anglican churches are slated for sale, leaving communities reeling.
Is this the future of small-town worship?

RON SONNERS

strides through the tombstones and crosses that creep up a gentle grassy slope, stopping just shy of the portal into St Peter's, an elegant Georgian church perched on a hill overlooking the Tasmanian farming village of Hamilton. He wants to show me the war graves but the most frequented plot in the grounds of this heritage-listed Anglican church is the fresher mound where his niece's son lies buried. She brings flowers and her unfathomable grief twice a week, seeking solace. He knows who is here in the cold, packed earth because he gardens and cares for this place, proud of the new cemetery gates, the old wooden door rehung, floorboards replaced and recarpeted, improved wiring, the levelling of the flagstone entrance, all done with volunteer money and labour.

The passage of convicts, free settlers and their kin has worn a shallow dip across the threshold slab of pale stone through almost two centuries of service since the church opened in 1838. Tested by the vicissitudes of fortune and faith, the dwindling congregation scraped by cheerfully enough until last month, when parishioners learnt St Peter's was on a hit list of 76 churches in Tasmania – more than half the total 133 – slated for auction to fund compensation for victims of child sex abuse by the Anglican clergy. Forget “temporal things” such as bricks and mortar, Tasmania's Anglican Bishop, the Right Reverend Richard Condie, urged clergy and lay members of the governing synod that endorsed the scheme last month. “What a miserable and pathetic gospel we would have if it could be destroyed by the loss of a building. Our

discipleship, our following of Jesus, our trust and hope and life is so much more than real estate.”

Sixty-one of the churches under threat are in pinched rural hamlets. Five of the six Anglican churches in the vast central midlands parish of Hamilton have a “for sale” sticker. These towns have lost services, post offices, banks and now churches that in many cases dominate the skyline, the main street, occupying parcels of land donated in perpetuity by private citizens, built through subscriptions, maintained for 100 years or more by the collection plate and the sweat of parishioners.

At Windermere, on the Tamar River north of Launceston, a psychologist and stalwart of St Matthias says: “I've cried and prayed every night over this decision.” In the West Coast town of Queenstown, where the local mine has closed, volunteer preacher and businessman Kevin Bailey admits to being “very stressed” about the potential loss of St Martin's, which would force folk to drive 50km on winding roads to the nearest alternative. The church warden of St Marks at Cressy, south of Launceston, hasn't slept for three weeks: “It tears the heart out of you.” In Pyengana, a speck in the state's far north-east, the tiny white clapboard church, recently painted and read by locals, offers sanctuary to a dairy farmer who goes there anytime he feels the need to be close to the graves of his two teenage children.

“Country people vote with their feet. They just leave and they don't come back,” says Nichola Ball, whose family have been baptised, wed and buried at St John the Baptist in Ouse, 15km north-west of Hamilton, for four generations. With its pressed tin spire, wooden fretwork and chunky blue stone, the tiny church was built by her great-great-grandfather in 1843. “Whoever buys this is going to have to buy Walter Ross Bethune,” she hoots of her great-uncle's resting place under the altar. The blackwood lid of the stone baptismal font was carved by revered Tasmanian arts and crafts artist Ellen Payne. “We love this church,” Ball sighs, pausing to read the rapturous comments from tourists and others tracing their ancestral footprints who have signed a leatherbound book in the porch. “Door is not locked. Visitors welcome,” says the sign.

Ball has joined Sonners on the frontline. Her cultivated manner camouflages a soldiering bloodline. “Unconscionable... disingenuous,” she says of the bishop's plan to sell “our light on the hill”.

Parishes have until December to secure an exemption. Once churches are sold there'll be the

sweetener of diocese funds available to bankroll new ministry in school halls, living rooms, coffee shops, wherever. The fate of the graveyards is anyone's guess; the state government is urgently reviewing its Burial and Cremation Act. Plots have been paid for everywhere I visit. Trust deeds are being pored over. Meetings are underway. This could be the saving grace of Tasmania's Christendom or its death knell. Heritage, history, culture, religion: the social fabric of an island state is up for grabs.

Huge inverted red neon crucifixes menace the night sky on Hobart's waterfront for Dark Mofo, the annual winter festival of the Museum of Old and New Art, a cultural phenomenon that has turbocharged Tasmania's tourism-led economic recovery. The upside-down motif decried as blasphemous by Christian leaders is a neat metaphor for the turmoil triggered by the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

At Anglican church headquarters in nearby Macquarie Street, next to St David's Cathedral, the fallout is written in Bishop Condie's taut composure. “I've worked pretty much seven days a week for the last couple of months on this, as much as is possible humanly to do,” he tells me. “I've been trying to lead calmly but sometimes I think people have understood that to mean that I don't care about this. I've wept over this. This is the hardest thing I could do and I'm incredibly sad that the Anglican Church in Tasmania is in this position. Evil people in our history did these terrible crimes and now our generation is paying for it, but I'm also filled with compassion for survivors of child abuse who have sat in this room and told me their stories. I can't ignore that.”

Proud: Ron Sonners

His office in a city precinct of blue-chip real estate bears none of the lustre of corporate foyers. Worn carpet, cheap framed prints and mismatched furnishings are testament to a cash-strapped purse as well as a nobler disregard for secular trappings. Burdened by an annual deficit of \$95,000, Condie insists he could neither borrow the \$8 million for redress nor raise money through the sale of commercial assets, since these provide essential ongoing revenue for an institution in decline. "It would cripple us and we'd go out of business pretty quickly," he says.

Tasmania has the lowest religious affiliation of any state and falling, according to the latest census, although the proportion of Anglicans compared with other religions, while also shrinking, is higher than the national average. To prepare for a looming compensation bill, the state synod last year introduced a sustainability test to determine parish viability. Churches had to demonstrate attendance by 30 households; sufficient funds to pay a full-time minister; pathways to encourage families and children; and evangelical and outreach activities. Survival of the fittest doomed the frailest

his only exposure to a rural community occurred during an early two-year posting in a parish in northern NSW. Anglican officials around the country are monitoring his ambitious reversal of authority. Traditionally, veto over the sale of church property is vested with the parish councils but the Tasmanian synod handed the bishop power over the fate of 108 properties.

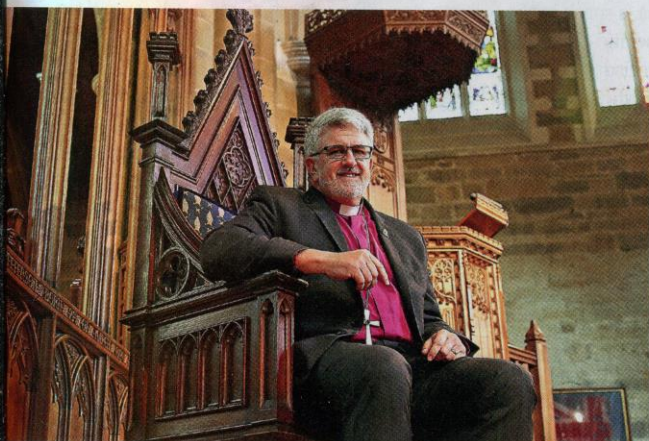
Newcastle in NSW is the other diocese on a shoestring budget facing multiple claims. Bishop Peter Stuart of Newcastle anticipates the diocese's initial estimate of \$4 million in redress will climb, requiring the sale of church property and drawing on trust funds. Parishes have until August to propose alternative strategies in a consultative phase distinguished by a calmer mindset. "Many of the metropolitan dioceses have enough cash reserves to deal with this but a number of the rural dioceses are in very precarious financial straits all around the country," Condie says. "For some of them redress claims will spell the end. What we are trying to do is sustain the future of the Anglican Church in Tasmania at the same time as we are meeting our obligations."

the sale of churches and land that will be held by the Hobart diocese to support programs in parishes with a will for reimagining religious connection.

Sonnars' flinty blue eyes narrow as he lists the portfolio of commercial properties owned by the church that will be spared the auctioneer's hammer: a Burnie motel, a city carpark, two fuel stations, a Spring Bay holiday home for clergy. He would far rather trade these than the place where he worships and tends for the love of his faith. "The bishop says he has no alternative but to sell our churches to fund redress. That is clearly not the case... the Anglican Church in Tasmania is a rich entity," he rails. "This is our spiritual home, it is a sacred and holy place. It's where our ancestors and children are buried. We need to hang on to our churches, build from their foundation, go forth and engage the community, as we are doing. We've overcome the damage inflicted by the despicable actions of clergy. We're bringing young families back into our church. We protect vulnerable people. We maintain an effective ministry with our own team of volunteers. We get involved in the schools, the local health centre, the disadvantaged in our midst... The evangelical ministry, if it goes ahead, will be a flash in the pan. I don't decry it... but not at the expense of what we've already got."

When I mention Sonners' belief that it shouldn't be a case of church or ministry when both could continue by rearranging assets and finances to pay solely for redress, Condie twists testily in his chair. "Church buildings that raise \$15,000 a year, that barely can pay maintenance, with a minister in her 80s who hasn't been paid for 14 years... I've not come up with arbitrary things that I've thrown at people." The last church census taken on a Sunday found 15 people worshipping in Hamilton. "That is not a sustainable model in anyone's language because I don't have an endless supply of clergy who want to work for nothing... no one's denying they feel great grief that is real and palpable but at the same time nobody has come up with an alternative plan."

Some parishes get it, he says, but others can't see past the loss of the church building. Condie selects Evandale outside of Launceston as a beacon of hope. Weekly worship had dwindled to 11 and the community is dreaming up ideas for ministry funded by the sale of the church. "They are now filled with excitement... they've already decided they'll continue to meet together and pray and read the scriptures... and they're thinking we could do something really interesting, perhaps buy a shop and run a little business in the main street and connect with the local people."



**Evil people
in our history
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generation is
paying for it**

No alternative: Bishop Richard Condie

rural congregations for auction despite the best efforts of parishioners to make ends meet. In Hamilton, for example, the elderly priest is part-time and unpaid. She earns a small salary from school chaplaincy work and the parish bought her a car and covers petrol expenses as she rotates Sunday services between churches.

Ministry matters more than church buildings in the figuring of Bishop Condie, an evangelical Christian aligned with the GAFCON (Global Anglican Future Conference) strand of conservative Anglicanism. Melbourne born and bred,

From his windswept parapet, Sonners insists that no one opposes the redress scheme. His anger shoots at the bishop, who has harnessed this moral imperative to raise many millions more than is required for redress in the interests of fostering the spread of a new evangelical ministry. Only 25 per cent of the money raised by selling 108 properties, including churches, halls and vacant land, will go towards the redress bill, estimated at about \$8 million for up to 200 claims. The rest will be drawn from a levy on trusts held by the diocese, and direct contributions. That leaves \$14 million from

Condie characterises the synod vote in support of the scheme as “pretty close to unanimous” with 80 per cent of laity and 90 per cent of clergy backing him. An envious politician told him that “that kind of support for a proposal as radical as this” was unheard of in the political sphere.

The haste with which it was stitched together in time for the June synod and the July start of the redress scheme hindered extensive consultation or brainstorming. Opponents say they have been silenced and accuse the diocese of playing political hardball. Before the start of a protest meeting in Hamilton, the parish rector told Sonners she’d been directed by Bishop Condie to “relieve him of the chair”. Two weeks later when the synod met, Sonners, who is a lay member of the church’s decision-making body, was one of a handful who argued passionately against the measure. “I was told before the meeting started, ‘Don’t bother, we have the numbers.’” He was allowed five minutes. The bishop and the registrar each held the floor for almost an hour. Passed on voices, there was no formal vote count.

“I don’t think anybody’s been shut down,” the

alongside their dearly departed spouses. Ignore the fate of treasured heirlooms, memorial stained glass windows, chancellery carvings, organs, an ancient bell from a shipwrecked East India clipper. Discount the community crowdfunding over centuries to purchase pews, pulpits and heaters, for you can’t possibly unpick who gave what once these buildings go under the gavel.

City dwellers are familiar with churches split into apartments, restaurants, galleries and cafes but these properties were sold by suburban parishes with another place of worship nearby. The diocese has used government valuations in its arithmetic but according to David Headlam, manager of Roberts Real Estate, the question of what each church might fetch is vexed. “Some of them come with a fair amount of baggage,” Headlam says, listing a swag of impediments from the graveyards to community zoning restrictions that inhibit residential use, heritage overlays, and the possibility of covenants governing the original donation of land to be used for church worship in perpetuity. “Anyone buying these things needs to have their eyes wide open as to what they’re letting

December at a press conference saying that we’ll only have to sell 20 churches or five churches or 40. I hope I’m nowhere near 108 properties. That would be the greatest delight if parishes can see this as an opportunity to do it. Maybe if we had our time over again and gone out and talked to people...”

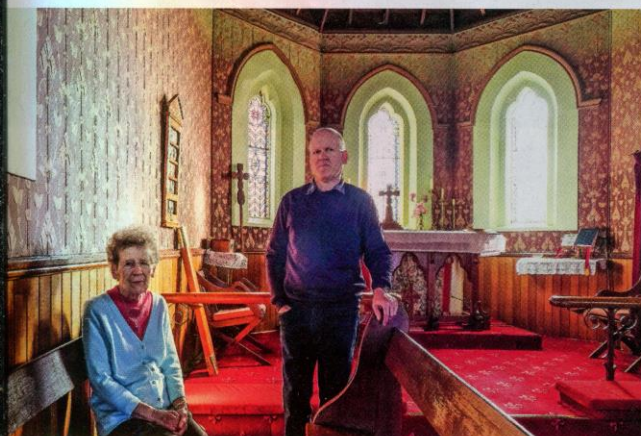
The graveyards may frighten off potential buyers, though the bishop says he’s had 10 to 12 expressions of interest from affluent history buffs offering to buy a church plus graves as a philanthropic gesture. “In some cases they say they would give the church back, not live in it.” Buyers who wish to purchase church properties for homes or other commercial uses would otherwise become cemetery managers, but how this would work in practice is unclear.

In a void of uncertainty, fear excites worst-case scenarios. Under the current law headstones may be removed if there has been no burial for 30 years. Tasmanian historians say babies and children were often laid in unmarked church graves. Mortality and birth rates were high and penury common. The stories written on the weathered stone tablets draw professional researchers and amateurs tracking their ancestry. The bishop wants the government to take control of this problem. “They are an artefact of history that is in our hands.” He cites Heritage Tasmania’s view that historical sites may fare better in private hands. “I have been in many, many country churches that are falling down around your ears. They smell of possums.”

An architectural survey commissioned by Tasmania’s Anglican Church in 2005 found churches on the state’s register “probably have the highest integrity of any class of heritage place” though the report noted they are often “unsuitable for contemporary styles of worship”, expensive to maintain and not essential for missionary work.

The rivers of gold earmarked for new ministry may prove a stroke of genius if Christianity thrives free from the shackles of stone, steeples and stained glass. Condie points to growth corridors in Burnie and Cygnet, where rector Lesley Borowitzka sings from the bishop’s song sheet. “He’s stuck between a rock and a hard place. This is really the only way to go,” Borowitzka argues. “We can still be the Anglican church. We don’t need designated consecrated buildings. Jesus said, ‘Go out and save people’ – he didn’t say, ‘Go out and maintain heritage buildings.’” Try telling that to the worshippers who’ve kept possums at bay and buried their dead close.

The bishop says relations with two parishes and one member of the clergy are strained because of the “very aggressive way” they’ve reacted, but otherwise he’s been pleased by the response in church



We get the redress thing. But the way forward promoted by the bishop is too harsh

Second home: Fae and Jason Cox

bishop says of opponents who’ve felt muzzled. “There’s risk in anything you do and there is huge public risk in this about our reputation and I understand the emotions in it.”

Set aside the question of whether buyers will bid for heritage churches with a cemetery attached or perhaps a casket buried beneath the altar. The bones of former premier Richard Dry, who died in office, lie under St Mary’s at Hagley, south-west of Launceston. Disregard the problem of whether private owners will manage graveyards to allow public access or honour plots sold to widows

themselves in for.” Headlam has previously sold two churches in the midlands. A small brick chapel outside Longford went for \$70,000 while a prettier, larger building raised \$200,000. “I think the church has probably got a lot of other assets that would be far better called upon without the angst.”

“The church is people, not bricks and mortar,” maintains Condie, yet as our interview progresses he concedes the case for keeping certain churches because of distance or isolation, and appears open to persuasion by parishioners who conjure a different revenue stream for redress. “I hope that I’ll be standing out on the lawn in the middle of

circles. But then he hasn't yet visited Hamilton or Queenstown. He's stung when I mention raised eyebrows over his forthcoming trip to the Middle East for a GAFCON meeting of evangelical clergy, where he'll lead a tour of holy sites. Martin Dumaresq, a pastoralist and parishioner fighting to spare Illawarra Christ Church near Launceston, wonders at the wisdom of the bishop visiting historic places sacred to Christianity when he "has not given rural churches in Tasmania much more than a drive-by... There has to be a better way. Rightful redress should not be associated with wrongful closure."

Tears choke Condie as he talks of going to the small town of Sheffield in the state's north, where three churches are listed for sale. He met a dozen parishioners. "All they could talk about was how good this was going to be for the survivors of sexual abuse, then all they could do was say how hard this must be for me having to tell people this and I said, 'But you're the ones losing here' and they said, 'We're more concerned about you'."

Along a winding road to the small town of Cressy, south of Launceston, the only traffic I encounter is two tractors. In the cosy weather-board hall at St Marks, parishioners have the urn bubbling, a plate of scones with jam, and stories of the church that was built in 1858, its bell first used on a tea-carrying clipper between England and India. Their part-time rector, Alan Bulmer, who also works as a hospital chaplain, spoke against the proposed church sale at synod. He invited his flock to speak with me but he's grown nervous of repercussions and leaves once I arrive.

For treasurer Fae Cox, this place is sacred. From childhood picnics under the giant oak tree overhanging the graveyard, through weddings, funerals, baptisms and Sunday services that attract about 20 regulars. "Our happinesses, our sadnesses, everything has taken place in this church. It's been an extension of our home. It is more than a building," she says, pointing to improvements including the new kitchen in the hall, multi-media facilities in the church, fresh paint and carpet. "We've not asked the diocese for a cent in 180 years. Everything has been done by the people behind this church."

"It's corporate takeover 101," says her son Jason, a church warden. "We get the redress thing. We understand how difficult it is. Our founder was based on the principle of paying for the sins of others but the way forward promoted by the bishop is too harsh. He's creating a whole set of other victims in the process. He says we're unviable or will be in a few years. We say as Christians our value to the faith is as great if we're eight or 80."

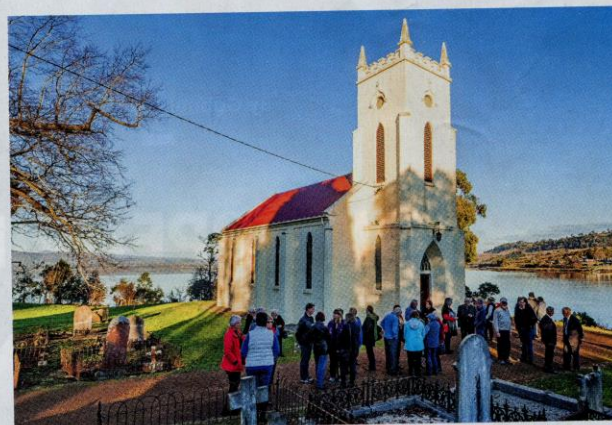
There are signs that rural towns will benefit from tourism and rising house prices in Tasmanian cities. Local mayor David Downie thinks the bishop's timing is awry. "Small towns are beginning to grow and prosper so the church should be embracing that, not trying to rip the guts out of these communities," he says.

Hurt and shattered by the sword hanging overhead, warden John Franks says: "It's really hard to know which step to take next." If St Marks is sold from under them they can't see a future. Jason Cox doubts there'll be a will to continue with a new ministry without a roof or a hall or an urn. "The bishop says some of the money will be redirected back at us, which he knows full well won't be taken up. People will break away from the church. They won't put resources in if it can be taken away again."

Further along the road at Illawarra, Martin Dumaresq is running the ruler over early trust deeds to arm the Longford parish for its struggle to keep Christ Church. Australian artist Tom Roberts is buried here beside his second wife, a local girl. A freshly minted sign explaining the significance of our best-known impressionist has been hammered

This is such a special and sacred place. It is the beating heart of our community

Sanctuary: St Matthias, Windermere



into the muddy turf. Inside the church a wooden screen painted with angels bears the signature of painter Arthur Boyd, another cultural icon.

Organist and church warden Thomas Cowell, in work shorts and boots, sits at the keyboard, his music filling the cavernous space. "The diocese does not understand what these little places represent historically in a contemporary world and for the future," he sighs. "Hand over the redress willingly. But for God's sake leave us alone. I'm very proud of my association with this community and this church and to think it will be denied to me strikes at my inner being."

On a bend of the Tamar, north of Launceston, more than 100 people squeezed into the pews of St Matthias Church on the second last Sunday in June to brainstorm their campaign for exemption. The turnout floored a representative sent from the Hobart diocese. Clipboards were filled with the names of volunteers – musicians, photographers, professional fundraisers – who believe they can raise enough money for the redress so that the church may continue to serve the purpose for which it was built. "I don't want anybody to misinterpret our stand as a lack of support for victims of abuse. We have parishioners who have experienced this," says parishioner Jennifer Chandler, who worries about rural suicides. "We help a number of people who themselves are victims and have mental health issues. When times are tough, churches are always open and welcoming for people facing hard times." The prospect of losing this sanctuary has rocked her. "This is such a special and sacred place. It is the beating heart of our community."

The local men's shed recently made gates for the church. A new roof and screens for the stained glass windows were installed after a heritage

review identified priorities for upkeep. Parishioners had been beavering away on next year's 175th anniversary celebration of this bluestone gothic chapel when the bishop's bombshell dropped. "We were all so shocked," Chandler says. "Everything was done so hastily. We were blindsided. This has been traumatic for everybody."

But the blowback has galvanised the custodians of St Matthias. Tears and turmoil have unleashed a wave of hope. Overjoyed by the response to their plight, Chandler feels rejuvenated by the possibilities ahead. The bishop's curse may prove to be a blessing in disguise. ●