

talkingpoint

Faithful paying

THEY say you should never discuss religion and politics in polite conversation, but the proposed sale of more than 50 Anglican churches in Tasmania has forced my hand.

It's also why I have started a Save Our Churches webpage requesting people pledge their support to stop the Anglican Church from the mass sell-off of community churches.

The sale, to help fund the National Redress Scheme following the Child Abuse Royal Commission, would provide money to victims of horrific crimes. But the sale will short change the work, dedication and faith of generations of parishioners.

The passing-around of the collection plate on a Sunday was the first memory that sprang to mind when the Anglican Church made its announcement. Heads bowed, some would place banknotes, while others, like my family, could only afford a few coins. Some would put sealed, white envelopes, the contents known only to the giver and God.

It's amazing what young minds grasp to from their early days attending church. One thing I learned was money can't buy your way into heaven and it can't buy friends nor build communities.

People do that. But it seems the Anglican Church's plan to sell churches is about money, not the people who helped build them. Like the white, sealed envelopes put in the collection plate, the decisions of the church appear shrouded in secrecy.

The message that it is putting money before people even comes up in its own correspondence when it states: "we strive to be good corporate citizens". Surely the church's priority is to God and his people, not money.

There is no doubt the trial

The Anglican Church property sale in Tasmania is a trial that will spread interstate, says Steve Martin

underway in Tasmania will spread to the mainland. There is also no doubt the Church has not consulted widely enough about the sale of churches owned effectively by the congregations in hundreds of Australian communities.

Those congregations and their predecessors paid for the churches with their tithes and offerings at Sunday services. They volunteered time and energy to keep churches and surrounds in good order. With blood, sweat and tears, they built churches and communities. They have ancestors, some soldiers or community leaders, buried in

the church grounds. They are owed gratitude.

That is why I wrote to the Anglican Diocese of Tasmania requesting more details about the planned sales. That is why I'm backing the grassroots Save the Churches campaign.

That is why I have sent a letter to the Tasmanian branch of the RSL, as well as all RSL clubs in Tasmania, outlining my concerns and those of many constituents about how any sell-off would impact on graves honouring our soldiers.

Sure, churches are steeped in history and a lot are beautiful buildings. But they are more than bricks and mortar and stained-glass.

The Anglican Church owes the generations of worshippers who celebrated marriages and

births, and buried family and friends in the grounds to keep churches in community hands.

It has been encouraging that Dr Richard Condie replied to my letter giving more context. It has also been encouraging that the Anglican Diocese of Tasmania and Bishop Condie have extended the consultation period with a cut-off date of October 1.

But I'm not encouraged by the language used in their correspondence when the church states the extension was granted "to allow more time for community groups to consider their options ... and the Diocesan Council will make its final decision about property sales in December".

The tone suggests the Church has made up its mind.

The avalanche of media and community concerns highlights that the Church has not consulted effectively.

The way the Anglican Church has handled the sell-off reminds me of a verse from the Book of Proverbs: "To answer before listening — that is folly and shame."

It is a reminder that the church and many politicians should take on board, especially as it stands astride the sacred and the secular.

Let's hope and pray the Anglican Church chooses to listen before making any rash decisions. It would be a disgrace if these communities are the ones that face the punishment due to others. After all, it is the sins of a few in the church's ranks who have brought us to this point.

The Anglican Church needs to contribute to the National Redress Scheme, but that price should not be paid by the faithful.

See the website www.saveourchurches.com.au

Steve Martin is a Nationals senator for Tasmania.

