



# **Theology of Place**

## Reflections on Church Property





## INTRODUCTION

In a period when many communities of faith are facing difficult decisions about their buildings – whether to sell, rent, or repurpose them – there is an opportunity to reimagine our relationship to place through the lens of faith. This resource invites congregations of the United Church of Canada to reflect on their property decisions in theological terms, rooted in the church’s vision of bold discipleship, daring justice, and deep spirituality.

Church buildings have long been a tool to facilitate experiences of worship, community, and sanctuary, but they are also physical assets that carry both historical and symbolic significance. How we choose to use or transform these spaces reflects not only practical concerns but also our understanding of God, creation, and justice.

This resource draws on sections from *The Song of Faith* to help congregations engage with the sacredness of place. As you reflect on what’s next for your community of faith, we invite you to prayerfully discern what it is you believe, as a congregation, and name to yourselves how that informs the decisions that you make. At the conclusion of the document, you will find suggestions for how you might consider using this resource in your congregational reflections.

# 1. GOD IN CREATION

*“God is creative and self-giving,  
generously moving  
in all the near and distant corners of the universe.  
Nothing exists that does not find its source in God  
[...]  
Each part of creation reveals unique aspects of  
God the Creator,  
who is both in creation and beyond it.  
All parts of creation, animate and inanimate, are  
related.  
All creation is good.”*



## Reflection:

Spiritual formation is fundamentally a relationship with God, an ongoing journey of noticing where God’s presence reveals itself to us and deepening that connection. God’s omnipresence is not distant or abstract – it is an act of grace that invites us to encounter the divine in all that is. From the beauty of nature to the interactions we have in our daily routines, God’s presence is woven throughout creation, offering countless opportunities for us to engage, reflect, and grow in relationship with the Creator.

This ever-present grace enlivens our formation, reminding us that we are never far from God’s presence, whether we are inside the church or out in the world. As we reflect on our church property, we are invited to reflect on all of the ways that we encounter God, and how the physical space might – or might not – nurture this awareness. What contributes to our collective ability to recognize God’s presence in the world, and what supports our ongoing spiritual formation?

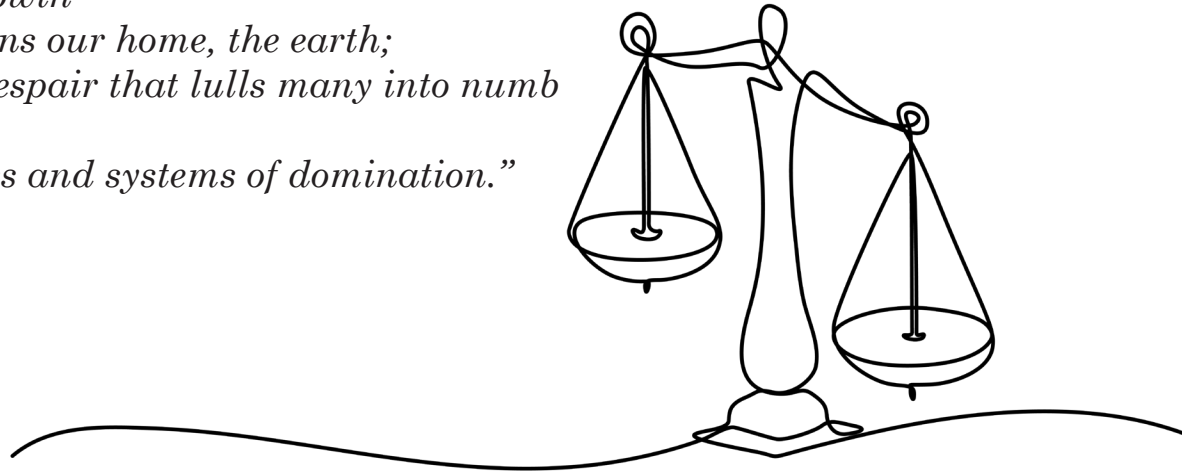
## Question for Consideration:

In what ways can our congregation foster a deeper awareness of God’s presence in our daily lives and in the world around us? What role does our property serve in our formation, helping us notice and respond to the spirit of God?



## 2. THE REALITY OF INJUSTICE

*“We are all touched by this brokenness:  
the rise of selfish individualism  
that erodes human solidarity;  
the concentration of wealth and power  
without regard for the needs of all; [...]   
the delusion of unchecked progress and  
limitless growth  
that threatens our home, the earth;  
the covert despair that lulls many into numb  
complicity  
with empires and systems of domination.”*



### Reflection:

There is an ongoing material dimension to sin and injustice, including the concentration of wealth and the exploitation of land and resources. We are called to acknowledge the reality of systemic evil, which then requires us to confront the structures of power and privilege that shape the world around us. The church, with its often large and valuable properties, is a part of this narrative, particularly in Canada, where colonial dispossession directly intertwines with both our religious identity and our property ownership. This isn't just a historical event - its legacy endures through the unjust distribution of resources, privileging some while marginalizing others, particularly Indigenous peoples and nations.

As we consider our church properties, we must ask ourselves how we are participating in this legacy of injustice. The church is called not only to lament this brokenness but to both repent and to work with those who suffer its consequences to create new possibilities. Ultimately, our response to colonialism must be rooted in a theology of solidarity – aligning ourselves with those who are marginalized, advocating for systems that reflect God's justice, and resisting structures of domination.

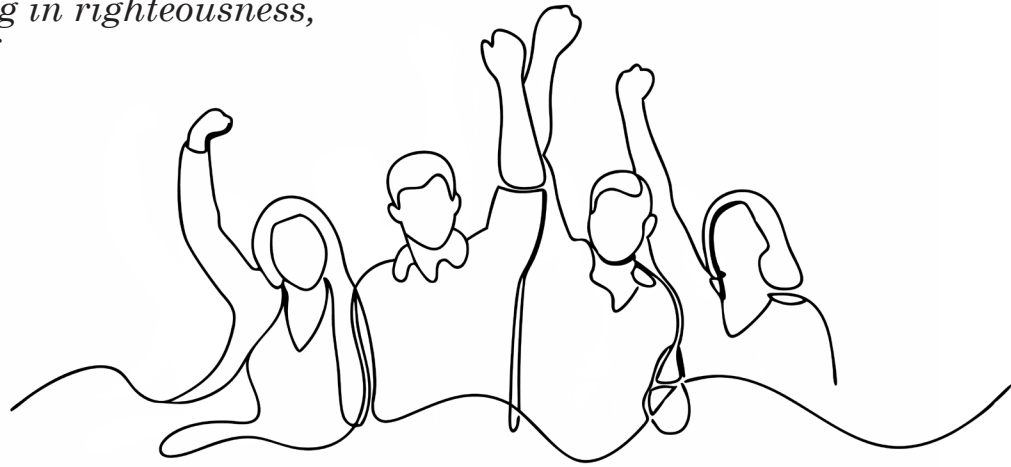
### Questions for Consideration:

How can our congregation theologically reflect on the privilege we hold through property ownership, and what steps can we take to act in solidarity with Indigenous communities? How can our decisions about our building contribute to dismantling injustice and promoting reconciliation?



### 3. OUR PLACE IN COMMUNITY

*“The fullness of life includes moments of unexpected inspiration and courage lived out, experiences of beauty, truth, and goodness, blessings of seeds and harvest, friendship and family, intellect and sexuality, the reconciliation of persons through justice and communities living in righteousness, and the articulation of meaning.”*



#### **Reflection:**

The life of faith is not confined to Sunday worship or the activities within the church building, it is lived out in our everyday actions and relationships, in the workplaces, homes, and communities where we spend most of our time. Discipleship calls us to embody God’s love in all aspects of our lives, seeking to serve others wherever we are. We recognize that God is also at work even outside the people in our congregations: in community organizations, grassroots movements, and everyday acts of care and justice of our neighbours. Part of our calling as a church is to recognize and participate in this broader work.

As we reflect on our church property, we are invited to think about how we might honour and collaborate with the work God is already doing in our community and lives. This could mean using our building as a site for all facets of our lives, offering space for community initiatives, or leaving the building altogether in order to better to connect our mission with the good already happening around us. We are invited to create a dynamic relationship between the church and the community, where we live into God’s work in all its forms.

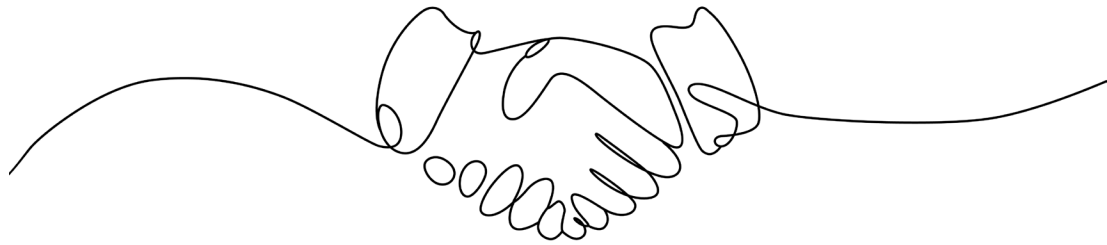
#### **Question for Consideration:**

How can our congregation support and collaborate with the work of God happening outside our church walls, in community organizations and in our daily lives? How does, or doesn’t, the building contribute to strengthening these connections? How could we do that work with no building or a reimagined facility?



## 4. ECONOMICS AND THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

*“We sing of Jesus,  
a Jew,  
born to a woman in poverty  
in a time of social upheaval  
and political oppression...  
Jesus announced the coming of God’s reign –  
a commonwealth not of domination  
but of peace, justice, and reconciliation.”*



### Reflection:

Church property requires financial resources to maintain, and for many congregations, renting out space is essential for sustainability. At the same time, our buildings are not just assets to be managed; they are part of our ministry, places where we seek to embody God’s commonwealth – a vision of peace, justice, and reconciliation. Jesus’ economic teachings challenge us to move beyond mere survival thinking while also avoiding unsustainable generosity. The call is to find a faithful balance – using our buildings to serve the community while ensuring that our congregation remains financially viable for the future.

This balance requires careful discernment. Some churches have long histories of offering space at little or no cost, prioritizing mission over income. Others may feel pressure to maximize revenue, seeing rentals primarily as a financial strategy. The challenge is to hold these realities together: to be generous while also being good stewards, to welcome the community while also ensuring the church itself can continue its work. This might mean structuring rental agreements that offer affordability for mission-aligned groups while securing sustainable income from others. It could also mean reimagining partnerships—moving beyond a landlord-tenant dynamic toward shared ministry. By making intentional, theologically grounded decisions about property use, congregations can support both their mission and their long-term sustainability.

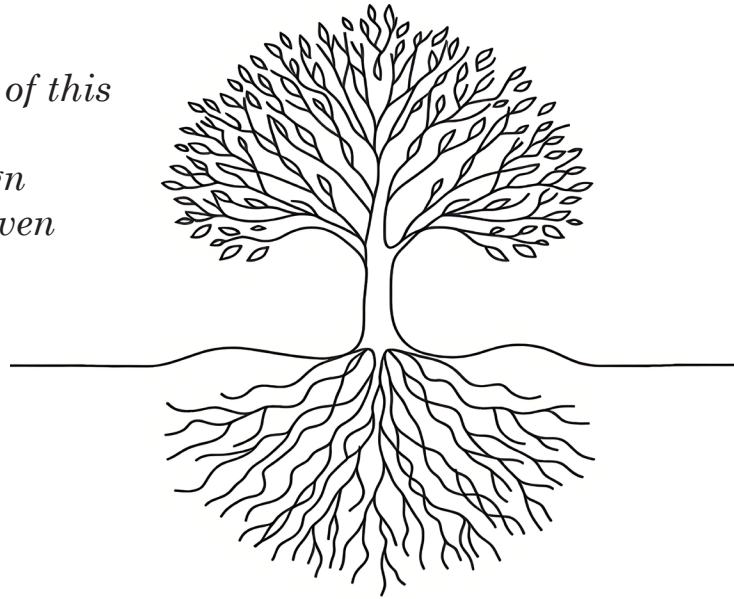
### Questions for Consideration:

How can we structure our rental policies to sustain both our church’s mission and its financial future? Where is our congregation currently on the spectrum between generosity and sustainability, and do we need to adjust our approach?



## 5. THE ONGOING INCARNATION OF CHRIST

*“We sing of a church  
seeking to continue the story of Jesus  
by embodying Christ’s presence in the world.  
[...]  
Our ancestors in faith  
bequeath to us experiences of their faithful  
living;  
upon their lives our lives are built.  
Our living of the gospel makes us a part of this  
communion of saints,  
experiencing the fulfillment of God’s reign  
even as we actively anticipate a new heaven  
and a new earth.”*



### Reflection:

Our church buildings carry with them the legacy of those who came before us – generations of faithful people whose lives and sacrifices built the foundations upon which we now stand. This legacy is a gift, and with it comes the responsibility to honour their faithfulness as we make decisions about the future of these sacred spaces. As we honour the past, we also remember that we are ultimately grounded in the radical mission and ministry of Christ. Christ’s life was never static or confined – it challenged the status quo, broke down barriers, and prioritized the most vulnerable.

As we discern the future of our church properties, we are invited to carry forward the faithfulness of our ancestors, while grounding our decisions in the transformative, boundary-crossing mission of Jesus. Stewardship of the legacy of those who have gone before us lies in how well we continue Christ’s radical call to love and justice in the present.



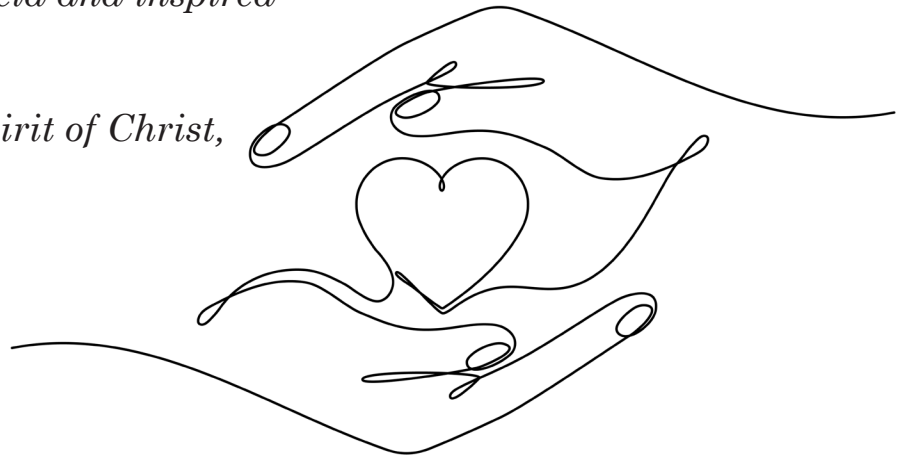
### Question for Consideration:

How can we honor the legacy of those who built and maintained our church, while ensuring our property decisions reflect the radical love and justice of Christ today?



## 6. THE PURPOSE OF THE CHURCH

*“We sing of God’s good news lived out,  
a church with purpose:  
faith nurtured and hearts comforted,  
gifts shared for the good of all,  
resistance to the forces that exploit and  
marginalize,  
fierce love in the face of violence,  
human dignity defended,  
members of a community held and inspired  
by God,  
corrected and comforted,  
instrument of the loving Spirit of Christ,  
creation’s mending.”*



### Reflection:

Before making decisions about property, congregations are invited to pause and first discern their mission: What is God calling us to do in this time and place? What does it mean for us to share the good news, resist injustice, and live out Christ’s love in our community? Only after we have a clear understanding of our mission can we begin to reflect on what resources—physical, financial, and communal—are needed to live that mission out.

Our church buildings and properties are tools to support the mission, not the mission itself. The question is not simply how to maintain or use our space, but how that space can help us live out our purpose. Does our current property support the work we feel called to do? Are there new, creative ways to use our space that align with our mission of justice and love? Or might our mission call us to let go of certain resources in order to be more faithful to the work of the Spirit?

### Questions for Consideration:

What is our congregation’s mission, and how can our property be used or reimagined to help us live that mission fully? Are there resources we need to embrace or let go of in order to more faithfully embody God’s call?





## 7. GATHERING AROUND THE TABLE

*“Carrying a vision of creation healed and restored,  
we welcome all in the name of Christ.  
Invited to the table where none shall go hungry,  
we gather as Christ’s guests and friends.  
In holy communion  
we are commissioned to feed as we have been fed,  
forgive as we have been forgiven,  
love as we have been loved.  
The open table speaks of the shining promise  
of barriers broken and creation healed.”*



### Reflection:

The act of communion is deeply material – bread, wine, and a shared table are tangible signs of God’s grace and presence. In the simple act of breaking bread together, we embody the promise that all are welcome and none shall go hungry. As congregations reimagine their spaces, the question arises: does this space include a table around which we can gather to break bread? Communion is not just a spiritual practice but a physical one, reminding us that our faith is rooted in the real and the present.

As we reflect on our buildings and properties, we are invited to think about how our spaces – both inside and outside – create opportunities for both hospitality and worship. Whether it’s a physical table for sharing food, an online opportunity for gathering in fellowship, or creating new models of even more radical hospitality, our spaces should reflect the centrality of communion: the promise of shared life, forgiveness, and healing.

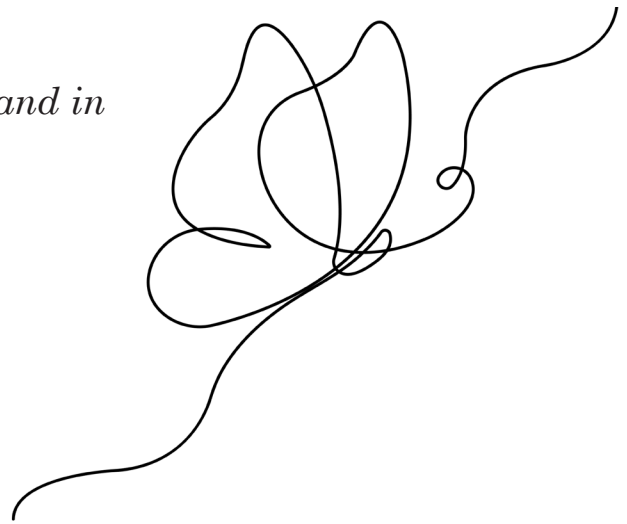


### Question for Consideration:

As we reimagine our church space, how do we ensure it includes a ‘table’ for gathering, breaking bread, and embodying the radical hospitality of Christ’s open invitation? How might our property reflect the call towards communion?

## 8. A TRUSTING AND MUTUAL WHOLE

*“All parts of creation, animate and inanimate, are related.  
All creation is good.  
In and with God,  
we can direct our lives toward right relationship  
with each other and with God.  
We can discover our place as one strand in the web of life.”*



### Reflection:

As trustees, congregations are entrusted with property not for their own sake but as a gift to be held for the sake of God’s mission. This trusteeship calls us to recognize our role as part of the wider church, balancing the needs of our local community with the vision of the larger whole. Just as God entrusts creation to humanity, we are invited to hold church property in trust, directed toward right relationship with God, one another, and the world. Ultimately, this property doesn’t belong to us.

Embracing this trust means entering into a sacred relationship of interdependence—both giving to and receiving from the larger church. This might include engaging with our Regional Council or exploring participation in a Regional Trust; it might involve looking at collaborative ministry opportunities with other congregations. How many facilities do we need in our community in order to live into our mission? Are there other ways that some of these properties could be used?

Ultimately, this will invite thoughtful discernment about how our resources, including property, reflect our shared call to participate in God’s creative and redemptive work, shared broadly amongst our friends and colleagues across the church.

### Questions for Consideration:

How does the use of our property reflect our role as stewards within the wider web of creation and church? In what ways might our decisions about property support the mission of the wider church and foster right relationships in our community?



## 9. HOLDING ONTO OUR HOPE

*“Divine creation does not cease  
until all things have found wholeness, union,  
and integration  
with the common ground of all being.  
As children of the Timeless One,  
our time-bound lives will find completion  
in the all-embracing Creator.  
In the meantime, we embrace the present,  
embodying hope, loving our enemies,  
caring for the earth,  
choosing life.”*



### Reflection:

This is a moment of great uncertainty for many congregations. Declining membership, financial challenges, and changing societal contexts have left many feeling anxious about the future of the church. It is natural to feel fear when facing the unknown, especially when it seems like so much is at stake. We remind ourselves that God’s work of creation is not yet complete. We remember that we are a resurrection people, and that the foundation of our tradition is the faith that out of death comes the possibility of new life. We trust that we are part of a larger story, one that stretches toward wholeness, integration, and union with God. In this in-between time, we are called to embrace the present moment with hope, to trust that even in uncertainty, God is at work.

Our decisions about property and the future of our church must be grounded not in fear but in this hope – in the ultimate reconciliation of all things, that God is still creating and sustaining, and that we are being led toward new life, even when the path is unclear. This hope gives us the courage to make bold decisions that align with our deepest values. While the future may feel uncertain, our faith assures us that God’s creative work continues, and that our time-bound lives are part of God’s eternal story.



### Question for Consideration:

In a time of uncertainty, how can we ground our property decisions in hope rather than fear? How can we trust in God’s ongoing work of creation and choose life-giving paths for our church and community?

## WAYS TO USE THIS RESOURCE

This resource is designed to help congregations, church leadership, and decision-making bodies reflect theologically on church property.

Congregations are also invited to reflect on The United Church of Canada's Theology of Giving and Community of Faith Stewardship Resources. Additionally, most Regional Councils have handbooks available for property policies within the Region.

In moments of crisis or uncertainty, when congregations feel overwhelmed by financial pressures, declining membership, or the weight of property decisions, this resource can provide a foundation for conversation. Returning to the deep theological commitments of the church can help reframe discussions, offering hope and perspective even in challenging times.

Before setting property policies, making decisions about selling, renting, or adapting a space, or engaging with Regional Council, this resource can be used to articulate a theology of property and place. A Regional Council might even use this as "homework" for congregations, inviting them to reflect theologically before making major decisions.

Here are some possible ways to engage with it:

### **A. Integrating Reflection into Leadership Meetings**

Church Boards, Trustees, or Property Committees could use this resource in 'bite-sized pieces' at the beginning of their meetings. Taking just a few minutes to read and reflect on one section before discussing practical decisions could help to ground their conversations in an awareness of our collective theology.

### **B. A Day-Long Retreat for Congregational Visioning**

For congregations engaging in long-term planning, this resource could form a foundation for a day of discernment and visioning. The facilitator could invite exploration of each section, offering an opportunity for the congregation to name how their property use aligns with the theological commitments reflected here.

### **C. A Sermon Series or Worship Integration**

These reflections could spark a sermon series exploring faith, place, and stewardship. Ministers could reflect on the call to be faithful stewards of their space, engaging with themes of justice, hospitality, and hope.

### **D. A Study on Trusteeship and Stewardship**

This could be a resource for a focused study on what it means to be property 'trustees' rather than owners. A discussion could explore how we steward a place that has welcomed and shaped us, rather than how we maintain a building that we own – shifting the perspective from scarcity and burden to gratitude and faithful discernment.

*This document was produced by Daniel Reed, at the Toronto United Church Council. Please feel free to get in touch at [mail@tucc.ca](mailto:mail@tucc.ca).*