



Church seeks intervention for Support Fund oversight

A VICTORIAN OMBUDSMAN INVESTIGATION

Nestled 30km north east of Melbourne on the edge of the Yarra Valley rests St Matthew's Panton Hill Anglican church. A communal hub for the people of Panton Hill, Hurstbridge and St. Andrews, St Matthew's depends on the financial support of its parishioners and venue hire to make ends meet.

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown had a devastating impact on the church, its community and its financial obligations.

"We couldn't meet in person for basically most of last year and most of our income is from the offering plate," explained St Matthew's treasurer during the pandemic, John Reale.

"Obviously when you're not meeting in person, it's much harder to get people to donate to the church and keep it sustainable."

"In the meantime, all the church's costs are basically fixed; we employ a minister and we've got property costs, but we've got reduced income which makes it financially difficult."

The financial strain of COVID-19 was difficult for many community groups, but also highlighted just how important a sense communal belonging is during times of uncertainty.

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"I think the church is a really good support group for people in the congregation, so with last year being as difficult as it was, there was probably a higher need for it than usual," observed John.

The Business Support Fund introduced by the Victorian Government in March 2020, was designed to provide financial assistance to organisations affected by COVID-19.

The Anglican diocese provided church treasurers, like John, with instruction on how to apply for the grant.



St Matthew's, Pantom Hill

Despite following those instructions, The Department rejected John's initial application, as the business name was not registered with ASIC. So, on 25 May 2020, John submitted a second application.

The Department's initial review shows this application was cancelled as a duplicate and states that the Department did not send an email informing John of this.

After contacting the Support Fund call centre on 1 July 2020, John was told the Department was no longer providing status updates on individual applications, as it was 'too time consuming'.

That same day, John complained to the Ombudsman.

The Ombudsman found that John's church was not registered with ASIC as it is governed by the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC). The Ombudsman brought this to the Department's attention and asked it to confirm if an ACNC check was done.

At the request of the Ombudsman, The Department agreed to reassess John's case and on 3 February 2021, almost eight months after he first applied, John's application for the Stage One \$10,000 grant was approved.

"I understand it's a complicated thing for the state government to run a programme at such short notice," noted John.

"I think there should probably have been a better process to look at cases, rather than just let them go without a response or just handing out a blanket no."

"A big part of a church treasurer's role is managing the cash flow; you have to make decisions on what you can pay and what you can't.

"It's a bit of pressure on me personally.

"With an extra \$10,000, it means we were able to pay some creditors and the pastor's salary and a few other things.

"It took a few months to get resolved but the proof is in the pudding and we've got the grant.
"So yes, we're happy with the result."