Sharing God's House

Edward Rivera-Santiago

Space for a new church start is one of the most important elements in its development. An appropriate temporary space can make or break the development of a new faith community. The new church needs worship, meetings, fellowship, and office space. These are critical elements when initiating a new congregation.

Most new congregations move several times prior to having their own church building. Sharing space is one possibility. Church buildings do not belong to a congregation, they are places that have been dedicated for the explicit use of expressing God's love and grace to the community in which they are located. Sharing building space for expanding ministry to the community offers a wonderful opportunity to be good stewards of God's gifts. In many cases an established congregation will host a newly formed Pacific Islander, Asian American, African American, or Hispanic congregation.

Sharing space requires more than the use of the facilities. It requires that the host congregation nurture the new congregation toward success. It also requires a sense of mission; this comes from providing a space for a congregation that does not have adequate resources. The sharing of space is an example of good stewardship. The new congregation will benefit from a space that is already designed for church use. Sharing facilities presents an opportunity to model antiracist behavior and establish cooperation between racial/ethnic groups.

When the host and developing congregations come together to discuss the sharing arrangements, care must be taken to attain and maintain good communication. Do not be afraid to broach issues in the beginning that could affect the relationship later on.

Kitchen use and church growth are two issues that can threaten a host congregation and cause a budding relationship to be terminated. It is wise to clearly negotiate shared use agreements and then work diligently with each other.

Listed below are some questions congregations may want to answer when considering sharing God's house.

• What differences in culture, worship style, and theological understanding are there due to linguistic differences and ethnic sensibilities?
• Scheduling for the use of the building: when will each group use the facilities?
• Can both groups meet separately on Sunday morning?
• Is there a booking process for special events?
• What space can be used by the developing congregation?
• Will the two congregations share equipment?
• Will they share kitchen facilities and utensils?
• What are the financial arrangements?
• Is the developing congregation considered a part of the host church?
• Is the host church part of the support committee of the new church?
• What are the janitorial arrangements?
• Should there be a written agreement?

When we talk about sharing space we need to understand that the building is God's house and that it should be open for people to praise God, regardless of their race or culture. However, the reality is that some host church members believe that the church building belongs to them rather than God.
Communication is an important element in sharing space. When space is shared there needs to be a committee represented by both congregations plus Association and/or Conference representation. When clear lines of communication are established and maintained, problems can be resolved early on.

A shared-spaces agreement should include information that will address the following concerns:

- Programmatic needs
- Space and time usage
- Financial obligations
- Organizational structure
- Timeline for evaluation
- How emergency related issues will be handled
- Consideration of staffing concerns
- Insurance coverage
- Liaison Committee or Facilities Committee
- Channel of Communication

People of God can create faith covenant agreements that will affirm them in sharing common space and unite them in offering God's love and compassion to their communities. The congregations who are sharing should respect each other and be willing to accept differences. An agreement that is mutually acceptable to both congregations should be signed and adhered to.

Facilities Use Agreement
(Sharing God's House)

This is an example of an agreement between two churches entering into covenant of shared space of facilities:

CONTACT AND EMERGENCY INFORMATION—BOTH CHURCHES

Host church contact persons:

Name: ____________________________
Work phone: _______________________
Home phone: _______________________
E-mail address: ____________________

Nurturing church contact persons:

Name: ____________________________
Work phone: _______________________
Home phone: _______________________
E-mail address: ____________________

Emergency information:  
Paramedic: ________________________
Fire: _____________________________
Police: ____________________________

Emergency contacts for church premises:

Pastor: ___________________________
Moderator: _________________________
Custodian: _________________________
INTERCHURCH MEETINGS

Liaison Committee
Establish a Liaison Committee between the congregations. It is recommended that its members be drawn from the area of mission in which both churches are engaged. They are to meet at least monthly to review calendars to make changes as appropriate. The pastors have a mutual responsibility for developing a collegial relationship.

Leadership
The pastors and two lay persons from each congregation shall meet regularly, but at least once every three months to share each church's on-going mission, design and resolve any problem areas that may be of concern to either congregation.

Schedule Agreement
__________________ agrees to covenant with the new congregation, __________________, to use the sanctuary and all-purpose buildings as indicated beginning __________________ for a donation of $__________

Agrees that the nurturing congregation will use facilities each Sunday between the hours of __________________ and __________________ o'clock, except as noted here (to accommodate special programs, giving name of programs, dates, hours).__________________

This facilities use agreement will be reviewed every six (6) months and will be subject to changes and renewal at that time. (This mutual agreement is very important.)

Insurance
How does the church provide liability and personal property insurance coverage? What amount will the nurturing congregation be responsible for? Can this be done through the Conference?

Calendar
The master calendar will guide the program activities of both congregations. Each congregation marks in the calendar their definite and regular activities. It is very important that both churches notify each other in advance of any changes in the program as soon as possible.

✓ Sound Equipment Agreement
✓ Churches and Contacts
✓ Kitchen Guidelines
✓ Signatures

Nurturing congregation
Pastor: _________________________________
Date: _________________________________
Chair, Support Committee: _________________________________

Host congregation
Chair, Council: _________________________________
Date: _________________________________
Office Manager: _________________________________
Date: _________________________________
Pastor: _________________________________
Date: _________________________________

For more information, contact:
United Church of Christ
Local Church Ministries, Evangelism Ministry Team
Church Development and Renewal: Nancy Nelson Eisenheimer,
Fed Ranches, Edward Rivera-Santiago, Charlene J. Smith
Phone: 216.736.3814
The congregations of four small churches from different islands of Micronesia are hoping to build a cooperative church community in Haiku by restoring the old Haiku Congregational Church. This is a community effort. "All four of the Micronesian churches with the Haiku Congregational Church are coming together," said the Rev. Marvin Danis, director of the Micronesian Christian Center at the old Haiku church.

The four churches—the Maui Chuukese Christian Ministry, the Maui Kosraean Etawi, the Marshallese Ministry, and the Maui Mission of United Church of Christ Pohnpei—now conduct services in borrowed locations. "The Pohnpei group did not have a place to conduct their meetings," said David Murata, a Kahului Union Church United Church of Christ member who is working with the Micronesian churches.

At the same time, the congregation of the Haiku church, originally built to accommodate a Japanese speaking congregation from the plantation camps that once dotted Haiku, had dwindled to just five families. The old wood-frame church building is still solid, but it is showing its age. It was built in 1933, Murata said. A garage next to the church was turned into a storeroom, but with broken windows and sags in the ceiling. In discussions about the needs of the Micronesian congregations and the condition of the Haiku church, there was a recognition that there was a solution to two problems, he said.

"We decided let's use it for the benefit for all. All of the Micronesian congregations could use the church," Murata said. It will take some rebuilding of the church as well as replacing much of the furniture in the church.

But the Haiku parcel where the church is located is ideal for the Micronesian members, Danis said. "It's like this at home. This area reminds us so much of where we came from," he said. Church members who have started working on the site have been planting bananas, taro, and other fruits and vegetables that they would normally be raising on their home islands scattered across the western Pacific.

In time, as the church at Haiku grows, the congregations would hold festivals aimed at helping the families instruct their children on their cultures and to display those cultural activities to the public in Maui.

"One of these days, we hope to hold a cultural program, to preserve our culture through sharing of our culture and our food," he said.

Most have moved to Hawaii looking for better opportunities. Danis said he first came to Maui for medical treatment and stayed when he found a growing population of people from his home island of Chuuk. He is the minister to the Chuukese Christian Ministry, which has about 100 members.

The other congregations number about 40 each for the Pohnpei mission and the Kosraean Etawi, and up to 180 for the Marshallese Ministry that currently shares use of the Kahului Union Church facilities.

But before the dream of the Micronesian Christian Center can be fulfilled, the old Haiku church needs repairs as well as tools for maintaining the grounds and the structures. The need range from the very simple—wheel barrows, picks, garden rakes, and other tools for yard work and developing a garden, a refrigerator, office equipment—to expertise in repairing roofs, walls, windows, and electrical systems.

Murata said the church members could use the help of a professional in identifying what kinds of repairs are possible. But the group can't really afford to pay for professional services. One project will seek to repair the old garage so it can be used for children's center.

But there is so much that needs to be done, Danis could only guess that it will be very expensive.

For more information, contact:
David Murata
Lay Leader, Hawaii Conference UCC
639 Holoopuni Road
Kula, Hawaii 96790
Phone: 808.878.6159 / Email: Muratad002@hawaii.rr.com