


Evangelizing our communities these days frequently requires declaring the gospel in several languages. Ethnic churches are springing up seeking a home. But church members wonder about the risks of sharing facilities.

How to Share Your Buildings without Losing Your Church

by Dr. Ralph F. Wilson

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"We'll never do that again!" The battle-scarred pastor looked me straight in the eye. "Nothing is worth that mess."

For the past two years a Korean congregation of a different denomination had shared the facilities of Community Church, a smaller Los Angeles congregation. The pastor had taken pity on a group which needed a place to call home. The Koreans had their own set of keys and were meeting in the buildings even before the trustees approved it. Ad-hoc became permanent.

Problems multiplied. Clean-up was hit-and-miss. They would meet at all hours without prior scheduling. Half the choir robe closet was appropriated without asking. The last straw was the overwhelming stench of rotting, half-eaten fish left over from a fellowship dinner. The odor clung to the primary classroom for days. In the confrontation which followed, the trustee chairman resigned. Though the Koreans finally departed, the host congregation was left scarred and bitter. "Never again," the pastor told me.

This scenario has been played out with many variations. Is sharing worth the hassle? Can it work? Yes, indeed! Hundreds of churches across the country share harmoniously with Hispanic, Asian, Middle Eastern, Black, and Eastern European congregations. Yet, three important principles must be observed to share buildings with the greatest success: clear prior understanding, on-going communication, and cooperative ministry.

Clear Prior Understanding

The problems at Community Church probably could have been avoided if both the English-speaking and Korean congregations had taken time to reach a clear understanding of their relationship before the Koreans were invited in the door. For evangelicals, this understanding starts with God's Word.

Theological Understanding

Financial expediency is not a good enough reason. A host congregation needs to reach Scriptural convictions about sharing its buildings, or the project is likely to falter at the first hint of trouble. Lindley Ave. Church has shared its buildings at various times with Chinese, Korean, Hispanic and Iranian groups. Yet people would ask, "Some of the pans from the kitchen are missing. And where are all the good coffee pots? Why do we let those people share our buildings?" Why, indeed?

The church began looking at the theology of sharing our buildings at a meeting of the Advisory Board, a group which represented all the ministries of the church. "Let's give all the Biblical reasons we can think of for sharing our buildings," the pastor asked. "And for the moment, let's not bring up

our little annoyances." For the next ten minutes he listed ideas on a chalkboard as people spoke. With that start the Missions Committee came up with a statement which was later adopted by the congregation:

As disciples of Jesus Christ, we are convinced we ought to share our church facilities with congregations of other cultural groups: 1. To further the gospel in our city and fulfill the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20; Mark 16:15; Acts 1:8) 2. To practice our brotherly love by "loving the stranger" in our land (Deuteronomy 10:19; Leviticus 19:34), and helping those who can't afford to own property. 3. To serve as good stewards (Titus 1:7). Sharing expenses is good financial stewardship. Recognizing that the church property belongs to the Lord, not to us (Psalm 24:1), as His stewards we should expand its use to include congregations who speak other languages. 4. To grow ourselves. We hope to benefit from the strengths of other congregations (and share our strengths with them, too). As we work with people from other backgrounds, we develop patience (Colossians 3:12-14). In addition, learning about other cultures better equips us for the missionary task. 5. To reflect now the future unity which will be realized when "a great multitude from every nation, from all tribes and peoples" shall stand before the God's throne (Revelation 7:9; 5:9). After completing this statement, the pastor preached a sermon based on these principles to develop Biblical convictions in the congregation. People must begin to see beyond the bother to the purpose of sharing.

A Written Covenant or Agreement

Beyond an initial statement of Christian convictions, both the host and guest congregations need to understand clearly from the beginning the privileges and responsibilities that go along with sharing. For this purpose a written covenant or agreement should be prepared in the languages of both congregations.

Such a document will be affected by the particular relationship between the groups. Some churches embrace the group that worships in another language as an arm of their church organization, so that members of the ethnic department are also members of the mother church. Other churches may be host to groups which are separate congregations of the same, or perhaps another, denomination. Temple Church of Los Angeles uses a multi-congregational model, where several language-group churches share one facility and retain a good deal of individuality while still holding membership in the larger congregation.

No matter what the relationships, a written agreement ought to consider the following points:

1. The name of the guest church or group, and the name, address and telephone number of the pastor and another leader.
2. The dates for which the agreement is effective
3. An initial list of rooms to be used and times of use, which may be changed by mutual agreement.
4. What kitchen coffee pots, pans, and table service may be used? Audio-visual equipment?
5. The procedure for scheduling special meetings.
6. Where to park and not to park.
7. Cleaning arrangements. How much is expected of the guest group? Of the church custodian? Responsibilities for setting up, moving, and putting away chairs and tables. Kitchen use and clean-up.
8. A statement that children must be supervised at all times.
 1. Use of telephones, office space, and storage space allotted to the guest congregation.
9. Who will be responsible for keys and lock-up after each use? Is there a policy about duplication of keys?
10. Sign identifying the guest congregation. How large and where?
11. Request for participation in workdays to maintain the property.
12. Financial responsibility for damages.

13. For a separate congregation, a statement that the guest group's insurance should list the host church as "additional insured".

14. The amount of shared use fee to be charged, if any, and when it is due.

A procedure to terminate the relationship, if that becomes necessary. Try to provide enough notice so the guest congregation has time to locate other facilities, perhaps 60 to 90 days. First Church of Torrance spelled out this type of agreement in a letter on church stationery. They concluded the otherwise businesslike document with a warm message to the Chinese, Filipino, and Korean groups sharing their facilities:

Please tell us about the good things God is doing in and through you. We would love to know when folks accept Christ, when other important decisions are made for Christ. We want to rejoice with you. Please tell us about the problems you are having. We want to pray for and with you. Please do tell us about problems you notice in regard to using these facilities. Are the lights out? Is it too hot or too cold? . . . We at First Church have appreciated the way all of you are cooperating so well in your use of these facilities. Sometimes there are slip-ups in some areas. (We have these with our own congregation, too, from time to time.) This is just to lay some things out in print so that they may be remembered more easily. We thank God for you and love you.

A gracious spirit does much to set a cooperative tone between the congregations. The final agreement should be signed by the leaders of both congregations.

Written statements are vital. One pastor lamented, "How I wish we had every detail in writing for future reference. It would have avoided guessing what has been decided in the past. Leadership from both groups has changed." A clear agreement keeps misunderstandings to a minimum. Yet the relationship is certain to undergo serious strains unless there is deliberate plan to ensure that communication continues.

On-Going Communication

"Why can't the Cuban pastor speak better English?" a trustee questions. Language differences are a real barrier to communication. But communication is a two-way street. As our emigrant pastors struggle to communicate in English, we must work extra hard to keep the lines of communication open.

Regular Meetings

The host pastor needs to meet regularly with the guest pastor for sharing and prayer "whether you need it or not." The course of least resistance is to meet only when there is a problem, but this is guaranteed to fail. The time invested in build a caring friendship is time well spent when a problem threatens the relationship. Once a month is probably minimal.

Equally important is a regular meeting between lay leaders of both groups. Without this, the pastor alone gets the complaints, and bears the burden of smoothing ruffled feathers and of maintaining the relationship. When lay leaders get to know members of the guest church, distrust begins to dissipate. They begin to see the shared relationship as a mission of the church rather than the pastor's pet project.

When one suburban church set up an inter-congregational relations committee to meet quarterly with the Chinese congregation over lunch, hard feelings began to give way to genuine Christian fellowship. They were able to discuss problems, explore differences in culture, and move toward real understanding.

Hacienda Heights Church found that a warm personal presence works for them. They were frustrated that the Cambodian and Korean congregations which shared their buildings weren't careful enough about cleaning and locking the rooms they used. Now the host church employs one of its members at \$25 per week to be on the grounds Sunday afternoons. Rather than being viewed as a "security

guard", Rick Martino is so friendly and likable that when the Asian children see him they flock to him. Sometimes he looks like the Pied Piper. Yet he unlocks doors, locks up later, sees that church policies are followed, and that the facilities are properly cared for. His church couldn't be happier.

Board Representation

When the guest group is a department of the host church it is both appropriate and vital that representatives of the ethnic department be appointed to serve on the boards of the church. A natural place to start might be an Hispanic Department member on the Board of Trustees or Property Committee. Serving on committees and boards is new to some cultures. But this involvement not only enriches the committee, it also helps train ethnic leadership to understand first-hand the problems which come with owning and maintaining property. As the ethnic department matures, representatives on both the main church board and on various program committees should be deliberately encouraged.

Regular communications are vital to build bonds of caring. But nothing works quite so well as sharing together in work and worship.

Cooperative Ministries

Emigrant groups inevitably discover that their school-age children are finding it easier to speak, read, and write in English than in their native tongue. Before too many years, Iglesia del Salvador finds it necessary to hold Sunday school classes in English. Here is a splendid opportunity for the host and guest congregations to work together to their mutual benefit.

At First Baptist Church of Los Angeles children from several language groups attend Sunday school together. In fact, the Filipino group at the church provides a number of the teachers. A guest congregation may well make possible a size and quality of Sunday school staff that a host congregation couldn't maintain alone.

Developing programs together draws on the strengths of both churches. Christian Education is often the place to start sharing--Sunday school classes, Vacation Bible School, youth groups. But other ministries such as feeding the hungry and developing sports teams can be conducted together as well. Cooperative work-days are especially valuable, not only in the fresh energy available to maintain the property, but in the trust built through working side by side. Lorena Church had become run down, requiring more maintenance than the small, aging Anglo congregation could provide. A new Hispanic congregation put both money and muscle together to help upgrade the facilities both now share.

Finally, both churches are enriched by worshipping together occasionally. Many congregations hold joint baptisms or celebrate a bi-lingual communion service several times a year. Our church has exchanged choirs and pulpits with the Chinese church which shares our facilities. Temple Church of Los Angeles holds a quarterly "Sounds of Heaven" service, involving all its member churches in a united celebration of music and message, using as many as five languages. Cooperative potluck dinners and picnics, too, break down barriers and build friendships.

Churches which share buildings only, are like ships passing in the night. Common work and worship vitally enrich the experience of the people of God.

Are there risks? Of course. Problems are inevitable when two families share the same house. But as Christians committed to reaching the lost, can we do less?

To Los Angeles, Chicago, Philadelphia, New York, and a dozen other cities people are flooding from all over the world. The nations that were yesterday's mission fields are settling in our cities today. "The regions beyond" have come home and we must see their peoples won to Christ. New congregations are winning the lost to Christ in Thai and Tagalog, Samoan and Spanish.

We can ill afford the luxury of preserving our facilities for English speakers alone while scores of needy ethnic congregations struggle to be born. As congregations, we determine before God that our minor inconveniences will not prevent us from opening our doors that the gospel may be proclaimed.

When carefully followed, the guidelines given here make sharing church facilities a workable strategy for outreach. We can share our buildings without losing our church!

[In April 1987, Dr. Wilson directed a conference under the auspices of the Los Angeles City Mission Society entitled "How to Share Your Buildings without Losing Your Church." This article was developed from his presentation there.]

Sidebar to Accompany "How to Share Your Buildings without Losing Your Church"

A Checklist for Sharing Your Buildings

To share your buildings with the fewest problems, make sure you carry out the following items:

- ___ 1. Written theological reasons for sharing buildings
- ___ 2. Written covenant or agreement between congregation spelling out policies, room use and schedule
- ___ 3. Regularly scheduled meetings between the pastors of the two groups, at least monthly
- ___ 4. Regularly scheduled meetings between lay leaders in an inter-congregational relations committee, at least quarterly
- ___ 5. Representation on church boards for a department or mission of our own church
- ___ 6. Several cooperative activities in ministry, worship, and work.

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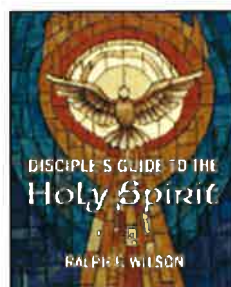
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