

Task Group on Property Sharing in Cross-cultural Settings

1. In response to proposals from the National Agency, Multicultural and Cross Cultural Ministry, the 11th Assembly reaffirmed its understanding “that all property belongs to God and we are called to be its stewards”. The Assembly encouraged congregations that share property to undertake a ‘Living together as God’s people in this place’ workshop, and requested presbyteries and synods to explore how they can promote joint custodial responsibility and ‘joint beneficial interest’ where Uniting Church congregations are sharing property.
2. The 11th Assembly also requested the Assembly Standing Committee to appoint a task group to survey all situations where two or more Uniting Church congregations are sharing property, and to report to the 12th Assembly, including any proposals, on the state of property sharing in the Uniting Church. Members of the task group, established by the ASC in November 2006, were Clabon Allen, Tony Floyd, Glen Powell, Ivan Roberts (Convener), Alan White, and Myung Duk Yang. Samata Elia and John K. Martin were later co-opted to the task group because of their interest and expertise in property sharing issues.
3. The task group commenced its works by circulating a survey form to all congregations in the Uniting Church through Synod secretaries. In addition, the task group consulted with the Korean Commission in the NSW Synod, synod cross-cultural committees, the NSW Synod Board of Mission, and representatives from the national conferences through the Assembly Uniting National Conferences Working Group.
4. As expected, results of the survey indicate that the majority of cross-cultural property sharing arrangements occurs in urban areas of NSW & Victoria. Of the 358 congregations who responded to the survey 32% indicated they did share their property with another congregation. However, of the 114 who indicated they are sharing property, only 31 are with other Uniting Church congregations. 73% of congregations sharing properties are doing so with non-Uniting congregations. Of the 31 Uniting Church congregations sharing property with other UCA congregations, 20 were in NSW and 9 in Victoria. Of the 20 relationships in NSW, 16 were described as a ‘partnership’, and 4 as ‘host and guest’. The understanding of ‘partnership’ may however vary, and not necessarily be one of joint custodial stewardship. In contrast, of the 30 congregations in NSW sharing property with non-UCA congregations, 20 were described as ‘landlord & tenant’ arrangements, eight as ‘host & guest’, and only two as a partnership.
5. On the basis of these survey results it would appear where two UCA congregations are sharing property some attempt has been made to develop a useful working relationship. It may be helpful to explore in greater detail with those 31 congregations the formal basis of the relationship, and whether or not both congregations are equal partners in joint custodial stewardship.
6. The situation where property is shared with non-Uniting congregations appears quite different, seen primarily as a financial arrangement of ‘landlord & tenant’. Whilst to an extent this is understandable, UCA congregations need to ensure, as a minimum, they conduct themselves ethically, but also hopefully seek to develop some level of relationship which might support the worship and mission aspirations of the ‘tenant’ congregation. There is need to encourage congregations to explore the missional possibilities that can emerge with property sharing arrangements. Sadly, however, it appears some non-Uniting congregations in ‘renting’ arrangements with Uniting congregations have found the experience discouraging and are therefore reluctant to consider closer ties with the UCA.
7. The great majority of congregations who host other congregations reported they initially became involved through an approach from the other congregation requesting a place to worship, rather than for intentional mission or financial reasons. This suggests many congregations may drift into a property sharing relationship without much thought as to the implications and responsibilities. This was borne out by the survey with only a handful of respondents involved in property sharing arrangements aware of the Assembly approved “*Property Policy in a Multicultural Church*” [2003]. There appears a need to better inform congregations and presbyteries on both the policy on property sharing and resources available to help them develop partner relationships. There is also a need to determine the expectations that attach to an “Assembly policy”.
8. Very few respondents indicated any formal agreement or memorandum of understanding had been negotiated in such property sharing arrangements. It is important for presbyteries to assist congregations sharing property to formalize the nature of the relationship at

- the outset to avoid possible future misunderstandings, as well as establish processes for resolving issues as they arise. Any such agreements would need to be culturally sensitive to be effective. It would be helpful for the Assembly to provide framework or sample agreements identifying key elements to be included in such agreements, subject to culturally sensitive variation in each individual case.
9. Nonetheless, few of the respondents indicated any major problems with arrangements apart from 'dirty halls' and minor property damage from 'hard use.' Such issues were considered capable of being handled locally without involving presbytery or other councils of the church. (One Uniting congregation did ask a non-UCA congregation to leave because of problems, but later accepted another congregation from the same cultural group as the earlier 'tenant'.)
 10. Whilst at first glance this lack of difficulties may seem positive, it could mean there is little or no interaction between the congregations. If two congregations of different cultural backgrounds are seriously working together then one could expect a little healthy tension to develop as both seek to work through differences of understanding in how decisions are made and responsibility shared.
 11. One positive feature to come out of these hosting relationships with non-UCA congregations has been some of the 'guest' congregations are now considering possible membership in the Uniting Church; two out of eight congregations in Queensland.
 12. The high level of non-UCA congregations utilizing Uniting Church properties, 73% of reported property sharing arrangements, does however lend weight to concerns raised by member congregations of the Korean Commission in NSW and the Assembly Uniting National Conferences Working Group. Both bodies expressed concern that little if any priority/preference is given to Uniting Church congregations seeking places of worship or growing their ministries over non-UCA congregations. There is also concern about UCA international partnership arrangements if Uniting Church properties are made available to congregations being established in Australia by 'home' churches. This may encourage congregations to stay linked with the 'home' church rather than consider membership in the UCA, contribute to splits in communities and families, and even deny fellowship groups, faith communities and congregations who are already members of the UCA.
 13. The survey form included a question whether UCA congregations currently sharing property with a non-Uniting Church congregation would be prepared to terminate that arrangement in order to accommodate another Uniting Church congregation seeking a place to worship or to grow their ministry. In response, the vast majority said 'no' and the others displayed definite reluctance to do so. From a positive viewpoint reasons given were that, the relationship having been developed, the host congregation felt a responsibility to the non-UCA congregation, as well as concern for the difficulties moving would cause them. In the event their property became vacant they would be more sensitive to the needs of other Uniting Church congregations.
 14. The authority of the current policy is presently only as 'guidelines' as indicated in the concluding paragraph of the policy. This seems to contradict the concept of 'policy'. Some respondents suggested that a directive from presbytery or other councils of the church requiring priority treatment for Uniting Church congregations may have greater impact and assist 'host' congregations, when seeking to terminate arrangements with non-UCA 'guest' congregations, and presbyteries in their strategic planning.
 15. In order to strengthen implementation of the policy the Task Group came to the view that the Regulations of the Church be strengthened to include provisions specifically relating to property sharing, particularly when approaches are made by or on behalf of Uniting Church congregations, currently without a place to worship, and seeking to share property currently utilized by a Uniting Church congregation. Such changes to the Regulations should be kept as simple as possible with details provided in an Approved Property Policy enabling changes to be made effectively and quickly as required.
- Whilst the above report specifically focuses on property sharing in a cross-cultural context, the task group believes that the same property policies should be applied in all situations where UCA congregations or faith communities share property, hence a national "Property Policy for a multicultural church". In this context we are aware there is another Assembly task group exploring "alternative missional use" of property.

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Task Group Convener

The proposals arising from this report are included in Section C of the Assembly papers.