

Sharing Building Space with Groups from Another Religion

From a brochure of the same title, produced and distributed by the Office of Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 100 Witherspoon St., Louisville, KY 40202-1396.

A congregation's property is intended for use in fulfillment of the ends of the church—defined by Presbyterians as "the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind; the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God; the maintenance of divine worship; the preservation of the truth; the promotion of social righteousness; and the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world" (G-1.0200).

See 199th General Assembly (1987),
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), ¶21.244-6.

A few Christian congregations consider sharing their physical space and property with a group belonging to another religious tradition (for example, a Jewish congregation). This requires careful and prayerful examination of many questions, some related to our defined "ends of the church" and others prompted by practical concerns. A congregation will be helped by seeking answers early on to such questions, perhaps in consultation with one or more congregations which are already sharing accommodations.

1. *Participating in more than a financial, rental transaction.* How will sharing space extend the ministry or hospitality of the church? Can you be respectful toward those with whom you are considering sharing space? Will you understand your lives and words to be a witness among your neighbors, made humbly through the dialogue of speaking to others and listening to them? Will you be willing to listen to their religious, ethical, and social concerns?

2. *Understanding the building's identity in your town or city.* With what purpose(s) do you want your neighborhood, town or city to identify your church's building? Is sharing space consistent with this identity, or will doing so harmfully confuse identity? If you want to develop a new public sense about the building's purpose, how can you do this?

3. *Determining what sharing space might enable you to do with others on behalf of the common good of people in your neighborhood.* What vision does your congregation have about societal issues related to justice, peace, and the stewardship of God's creation? How does your congregation's work for the common good of society relate to its witness as a congregation and its members' witness as individuals? How will your witness in society be affected by sharing space with persons of another faith? How can these questions be explored with others?

4. *Facing emotionally-charged decisions about religious symbols.* What meaning do the symbols of

the Christian faith have for your congregation? Are you willing for your symbols to be exchanged for those of another religion or to be concealed when a space is used by another faith group? Would you want to find common visual elements, appreciated by both groups, that could be placed somewhere in the building? How will you discuss these matters with those planning to use the building so that there is mutual decision-making?

5. *Sharing occasional celebration, worship or educational activity with others.* Is your congregation open to possibilities for occasional shared celebrations, worship or educational experiences with those who share your building? What standards will you use initially as you participate in mutually planning joint activities with them? Have you looked at the resource, *Respectful Presence* (see below)?

6. *Negotiating distribution of financial responsibility, time schedules, standards of cleanliness and building upkeep.* Will the accountability for practical matters be appropriately shared by all building users? Have you developed a system for regularly consulting about practical matters in order to lessen potential tensions and promote mutual trust? Who will provide leadership in developing and maintaining communication?

7. *Making decisions in an appropriate way.* What other questions and issues arise as your church officers discuss sharing space with another group? How can the full membership of the church be brought into discussion at an appropriate time? Will it be helpful for the congregation (or some of its members) to have an educational experience to learn about the other religion before a decision to share space is finalized? If so, who will make the plans? What will be the educational objectives?

This brochure has been prepared by the Office of Interfaith Relations to offer informal assistance to congregations.
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You may find these resources helpful:

Respectful Presence: An Understanding of Interfaith Prayer and Celebration from a Reformed Christian Perspective

(PDS#772-292-97-002)

Presbyterian Principles for Interfaith Dialogue (PDS#74-292-99-003)

The session is responsible for the mission and government of the particular church. It therefore has the responsibility and power:

- to lead the congregation in participation in the mission of the whole Church in the world . . .
- to provide for the growth of its members and for their equipment for ministry through . . . opportunities for witness and service in the world
- to establish the annual budget . . .
- to provide for the management of the property of the church, including determination of the appropriate use of church buildings and facilities . . .

Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
Book of Order, G-10.0102c,e,i,o

A particular church shall not lease its real property used for purposes of worship, or lease for more than five years any of its other real property, without the written permission of the presbytery transmitted through the session of the particular church.

Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
Book of Order, G-8.0502