

## **CONGREGATIONS MEET UNDER THE SAME ROOF CHURCHES OFFER MULTILINGUAL SERVICES, SPACE**

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

There are times when the hallways of south Florida churches sound like the corridors of the United Nations.

Increasingly, churches are offering several services in multiple languages or are inviting other congregations to make use of their facilities.

“There is not a lot of space for different church buildings in south Florida,” reflected Rev. Sharon L. Rogers, the pastor of First United Church of Christ in Hollywood. Her church makes space available to a Seventh Day Adventist congregation and just recently started renting space to a Portuguese-speaking Assemblies of God church.

“We have provided space to the Seventh Day Adventist group for four years, but they are beginning to look to the future to see if they need to develop their own facility,” Rogers said.

Citing the agreements with the two separate congregations as a “business arrangement,” Johnson said that she regrets that the three congregations do not share more in ministry. “We do cooperate in some mission projects such as food drives,” she said, but other than occasional cooperative worship services, the three churches operate their own programs.

At the Davie United Methodist Church, a Wesleyan Korean church rents space for services and Sunday school classes. “It has worked very well,” reported Nancy Dickinson of Cooper City, the church’s secretary. “I have never heard of any conflicts.”

Dickinson said that the two congregations have come together for Thanksgiving services at celebrations of the World Day of Prayer. “They have also participated in some of our mission projects where we feed the homeless,” she said. “All of our cooperative efforts are friendly gestures.”

Other congregations have found that shared arrangements have resulted in some stress. “We were working with a Brazilian congregation to rent them space for their worship,” said Barbara Cowen of Fort Lauderdale, the secretary at Faith United Church of Christ in Tamarac. “However, they wanted more time than we could negotiate. They wanted to begin activities every day and we just didn’t have enough space.”

Faith church has recently begun renting space to a Korean Evangelical church that is meeting there once a week.

While it might seem odd that congregations from a liberal denomination, such as the UCC, would rent space to a conservative body such as an Evangelical or Pentecostal church, church representatives said that it seldom presents a problem.

“The United Church of Christ is respectful and inclusive of all religious theology,” said Cowen. “We get along fine as long as everyone behaves in a kindly way.”

While some churches make space available across denominational lines, others are opening their doors to like-minded groups from their own traditions.

“In addition to our regular English language services, we offer Bible studies and worship services in Italian, Spanish, French and we have a Philippino congregation,” reported Lisa Davis of Miami who is the secretary at the Cooper City Church of God. Some of the groups hold services on Saturday evening, others on Sunday afternoon to make optimum use of the church’s space.

“Each church is a separate congregation, though we are all part of the same denomination,” Davis said. “Each church has its own pastor except for the French and Italian churches who are served by a multi-lingual pastor.”

Davis reported that the churches occasionally come together for worship and other programs such as special services following the September 11 terrorist attacks.

“We have had Italian services for over 20 years,” said Pastor John Valloton of Hollywood who serves as the pastor of both the Italian and French congregations at the Cooper City church. “We have around 45 or 50 who attend the Italian services every Thursday evening and Sunday morning.

“Just recently we restarted the French service after a break of several years,” he explained. “While we originally worked to attract the French Canadian snowbirds, we are now also reaching out to French-speaking people from Europe and Haiti.”

Valloton attracts some French-speaking worshippers through a weekly column that he writes for *Le Francophone International*, a weekly French-language newspaper published in Broward County.

In Hollywood, the Lake Forest Baptist Church also houses multiple language congregations, all of them affiliated with the Southern Baptist Gulf Stream Association.

“It’s sometimes a challenge to find space,” reported the church’s English-language pastor Rev. Ralph Cooper. “The Spanish group has a Thursday evening Bible school while the Haitian Creole-speaking congregation meets on weekends,” Cooper explained.

Cooper said that the church’s neighborhood is evenly divided between English-speaking whites, Spanish-speaking Latins and African American and Caribbean residents.

“Our congregations blend well,” Cooper said. “I don’t think that any of the congregations will want to move somewhere else unless they outgrow the space.”

The three churches often share in fellowship and service projects and sometimes combine for worship on special occasions. “All of the funds are handled by the English-speaking congregation,” explained Pastor Jorge Aguayo who previously served both the English and Spanish-speaking groups but now is serving as pastor of only the Spanish congregation.

Two congregations from the same denomination meeting in the same building can build alliances and work together. “We have a strong liaison between our English and Spanish congregations,” explained Will Anderson, an Elder at the Miramar Evangelical Church. “That’s encouraging to us and allows us to have a more aggressive evangelistic outreach.”

Anderson said that while his church houses a Spanish church, it wants to develop programming to reach out to the growing Bahamian and Jamaican population in Miramar. “We have a youth program on Friday and Sunday evenings that is reaching the Caribbean population,” he reported.

However, Anderson said that the Spanish congregation’s youth are increasingly participating in the church’s English activities.

“There are some wide cultural differences between the people in our community,” Anderson reflected. “We are concerned about prejudice. It is not easy to bridge the gap.”

**CONGREGATIONS MEET UNDER THE SAME ROOF CHURCHES  
OFFER MULTILINGUAL SERVICES, SPACE,** *South Florida Sun-Sentinel*, Jan 12, 2003