

Church moves to meet URA guidelines

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THE 10,000-strong Faith Community Baptist Church (FCBC) will hold its last worship service at the Singapore Expo tomorrow, the final day of its lease, to stay within new Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) guidelines.

Issued last July, the rules restrict the use of commercial property for religious purposes to 10,000 sq m. This cap was exceeded by FCBC, which has since 2005 used the Expo's 7,000-seat Hall 10 for its English service plus an adjacent hall for 1,000 youngsters in its children's church.

These two halls have a total floor area of 20,000 sq m, according to Unusual Entertainment, an Expo tenant and event organiser that leased premises to FCBC and City Harvest Church, which will also move this month.

FCBC Senior Pastor Lawrence Khong said: 'We cannot remain in Hall 10 as we have a large number of families attending the service with their children who participate in the children's programme held in Hall 9. Unfortunately, the new URA guidelines do not enable us to continue with this arrangement.'

So from March 12, the independent megachurch will move to two refurbished cinemas - in Marine Parade and Bukit Merah - that it has owned since the 1990s. It will split its service into four: two pairs of simultaneous services on Saturday at 7.30pm and Sunday at 9am in the two venues, which share a video link, so churchgoers will hear the same sermon.

Mr Khong framed the return to these central HDB sites as an exciting move forward. It falls into FCBC's long-term plan of fully using its facilities to benefit members, he noted. 'It also allows us to have a deeper engagement with our surroundings as a community and family church.'

The FCBC strategy is the way forward for big congregations, said the URA.

Responding to queries from The Straits Times about churches that fail to meet guidelines, a URA spokesman said: 'Religious groups with very large congregations could consider holding multiple services or holding simultaneous services in multiple venues as it may not be possible to allocate progressively larger sites to accommodate their expanding congregation.'

Bigger churches like Lighthouse Evangelism and St Andrew's Cathedral host a dozen or more weekend services. New Creation Church stages four English services at multiple venues - the Rock Auditorium, two overflow rooms in the Rock vicinity, Suntec Gallery West, and GV Marina and Eng Wah cinemas.

The URA reiterated its policy on places of worship: Singapore has to balance the needs of various religious communities. 'We also have to balance the

interests of the religious and those who do not practise any religion.'

When asked how many religious groups have submitted proposals or sought clarifications to use auditoriums, cinemas and function halls for religious use since last July, the URA would say only that 'several' had done so. Most applications have been approved as they comply with guidelines. It has 'shown flexibility' with others unable to meet the guidelines fully.

'In the case of FCBC's proposal to conduct religious services at the Singapore Expo, URA has informed them it could be allowed, provided the premises they occupy do not exceed the 10,000 sq m gross floor area cap for each religious group.'

The URA said it was processing City Harvest's proposal to use Suntec Singapore from March 19. To stay within URA limits, the church of 33,000 has scaled down its original plans for a 12,000-seat auditorium.

New Creation, with 20,000 worshippers, plans to move to a Buona Vista lifestyle hub around 2012. It is expected to send in its proposal when the building is completed, the URA said.

While megachurches may not secure huge sites to grow big where they are, observers like Dr Mathew Mathews, an Institute of Policy Studies research fellow who has written on Christianity in Singapore, do not think it will curb their growth. He said: 'The megachurches are never shy to publicise their numbers. Even if their churchgoers can no longer worship in one supersized venue, they have constant reminders of their size and impact and so feel part of a successful megachurch.'

Publisher Tan Chin Kar, 44, who has attended FCBC for 20 years, prefers the simpler, more compact Marine Parade premises to the theatrical Expo: 'I believe the magnificence of God is manifested not in tandem with the size of a place but through true, simple worship.'

Faith Community Baptist Church has been using Singapore Expo's Hall 10 and an adjacent hall since 2005.