

## **Religious groups must actively contribute to community, use local funding under MND's new land tender process**

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SINGAPORE — Religious groups in need of new dedicated sites for worship must now show that they actively contribute to the wider community, under a new two-stage tender framework announced by the Government on Thursday (Sept 13).

Those that do not meet the criteria will not be able to bid for land set aside for places of worship by the Ministry of National Development (MND). This also means that businesses or commercial entities will not be allowed to submit bids.

Bidders will also have to demonstrate that they have sustainable sources of local funding, and that they will not fund the purchase or development of a site using foreign donations.

This announcement by the authorities comes after controversy erupted in 2014 when Eternal Pure Land, a commercial, profit-focused subsidiary of an Australian-listed company, won a S\$5.2 million bid for a site at Fernvale Link in Sengkang. Residents in the area were unhappy that a commercial columbarium would be built next to their homes on the site earmarked for a Chinese temple.

The Government eventually terminated its agreement with the firm, and the site was put up for re-tender for only religious groups. It also prompted the Government to review the land tender process for places of worship, and to tighten eligibility rules for tenderers.

MND also announced on Thursday that it intends to release at least two church sites and two Chinese temple sites for tender each year, over the next few years.

The first two locations — standalone sites for a Chinese temple and a church — will be launched in the next two to three months.

In a bid to address the space crunch faced by some religious groups, in particular smaller outfits, the ministry is also expected to release land for the development of place-of-worship hubs for the first time next year. These will house multiple religious organisations belonging to the same religion within the same building.

MND will release sites for one church hub and one Chinese temple hub via concept-and-price tenders.

### **HOW IT WORKS**

Under the new framework, bidders for a tender have to go through a two-stage process. They will first be assessed on a set of pre-qualification criteria to prove that they are established or constituted for the advancement of their religion.

At the second stage, the site will be awarded to the qualified bidder with the highest bid price.

Previously, tenders were evaluated solely based on price.

Responding to queries from TODAY on its pre-qualification criteria, MND clarified that the Government will assess whether the bidder has organised regular activities that either involve or benefit the wider community within the last three years.

"This may include religious activities, volunteer activities and community events (such as) inter-faith harmony events", said its spokesperson.

They will be required to submit the average number of activities they have organised over the last three years, provide information on one activity and produce supporting evidence such as photos and attendance list of participants or beneficiaries.

While existing owners of places of worship sites will be allowed to bid, the spokesperson said they would need to demonstrate a genuine need for worship space with evidence. This could be the number of registered members, average weekly or monthly attendance in the past three years, and existing properties where religious activities are being conducted.

When queried on why tender sites would be for churches and Chinese temples, the spokesperson said the Government works closely with apex religious groups to plan for the release of land to ensure adequate supply of places of worship to cater to their needs.

"The objective of the places-of-worship hub is to help cater to the varying space needs of religious organisations...We understand that there is interest from churches and Chinese temples for such facilities," said the spokesperson.

A 2015 survey from SingStats showed that Buddhism/Taoism and Christianity form two of the largest religious affiliations in Singapore at 43.2 per cent and 18.8 per cent respectively.

## HIGH PRICES FROM BIDDING PROCESS

Various religious groups and experts approached by TODAY were cautiously optimistic about MND's announcement.

The Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Singapore, which oversees 32 parishes in Singapore, said the new framework was an "improvement over the existing arrangement", as it recognised the contribution that churches make to the community, and the space needed for their activities.

However, the Catholic Church hopes that the price of the land offered would not be based on commercial rates as the "Church is a non-profit institution".

It added: "What is yet to be settled is how to ensure that competition among churches for the same plot of land will not drive up the price to a level that is way above market price."

Similarly, the National Council of Churches hopes that the availability of new places-of-worship sites and hubs would mean that churches would "refrain from competing and bidding at high prices".

The council, which acts as an association of churches and other Christian organisations, is also hopeful that MND's pipeline of religious sites will meet its demand for space over time.

Venerable Seck Kwang Phing, who serves as the president of the Singapore Buddhist Federation, said the new framework would give Buddhist organisations that have been actively bidding for land without success a better chance at procuring for such a space.

While the places-of-worship hub is ideal for Buddhist groups with smaller memberships or funding, he said problems could arise in the future. For instance, some groups might end up jostling for space, particularly during religious festivals.

Dr Mathew Mathews, senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, said the announcement is a positive one, as it signalled to religious organisations that there would be ample space for religious use in the coming years.

He added that religious groups in Singapore have learnt to collaborate over the years due to the scarcity of resources.

"Where there are worship hubs, for instance, the group developing it will be willing to accept those of their broader faith tradition even if their practices or beliefs may not be exactly similar," he said.

Dr Mathews also said the Government's move to disallow foreign funding sent a message that religious organisations should be "oriented towards Singapore (rather than some other society)".

Member of Parliament Alex Yam, the chairperson for the National Development Government Parliamentary Committee, said it should not be difficult for "bona fide local religious organisations" to meet the requirements set forth by the MND.

"A majority of religious organisations today already have some form of community involvement, be it educational, charitable or cultural," he said.

Smaller religious groups that are unable to put in the highest bid for a site could benefit from the new places-of-worship hub scheme as it would "reduce capital cost, allow for pooling of resources, and provide economies of scale", added Mr Yam.

TODAY had approached the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (Muis), the Hindu Endowment Board, the Taoist Federation of Singapore, and several non-denominational churches, but they were unavailable for comment at the time of writing.