

Union Church's New Home Fuels Ministry Growth

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It's been said many times that a "church" is not a building, but a gathering of people to worship God. Wherever they gather – be it dedicated space, a rented assembly hall or a field – that's where the church is.

That said, the physical location of the church can also shape the ministry of that congregation, as well as opportunities for new ministries.

For example, when Union Church Hong Kong officially dedicated its new building on 22A Kennedy Road in September 2023, it marked more than a return to its old site after six years in Wan Chai – it also heralded the start of a new chapter in UC's long history of ministry in Hong Kong.

"Parable of the Talents"

Founded in 1844 by the Reverend James Legge, a Scottish member of the London Missionary Society, Union Church existed in several locations on Hong Kong island before moving to the Kennedy Road site in 1890. The building was destroyed during World War 2 and rebuilt between the late 1940s and 1970.

However, says one leader at Union Church, while the congregation at the time did their best in rebuilding the church, "the building material then used wasn't great and as time went by, it needed ever more costs to maintain."

Another issue was that the UC congregation was growing beyond the ability of the physical church to serve its needs.

"We were busting at the seams at the time," recalls one congregation member. "Sunday school classes were held in tents in the upper and back courtyards, with inadequate portable A/C and wet feet in the rain. The kitchen was tiny for the amount of catering we do. Youth and all kinds of meetings were being held in the manse."

By the mid-1990s, the congregation decided to redevelop the site with a new and larger building with apartments on top that could make the most use of the land.

"The Parable of the Talents was in our mind," says another church leader. "How can we make better use of God's gift to us, and generate surplus to go towards worthy causes and ministries?"

A multitude of challenges

While the decision to redevelop the UC site was made in the mid-90s, it would be over 20 years before work actually began. UC faced numerous challenges to get the project off the ground, from getting the congregation to agree on a to finding a developer willing to pay for the re-development and on terms that would allow UC to get its land and building back in full in 99 years.

Meanwhile, over the course of time after UC received its development order in late 1990s, rules and regulations for land development kept changing – for example, one rule stated that redevelopments higher than three storeys were not permitted on the 22A Kennedy Road site. Meanwhile, church leaders had to decide on a design they liked that would also be approved by the regulators for redevelopment.

Then there was the question of where UC would meet while the site was under redevelopment. It would take close to six years to finally settle on premises in a commercial office build-





ing in Wan Chai. UC held its last service in the old building in August 2017 and moved to its temporary home while work began.

Six years later, in September 2023, the UC congregation was finally able to move back to 22A Kennedy Road, with the official dedication service held in late November.

Expanding ministry

The redeveloped venue offers several practical advantages, such as parking (which the old site didn't offer), but

more importantly, the new site has expanded UC's abilities and opportunities for ministry.

For example, senior pastor Rev. Dr. Michele Bland says, it's enabled UC to expand its Alpha course offering.

"Since we moved back in September 2023, we've offered Alpha in English three times, in Chinese three times, in Tagalog three times and one for youth," she explains. "The Alpha course typically runs for ten weeks and provides a safe place for people to explore Christianity. We have never offered Alpha this many times and will be offering a new series in multiple languages again this September."

Also, she adds, "Alpha typically involves offering full meals, which we can now do with a full kitchen."

The new venue has also enabled UC's Filipino service and ministry to expand to Saturdays and well as Sundays. UC has also added new Bible studies and new discipleship groups, as it can support more classes during the evening and on Sunday mornings. The church also has two worship spaces for weddings and funerals – the sanctuary for a larger group and a chapel for smaller ones. Additionally, there are smaller meeting rooms where UC's Stephen Ministers can meet their 'care receiver' one-on-one during the week.

There is also now an entire floor dedicated for children's ministry, Rev. Dr. Bland says. "It's specifically designed for children – smaller tables and chairs, small rooms and a large room for bigger groups. We offer Sunday School twice each Sunday and this summer during the week we will be offering, for the second year, a kids' camp for three weeks."

Community outreach

Meanwhile, the redeveloped site has also empowered UC to expand its outreach for the community by offering space on a regular basis, she adds. "For example we make the space available to many NGO's, ministry partners and organizations on a daily basis. We hold regular meetings, classes, conferences, dinners, receptions and concerts, etc. We regularly host weddings and funerals. In fact, we have hired a staff member to accommodate these ministries."

Rev. Dr. Bland notes that among UC's core values is to be not only missional, but also welcoming.

"We love hospitality, and we have BBQ facilities which enable us to reach out to a younger crowd, like university students," she says. "We have also established a baking ministry and have used our kitchen to gather bakers to bake for a local NGO. We have a bi-monthly gathering for coffee and conversation – typically for those who are retired. Additionally, we use our fellowship hall to develop a sewing ministry."

Rev. Dr. Bland added, "It is a joy and a privilege to have this space, and we are indeed grateful for the ministries that have grown and started since our return to the new 22A Kennedy Road."

