

Presence & Engagement Guidelines: Use of Church Halls

The Church of England is committed to being a 'Christian presence in every community.' The increasing diversity of our country means that in some communities, questions arise which relate to the nature of that presence among people of other faiths. In order to ensure that Anglican clergy working in these areas are supported in their ministry, Presence & Engagement have put together guidelines addressing a range of frequently asked questions. These are intended to highlight some of the theological and practical issues which need to be considered in multi-religious contexts, and in doing so give clergy the confidence to make decisions which can be the basis of good relations with other faith communities.

The guidelines have been prepared by members of the Presence & Engagement task group and are primarily aimed at Anglican clergy, but may also be of interest to lay people and ministers of other Christian denominations working in diverse settings. Within most dioceses there is also a designated interfaith adviser, who can be consulted for further assistance. To find contact details for diocesan advisers as well as other information and resources, go to www.presenceandengagement.org.uk.

Introduction

Most churches have buildings which are available for use by groups in the wider community. This is an important aspect of the Church's mission and ministry, putting them at the service of parishioners often in contexts where there are no other comparable facilities. The widest possible availability of church halls and other buildings is as a general principle to be warmly welcomed and encouraged as part of the ministry of hospitality and a clear sign of the public role of the Church.

A church hall will normally be held on charitable trusts, or on the terms of some other legal instrument, which prescribe the purposes for which the hall may be used. Even where social activities by other faith communities can be brought within the terms of the instrument, they may well preclude the use of the property for non-Christian worship or instruction. However, it will be necessary to look at each case individually in the light of the legal documents and the nature of the proposed use. This will normally also apply in the case of a multi-purpose building intended for both worship and other activities and, depending on the circumstances, other restrictions mentioned above may well apply to at least part of the building.

The uses which are requested may vary. For example the request may be for worship or prayer or an associated activity; it may be for purposes of teaching or study; or it may be for social or family events. Each of these carries different implications. The basis of the arrangements under which church halls are used can also vary widely and may include one-off use for which a charge is made; a regular weekly or monthly use; or a long term hiring arrangement.

Considerations in responding to requests

Where parish churches are approached by another faith community asking to use their premises, we recommend that:

1. Thorough discussion of the issue should take place in the Parochial Church Council, and wide agreement be secured so that the visitors can be made genuinely welcome.
2. In every case the diocesan registrar should be consulted about the legal position.
3. Such activities should normally be restricted to the church hall or ancillary areas distinct from the area used for Christian worship.
4. In cases where a multi-purpose building is used for Christian worship and for other activities, and where the sanctuary can be screened off, this should be done and the sanctuary remain unused except for Christian worship. Christian symbols, pictures etc. should otherwise remain in place and undisturbed.
5. It is highly desirable that some regular contact takes place between members of the Christian congregation and the other faith users of the church building. Regular meeting could involve occasions of inter-faith dialogue or the exchange of simple hospitality at the time of festivals. The expectation of regular meeting and building friendships should be explained to the other faith users at the time of the original agreement so that the arrangement is not regarded by either group as a merely commercial one.
6. It is important to ensure that the church premises will at no time be used for teaching which constitutes an explicit attack on the Christian faith. The best way of achieving this aim is to develop the kind of relationships mentioned above. Relationships built on mutual knowledge, trust and understanding will provide a context in which agreed restrictions on the use of the church premises can be observed and enforced. It may be wise to check if the parent body of the group concerned is affiliated to the Inter Faith Network.
7. The arrangement needs to be monitored so that with changes of personnel the original principles of the arrangement remain in force.
8. The same concern suggests the value of a written agreement, drawn up after consultation with the diocesan registrar. A written agreement may also contribute to the sharing of good practice on a wider scale.
9. Where the request comes from a group which might be considered a new religious movement, consult additional specific guidance, available on the Presence & Engagement website.

The Equality Act

Clergy should be aware that the 2010 equalities legislation prohibits discrimination in the provision of goods and services on the basis of religious affiliation, amongst other protected characteristics. However an exemption allows a religious organisation to withhold these in circumstances where to provide them would cause offence to its members. For example, a church is not legally required to allow their premises to be used by another group if the church's members would be offended by this usage or find it to be in conflict with particular elements of their Christian belief. The relevant sections of the Equality Act (Schedule 23, Part 2) can be found at: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/schedule/23/crossheading/organisations-relating-to-religion-or-belief>.