

New Religious Movements

Guidance on letting church premises or halls

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THE CHURCH
OF ENGLAND

Introduction

Christian hospitality is essential to mission. The church community shouldn't be seen as a closed or exclusive group, but open and available to all who want to come in. Often churches have halls or buildings which others in the community ask to use. Allowing groups the use of facilities can be a useful way of letting the wider community contact Christian life, witness and hospitality, as well as a source of revenue where groups pay for hire of rooms and premises.

But while most contacts between the Church and other groups help everyone and build up community relations, there are potential problems. A very few groups may wish to engage in practices or activities which are unacceptable to the Christian congregation. Also, some new religious movements (sometimes called NRMs) may want to improve their standing and public relations by pointing to churches which have unwittingly provided them with facilities and have offered their goodwill. They may also say that we support their aims and intentions.

Sometimes it is hard to tell the difference between one group and another, especially if they themselves claim to be Christian, so that's why it's important to be careful. Some of the new religious movements which cause the most difficulties describe themselves as Christian fellowships or Bible groups, precisely because people think they know what they are getting. Other groups have been known to disguise themselves as bodies interested in environmental issues, health issues, or in justice and peace and may ask to convene meetings about those matters without saying who they really are.

So when things go wrong, they can often be difficult to sort out and cause much bad feeling and confusion as well as pastoral difficulties. This general guidance (which is not exhaustive – common sense counts for a great deal) can help you check out groups wanting to use your buildings:

Do you know the group already?

1. Do you know this group and does it have a history of activity in your area? It is typically a new or unknown group which you will need to check out, but some new religious movements are good at finding a sympathetic member of the congregation to speak on

their behalf. Don't rely on hearsay or allow third parties to make agreements on your behalf.

What do they want to do in your premises or hall?

2. Exactly what will the group be doing in the church or church hall? For example, if it is a 'yoga' group, is it just an exercise class or are aspects of spiritual teaching involved which could upset Christians or confuse someone exploring the Christian faith? Sometimes people have gone along to exercise or therapy groups in church premises only to find they are asked to do something which conflicts, or is incompatible with, their Christian faith.

Who's responsible for the group?

3. Is there an identified leader and do you have contact details? Find out who is responsible if something goes wrong. Sometimes new religious movements identify a global leader who is in another country and impossible to contact. You will need a local contact who is directly accountable for the activities of the group and with whom you can negotiate if there should be any difficulties or complaints. Sometimes small complaints over noise or parking can escalate into major headaches because there is no specific person to complain to.

What about the leader?

4. Does the leader (e.g. of an exercise class) belong to a specific religious group? If so, which? Will aspects of that person's religious beliefs or affiliation be included in the sessions? Complaints have sometimes arisen where 'issue groups' have included a requirement to agree with the leader's religious beliefs.

Are they qualified?

5. Another question to ask is about the specific qualifications the leader may have. You may have to ask questions about health and safety and about insurance. If you use a hiring contract, be aware of possible pitfalls outside the terms of the contract. Be especially careful about groups wanting to use the premises for work with children and young people and activities which involve physical contact. Safeguarding is paramount for any activity on church premises or in church halls and buildings.

Can you sit in?

6. Are members of the clergy and the congregation allowed to attend, participate, observe, come and go freely while the group meets? If not, why not? It is reasonable to ask people to respect the needs of a group meeting for prayer and contemplation, but if a group wants to lock the door and refuse admittance to others this should be investigated.

Will anything get changed or moved?

7. What part of the church/church hall/other buildings will be used? Will the group need to use any of the furniture, fixtures and fittings? If so, why and how? Is such use acceptable?

What about charges?

8. If there is a charge, how much does attending the group/class cost and are there further courses or classes on offer? There have been problems where people gaining benefit from what seems like an inoffensive introductory class or group session have been persuaded to part with large sums of money for residential courses elsewhere, often with the intention of recruiting for a new religious movement. The group leader is sometimes an innocent party in this.

Services in church

9. If a group specifically asks to hold, or to be part of, services in your church, and particularly where there is proposed participation by a minister or leader, be aware of the current rules about this. In general, check the group with the Council for Christian Unity and also against membership or association with Churches Together in Britain and Ireland and/or the Evangelical Alliance. Be aware however, that some new religious movements are already involved in some local groups and may seek permission on that basis.

We can answer questions about theological beliefs of particular groups and whether we recognise baptism in particular groups.

Also check with your Archdeacon and/or Bishop where group leaders or ministers of groups ask to hold services in the church, or ask to make substantial contributions to the occasional offices.

Equalities Legislation

10. A lot of people let their premises even when they are concerned about particular groups because they are worried they might fall foul of current equalities legislation and discriminating against people. But you should be aware of the terms of equalities legislation about the provision of goods and services. Religion is a protected characteristic and restriction of premises is permitted if you can show that it's necessary because of the religious aims of your church, or to avoid offending people who share your religious aims. <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/consumer/discrimination-in-the-provision-of-goods-and-services/discrimination-in-the-provision-of-goods-and-services-1/goods-and-services-what-are-the-different-types-of-discrimination/what-doesn-t-count-as-unlawful-discrimination-in-goods-and-services/religious-organisations-and-charities-when-discrimination-is-allowed-in-the-provision-of-goods-or-services/>

Make your checks before saying yes

10. If you are not sure, check out the group before you make any verbal agreement or before any money changes hands. Some new religious movements have attempted to sue after facilities and permission have been withdrawn.

How to check

11. You can check with:

INFORM at the London School of Economics. The staff will give you any information they have on particular groups, but they will not advise you what to do. 020 7955 7654 inform@lse.ac.uk

Your diocesan New Religious Movements adviser if your diocese has appointed one.

Dr Anne Richards, anne.richards@churchofengland.org

If things go wrong...

13. If things go wrong, don't struggle alone. Contact your diocesan adviser and/or Anne Richards as above if you cannot easily resolve difficulties with groups using your church. The problems are not always one way. Sometimes members of congregations can become hostile towards groups because of misinformation or lack of understanding.