

New Religious Movements

Some guidance on what to do if a group wants to use your church, chapel, other Christian space, or church hall.

Introduction:

Christian hospitality is an essential part of mission. The church community should not 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 and allowing groups the use of such facilities can be a useful way of allowing the wider community contact with Christian life, witness and hospitality, as well as a useful source of revenue where groups pay for hire of facilities.

However, while the majority of such interaction between the Church and other groups is mutually beneficial and helpfully builds 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 (NRMs) may be looking to improve their standing and public relations by pointing to churches which have unwittingly provided them with facilities and have offered their goodwill. Sometimes it is hard to tell the difference, - some displaced, or minority ethnic groups need help to continue to build up their Christian life in this country, but at the same time how do you know if a group describing itself as an 'independent Christian fellowship' is really anything of the sort? Some of the NRMs which cause the most difficulties describe themselves as Christian fellowships or Bible groups, precisely because people think they know what they are getting.¹ 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 ostensibly concerned with these matters.

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) is offered to help you check out groups wanting to use your buildings:

1. **Do you know this group and does it have a history of activity in your area?** You *probably* won't have to worry about the Brownies....it is typically a new or unknown group which you will need to check out, but some NRMs have a strategy of finding a sympathetic member of the congregation to be an advocate for them. Don't rely on hearsay or allow third parties to make agreements on your behalf.
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? Sometimes people have gone along to exercise or therapy groups in

¹ For example, people may not be aware that the Unification Church, The Church of Scientology, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and the International Churches of Christ are new religious movements.

church premises only to find they are asked to do something which conflicts, or is incompatible with, their Christian faith.

3. **Is there an identified leader and do you have contact details?** Find out who is responsible if something goes wrong. Sometimes NRMs 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.
4. **Does the leader (eg 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 concur with the leader's religious beliefs.
5. **What specific qualifications does the leader 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.
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.
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?
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 an NRM. The group leader is sometimes an innocent party in this.
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 terms of Canon B 43.** In general, check the group against membership or association with Churches Together in Britain and Ireland and/or the Evangelical Alliance. Be aware however, that some NRMs have managed to become involved with local EAs by calling themselves independent Christian fellowships.
10. **If a group wants to offer healing (including 'Christian' healing), bereavement counselling, or health, peace, justice or environment events,** check out their place of origin first. Some NRMs look for entrance under these themes or topics, but may use these as a cover for recruitment or to obtain goodwill from the Church for their activities.

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

12. You can check with:

INFORM's database 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

Your diocesan NRM adviser.

Dr Anne Richards, Church House, Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3AZ 020 7898 1444.

13. **Check with your Archdeacon and/or Bishop** where group leaders or ministers of groups outside the terms of Canon B 43 ask to hold services in the church, or make substantial contributions to the occasional offices.

14. **If things go wrong, get advice to help sort it out.** A knee-jerk reaction can cause all kinds of difficulties. Contact INFORM if you need access to legal, counselling networks, or parents' networks, where people have had difficulties with NRMs. 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 congregations can become hostile towards inoffensive groups because of misinformation or lack of understanding.

Anne Richards

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