



The
United
Reformed
Church



**BAPTISTS
TOGETHER**


**The use
of church
buildings
by people
of other faith
communities**



The use of church buildings by people of other faith communities

A. The context

1. In 1974, the General Assembly of the United Reformed Church issued guidelines concerning the use of church buildings by people of other faiths in a document called *The Local Church's Approach to Those of Other Faiths*. For the most part, those guidelines have stood the test of time remarkably well. However, it is clear that a review and update of guidance on this matter is now needed.
2. Over the last 50 years, the multi-faith and multi-cultural context in Britain has changed considerably. Whereas previous generations within our churches regarded enabling other faith groups to meet in church buildings as 'showing hospitality to "strangers" or "immigrant communities"', in 2021 we recognise that faith communities, other than Christian, are an established and integral part of British life, and need to be regarded accordingly.
3. This movement towards a multi-cultural Britain has included many faith communities becoming able to purchase or build, and sustain, their own places of worship. With the increased stability which they have found by having a place of worship to call their own, these faith communities have grown in confidence and now make many positive contributions to the community around them as well as to wider society.
4. During this period of cultural change, British society has grown more diverse, both ethnically and religiously; it has also become markedly more secular in outlook. At the same time, churches have often experienced decline in the number of



active members, along with an increasingly older age profile and a consequent lowering of confidence in their ability to contribute to wider society.


B. Questions of Christian theology and mission

5. Opportunities to engage with neighbours and local communities – both civic and religious – present themselves in many guises. Among these opportunities, the question may arise of giving hospitality to people of other faiths. This may come about in a variety of ways:
 - a) It could be that a church is simply approached by a group of people from another faith community who are seeking a space to hire for a ‘one off’ event, be it for worship or educational purposes, a business or social meeting;
 - b) It could be that a local faith group requests use of a hall or meeting room at a church on a longer term basis in order to carry out some of its own local worship, service or mission whilst, for example, awaiting the purchase or preparation of its own building;
 - c) It could be that a local faith group wishes to explore a more permanent and sustainable sharing of parts of a church building in order to establish a base and develop its work in a local community;
 - d) It could be that, for a variety of reasons, a faith community is in need of emergency accommodation;





- e) There is also the possibility that a faith community is being obstructed in its attempts to purchase or hire its own place of community activity, and the local church, feeling that it is a matter of justice that such obstruction be in some way challenged, offers its own building as a prophetic sign.
6. Whatever the request or proposal, the local church would be wise to consider and discuss its understanding of interfaith coexistence and cooperation, in the context of its local community, preferably before any approach concerning the use of buildings is received. We therefore advise local churches to contact their synod or regional association office, asking for suitable support during such a discussion. These in turn may approach the Baptist Interfaith Working Group or the United Reformed Church's Interfaith Enabling Group.
 7. Amongst items for discussion, we would highlight four issues for consideration:
 - a) Firstly, there is the search for truth and its faithful practice. Engagement with people of other faiths brings valuable challenge and stimulus, and it is part of our Christian vocation;
 - b) Secondly, Baptist and United Reformed churches are part of a tradition that seeks freedom of religious expression and belief for all;
 - c) Thirdly, in offering hospitality to any other faith community a local church is affirming the right of that faith community to find its place within the civic community, rather than making a statement regarding the truth claims of that faith community;
 - d) Fourthly, members of different faith communities may disagree with our understanding of the ways of God, and dialogue may indeed be a challenge to our understanding of others and of ourselves. But it is also an opportunity, both for us and for our partners in dialogue, to reconsider




what we and they actually believe and how that belief is expressed.

8. So here we offer a working document that seeks to provide churches both with questions to consider and with guidelines for good practice when offering people of other faiths hospitality in church buildings.

C. Building relationships in the local community


9. As the multi-cultural and multi-religious nature of our society has developed (see paragraphs 2, 3 and 4), we are aware that there is now great diversity of culture and religion, not only in our large cities but also in many towns and villages. Therefore, when discussing the building of inter-faith relationships within the community, and as part of exploring the issues to be considered in offering hospitality to other faith groups who want to meet in church buildings, we first acknowledge that every context is unique and these questions must be explored with sensitivity and the wisdom of local knowledge. See more here: www.baptist.org.uk/Articles/516106/Religion_or_Belief.aspx
10. Ideally, a church in a multi-faith community will already be building healthy relationships with people of other faiths, both as a matter of its own understanding of Christian witness and mission, and as a matter of its understanding of the rights of faith and conscience within the civic community (see paragraphs 5 and 7 above).
11. Building relationships, welcoming neighbours and being welcomed by them, seeking to understand and appreciate the culture, lifestyle and beliefs of those around us: these are all ways in which Christians interact with the world.



God has shown us that building loving relationships is a way in which we may participate in the spread of the Gospel, and working in partnership with people of other faiths within the local community can bring the church many opportunities to explore the call to reflect the love and life of God. In addition, while clear in our own Christian identity, we recognise that people of other faiths have beliefs and practices which may pose questions concerning our own assumptions and, still more, our level of commitment. This can be an opportunity for growth.

12. A request to use or share a church building could therefore bring an opportunity to deepen relationships and further cooperation between people of different faiths. The use of church buildings, even if only initially on the basis of hiring space, can bring opportunities to build greater understanding and, with it, a constructive relationship. Building relationships across the boundaries of difference is gospel work in the community, especially when it comes to explaining our own faith in ways which others can understand and it can prove transformational for all involved.
13. The Baptist Interfaith Working Group and the United Reformed Church Interfaith Enabling Group welcome the idea that Christians will engage with people of other local faith communities. Being open to, and working to build





relationships with, local faith communities, including offering hospitality, is a positive contribution towards that greater community cohesion and 'unity within diversity' which enables peace and sustainability in our society and indicates a willingness to journey together for the good of all.

14. We therefore encourage local churches to think about the nature of hospitality as they consider the welcome they offer to people of other faiths. Here are a few questions to stimulate discussion:

Can a request for, and the offering of, a place to meet bring an opportunity to get to know people of other faiths and form relationships of trust?

What further opportunities open up when space in a church building is being shared?


How can a church community encourage deeper and mutual engagement with people of other faiths in their local community?

How do we ensure that both 'differences' and 'similarities' are recognised and acknowledged, and that both are dealt with honestly and 'in good faith'?

How do we understand the word 'hospitality'?

What makes for good hospitality?

Could it be that good hospitality opens new avenues for building good personal relationships and for strengthening local community, thinking together about, for example: offering sanctuary / protective hospitality / solidarity / enriching society by walking in the shoes of another person / going the extra mile?




What is the place of mutuality in our seeking to be hospitable? For example, what might it feel like to be a guest of others (perhaps at a meal or other social gathering) in your own building?

Would you respond positively at a later stage to an invitation from those who were, for a while, your guests?

D. In the light of the above, we therefore offer the following guidelines ...

15. Local churches should seek advice and support from their synod or regional association offices in addressing these issues.
16. Local churches should be encouraged to view sympathetically requests by people of other faiths for the use of church halls for religious or social purposes, as a sign of community cohesion.
17. Use of places within the buildings where Christian symbols are normally on display is likely to need careful consideration and sensitive decision-making, both within the local church itself and in discussion with those to whom hospitality is being offered.
18. In every case, the legal question of what is permissible under any relevant historical Trust deed must be clarified. Where legal restrictions currently make it impossible for church properties to be used for worship by people of other faiths, we suggest that consideration be given to removing those restrictions.
19. Under Charity Law, redundant churches, no longer required for Christian worship, may be purchased by people of other faiths.



20. Local churches ought to be aware of the legislative environment in which we are now expected to work.

For example:


- a) In offering hospitality to people of other faiths, churches would be abiding by the spirit of the Equality Act (2010). There are, however, exemptions in this law for religious organisations, and guidance and advice on these exemptions can be found online from the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) Exceptions: charities and religion or belief organisations. Equality and Human Rights Commission (www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/advice-and-guidance/exceptions-charities-and-religion-or-belief-organisations).
- b) Where a local church makes a decision not to allow a particular religion or belief group to make use of its buildings, it is important to be able to explain this decision, not only in theological terms but also in terms of the law and the EHRC guidance, so that any challenge to this decision (e.g. from the local press) may be addressed with confidence.

21. Before offering hospitality to people of other faiths it will be important to indicate the ethos of the host church.

For example, where a church has registered to conduct same sex marriage, this should be made clear as it may determine whether or not the other faith community wishes to enter into an arrangement over the sharing of the building.

If a church has not registered to conduct same sex marriage, but may be considering doing so in the future, it should be noted that the registration process requires the consent of all the faith partners who use the building.

Other practices, such as the use of incense during worship, or alcohol being allowed on the premises, may also need to be clarified.

- 
22. Churches are strongly advised to incorporate within the formal Letting (and/or agreed use) Agreement, a Memorandum of Understanding agreed with the group which is to use the premises on a regular basis. In all cases, a local United Reformed Church must abide by its synod policy on formal letting arrangements.
23. If a local church has concerns about the beliefs or practices of prospective or current guests of another faith, please contact your synod or regional inter-faith officer or adviser, who may wish to consult with the Interfaith Enabling Group (URC) or the Interfaith Working Group (Baptist).
24. It is important for the local church to consider its relations with people of other faiths, and the offering of hospitality, in a careful and considered way, and prayerfully come to a conclusion which reflects its ethos and understanding of the gospel.

Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI) has produced a document, entitled *Acting in God's Love: Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World*, that addresses the theme of engagement between faith communities within a multi-religious society. We recommend that local churches use this document as a resource for engagement in the wider issues raised here.

The Revd Tracey Lewis, the Revd Dr John Parry, Professor Paul Weller, the Revd Philip Brooks, the Revd John Bremner, Andy Lie.





The
United
Reformed
Church

www.urc.org.uk



Written by the URC Interfaith Enabling Group
and the Baptist Interfaith Working Group.
© United Reformed Church 2021.

Produced by the Communications Team of the
United Reformed Church.

The United Reformed Church, Church House,
86 Tavistock Place, London WC1H 9RT
020 7916 2020