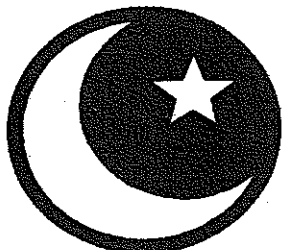
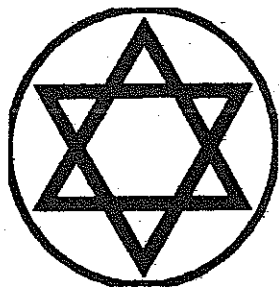
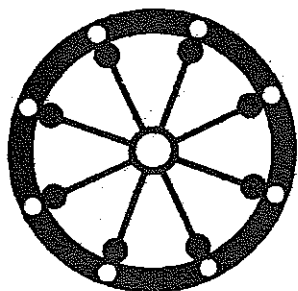
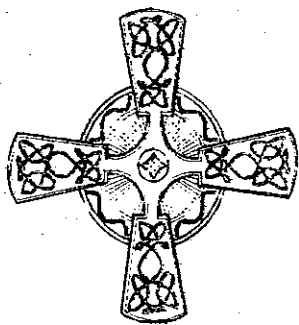


*Inter-Faith Consultative Group
The Board of Mission
The General Synod of the
Church of England*



ROOM FOR RELIGION:

SHARED FACILITIES FOR RELIGIOUS USE

A Consultative Document

Introduction

This paper offers principles and guidelines for those who find themselves asked for advice about the construction, adaptation or use of a building, a set of rooms or a single area which is to be used for worship and prayer by people from a variety of faith traditions. These may be individuals, informal groups such as families, or organised congregations. The paper is written from a Christian perspective and assumes that Christian clergy and leaders increasingly have to find answers to the questions involved in such situations. It attempts to deal with a wide variety of institutions and so cannot offer very specific advice but rather general but important principles.

Christopher Lamb
Secretary: Inter-Faith Consultative Group
May 1998

How does the Situation Arise?

Hospitals, colleges, prisons, airports, and other public institutions with no particular religious affiliation often include a chapel or a room for prayer or religious activities. Sometimes these were donated by past benefactors who assumed that they would be used exclusively by Christians, and even in some cases made it explicit that they were not for use by Roman Catholics. **This situation has often resulted in particular responsibilities for the Church of England chaplain, who may be regarded by the institution as its religious representative, and expected to operate on behalf of all faith traditions.** Sometimes a chapel has been retained for Christian worship, but is made available occasionally for other faiths. This can be a difficult arrangement.

In other cases institutions have set aside space more recently for those who have asked for a place to pray. In this circumstance it may not be clear who is responsible for its daily use. In almost every case there are severe constraints on the institution in terms of space and money, and it is simply not possible, even if it were desirable, to provide a different place for members of every major faith who may wish to pray or simply be quiet.

The conventional terminology used to indicate the premises and people involved, - *chapel, chaplain, prayer room, quiet room* - may mask the reality of the new situation that has arisen. For example it may be Muslim students who are the keenest to have the use of a room for prayer in their college, and the traditional terms have no place in their vocabulary. There may be others, especially in hospitals, who would not want to label themselves with any specific religious affiliation, but who nevertheless want a place where they can feel free to be quiet without distractions.

Who makes the Decisions?

As noted above the Church of England or other Christian chaplain may find him or herself in a position of particular influence and responsibility in determining the character and use of such premises. This may not be an enviable position, for people often have strong and mutually contradictory convictions about the proper use of premises for prayer and worship. It is important for the Churches' representative to be in partnership and dialogue from the beginning with all those who have a right to be involved. This will include at least

- the administrators of the institution concerned
- the potential users of the premises, including members of staff and visitors (eg. patients' families)
- representatives of the local faith communities
- chaplaincy team colleagues (if any)
- the chaplain's own institutional and Church line managers

The last category points to a question which needs to be answered as early as possible: **Who is to be in charge of the day to day use of the premises, and to whom will that person be responsible?**

Experience suggests that the time required to consult adequately is often seriously under-estimated. For many people the idea of premises used by a variety of faith communities is strange and even threatening. A long period of consultation and dialogue may prove an education for them in some very new thinking. Even if objections finally remain, it is important for these to be expressed eirenicly and as far as possible with sensitivity to those with other views.

It may be necessary to challenge the assumptions of secular administrators, eg. that a common space for corporate worship (as distinct from personal prayer or meditation) is regarded as possible and desirable by those who are committed to a particular faith.

Who will monitor the Situation/Space made available?

Such prior consultation should help to obviate the problems which might otherwise arise. It can happen, especially in colleges of higher or further education, that premises set aside for prayer by people of all faiths come in practice to be used almost exclusively by Muslims. Obviously those Muslims who use such premises every day, and even several times in the day because of the Islamic practice of prayer, will come to regard them as their own. Other people may begin to feel reluctant to use them, despite initial publicity stating the clear intention of multi-faith use. A similar appropriation of the premises can arise in other ways, eg. if Hindus insist on a permanent place there for an image. Some Muslims and Christians will feel excluded by such a act. If ignored the problem will grow, since the rapid turnover of students makes for very short institutional memories.

In all circumstances there is a need for clear lines of communication and accountability within the institution. Some of the questions about who decides and who monitors will be determined by the answer to the prior question of *Who pays? Who pays for the furnishing, for the artefacts, for the salaries of religious personnel, etc?* But if much responsibility falls almost by default on the Christian chaplain, the administrators of the institution need to be aware that he or she has several different kinds of accountability. He or she is accountable to the institution, especially if it is his or her employer; to the Church of which he or she is a minister; to any colleagues there may be, and to the faith communities.

It will help greatly in mutual understanding of the religious issues involved if there is general acceptance of some widely used principles of inter-religious ethics. The most accessible of these is the Code proposed by the Inter Faith Network, entitled ***Building Good Relations Between Different Faith Communities***. This document was put together by representatives of eight different faith communities, and has been found invaluable by many educational and social welfare institutions.

How do we use religious symbols?

The sharing of religious buildings by several different faith communities will inevitably focus attention on the religious symbols commonly used in each tradition. The symbols of communities, like a national flag, will often represent for people many of the causes to which they feel loyal. Such things should therefore be authentic and appropriate.

Moreover the way that such symbols are treated and handled will be very important. The context will determine their precise significance, but it should be remembered that prisons, hospitals and even airports are places where people are likely to feel vulnerable, and so perhaps more concerned about religious symbolism than elsewhere. **The apparently careless or inappropriate treatment of symbols may be the occasion of great hurt or offence.**

Those responsible should question whether it is appropriate to have, as is sometimes the case, a series of cupboards containing artefacts for the particular faith, marked on the outside with a cross, a crescent, a Star of David, etc.

Any religious symbol needs to be assessed as to:

- how it is used and understood by the community who own it
- how it appears to those of other religious traditions, and
- how it appears to the general public

Scriptures in particular need to be treated with great respect, and not as any other book. It would be unlikely, for example, that it would be possible to store the *Guru Granth Sahib* to the satisfaction of the Sikh community.

Principles of Use

- A sacred space needs in particular to be a safe area, where there can be some guarantee that people will behave appropriately. Accessibility has to be balanced with the possibility of misuse. This may present special difficulties in a mental hospital where patients may have a keen concern with religion in some form.
- There may be particular need to provide women users with a sense of security and privacy. This may even require a separate entrance for women.
- It may be right to set aside a space where people are asked to remove their shoes, as is the custom in places of prayer throughout Asia, and as is obligatory in gurdwaras, mosques and temples.
- As far as possible the whole area needs to offer flexibility, and be suitable for use by either individuals or groups.

Guidelines of Design

- It will be a great advantage if the location of the facility can be as central as possible, if not at the heart of the institution. Signs pointing to it need to be clear, inviting and easy to understand. This may require translations into a variety of languages. People should be able to find it easily, and if disabled, enter it without difficulty.
- Design will be determined by the precise use of the area, eg. whether it will be for occasional or regular multi-faith use, and whether that will include 'congregational' use by a particular faith-community temporarily excluding others.
- The guiding principle should be simplicity, while avoiding a merely functional approach. Windows and heaters tend to reduce flexibility, but much can be done with careful lighting.
- There will be a need for an anteroom, perhaps with facilities for shoes and for washing.
- A large area and an inner core space are both desirable, since there will be more than one kind of activity. Curtains or dividers can often be used to achieve this.
- An office for the chaplain and a private interviewing room situated nearby would be a great advantage.
- It should be possible to make music available.

**This Consultative Document is offered by the
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