

Presence & Engagement Guidelines: Shared Prayer Spaces

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.

Background

In a wide range of Institutions the development of multi-faith prayer provision has resulted in new opportunities for Christian engagement with other faith communities. This guidance is to support Anglicans involved in the development of such a space and addresses some issues, difficulties and possibilities which multi-faith prayer provision presents.

A key political driver for the development of these spaces is the recognition of religious diversity, combined with a policy of creating equal opportunity for people to practice their own religion or belief. This approach can be both permissive and restrictive.

A model of pluralism is behind much diversity policy; the assumption that religions are varieties of a similar thing, which need to be managed. Sometimes a ‘one size fits all’ approach is encountered – that provided for one faith group must be provided for all, irrespective of the particular needs.

Theological considerations

Prayer

The capacity to pray and worship is fundamental to human nature. In Christian terms humans were created to enter into relationship with God through prayer and worship. To engage in prayer and worship is to discover what it means to be fully human created in the image of God and is central to human searching after God ‘in [whom] we live and move and have our being’ (Acts 17.26-28). The Holy Spirit is

at work in all humanity, stirring people into prayer and worship, making it possible for them to respond to God's promptings.

Christians should take every opportunity to support and nurture the human desire to pray and to worship, while also being ready to enter into dialogue about the nature of prayer and worship. To encourage prayer is live in the hope that such responses to God will be both welcomed and transformed in God's eschatological future.

Sharing Space

God's creation is to be shared – we are all ultimately guests of a divine host, who entrusts us with treasures we must share. Anglican chaplains can help to ensure that a place of prayer is experienced as a welcoming and inclusive invitation through their own prayer and meditation; by developing relationships of trust and friendship, through encouraging conversation and by listening to the concerns of others.

The Blessing of Strangers

While people who seem different to us can often be perceived as difficult to get on with there are many Biblical examples showing that God is revealed through encounters with strangers. Our encounters with people of different faiths can lead us deeper into the very heart of God. To have these opportunities on a daily basis is a blessing for many chaplains. To have this observed by others counters the commonly held belief that religious difference leads to conflict and argument.

Visible Presence

Just as a parish church is 'owned' by attenders and non-attenders alike so the presence of a place of prayer in an institution will be 'owned' by many in that setting including those not known to the chaplains. To sustain a sense of sacred space in a secular setting is a powerful message to all who walk by.

Practicalities

Differing Needs

One of the challenges is in offering equal opportunities for differing needs. Different faiths have very different relationships with space for meditation, prayer or worship including different understandings of how such spaces are approached, how important they are to the practice of faith, how they are furnished and decorated and what, if any, religious artefacts are necessary or desirable. There are also differences of approach within individual world faiths due to religious differences or cultural context. A key principle is not to assume that you understand the needs of others, even within your own faith community; but always to ask the question about actual need or preference.

Furniture/Furnishings

Some will expect chairs, others will expect to use the floor with prayer mats or cushions. Some will want to sit, stand and kneel. A combination of chairs and significant open prayer space may work as a compromise. Other furnishings could include an altar for the Eucharist, statues or shrines, the Qiblah or direction of Mecca, votive candles.

Shoes

Some will expect to remove shoes on entering a space for meditation or prayer, others will not be comfortable with this. Shoe racks should be considered.

Washing Facilities

Ritual washing is a significant aspect of some traditions. For Muslims the provision of nearby wudu facilities significantly enhances their use of the space.

Decoration

Explore the extent to which different faith and belief groups expect the space to be decorated, and if the expectation is for representational or abstract art.

Gender segregation

For some gender separation is the norm for worship or prayer. Muslims may appreciate a curtain to divide prayer space for men and women.

Noise levels

Consider whether the shared space depends on a request for silence, or is the need for speech and singing of greater significance.

Texts and storage

The importance and use of sacred texts varies considerably, as does the way in which texts can be handled and positioned. Relative positions when stored may be perceived as making a statement about the honour given to a particular sacred text. It is also necessary to consider the appropriate storage of artefacts or whether provision should be made to cover these.

Different usage of shared space

The difference in the way people make use of shared spaces can create different senses of ownership of the space. Regular users may wish to shape the space more, others may perceive this as dominating the space. Careful listening and open dialogue may be required to enable people to work with the differences.

Management issues

User representation on a management group is recommended as well as good communications with faith groups in the locality and the host organization. Also consider who holds the responsibility for day to day management, and how they relate to a management group/body and to those who control the space within the wider institution. Explore what guidelines and information for users might be displayed, including service/prayer times, festivals, whether and how the space can be booked, and safeguarding the space from inappropriate uses such as social gatherings or consumption of food.

Useful Links

Manchester University project on multi-faith spaces:

www.sed.manchester.ac.uk/architecture/research/mfs

Recovering the Calm - Best practice guidelines for prayer rooms and quiet space at work, St Ethelburga's Centre for Reconciliation and Peace:

http://www.efbelief.org.uk/data/files/publications/498/Recovering_the_Calm.pdf