

GUIDELINES FOR THE USE OF CHURCH BUILDINGS by other Churches, Faith Communities and Voluntary Groups.

Committee for Community Relations Committee for Art, Architecture and Heritage

Black majority churches, Other Faiths and community groups often have real difficulty finding places to worship or space for activities which serve the local community. As a result, Catholic parishes and schools, especially those located in poor urban areas, are sometimes asked to allow local groups, churches or other religious communities the use of their premises.

Such requests take many different forms; and they invariably evoke a tension between our natural concern for the needs of the Catholic community and a wish to offer hospitality, to share our resources with our neighbours and to be of service to the local community especially in poor areas.

There is no simple rule for such situations. The following reflections and suggestions are intended to assist those who may be faced with such request.

1 Clarifying the request

There are a number of important clarifying questions to be asked when faced with a request for the use of premises:

- What premises are involved—a church or chapel, a crypt or hall, part of a school or some other space?
- Who is requesting use of the premises—a Christian community an ecumenical group, a non-Christian faith community, a cult or new religious movement, a neighbourhood group or a secular or business organisation?
- For what purpose is the space to be used— worship, education, community service, commercial activity or a private/family function?
- Is the request for a single event or for occasional or regular use?
- Will the requested use interrupt ordinary parish activity?
- Is the motivation from the parish's point of view a matter of charity/hospitality, community involvement or financial gain?
- Will the parish be involved in some level of real partnership with those using the premises?
- Is the Catholic community likely to be sympathetic to the request? Can they be persuaded to be sympathetic?

The Process of Discernment

After the above questions have been clarified, the following reflections may assist a process of discernment.

a Sacred Space

Within the Catholic Community there are different views concerning "sacred space". Even the church building itself is seen differently by different Catholics, as either

"domus Dei" (house of God)

"domus ecclesiae" (house of the People of God)

Vatican II tended to move from the first to the second, without discarding the first. If the Church is considered the house of the People of God, then the use of the church will depend in part on who is seen as the "People of God".

Different Christian churches and different faith communities have very different ideas regarding sacred space. Some have no such formal concept. They may or may not have an implicit sense of "sacred space".

b The Altar and Other Symbolic Furnishings

The Altar, Ambo and Chair each have a symbolic significance to Catholics that they would not necessarily have to other Christians. The rites expressed at the consecration of an altar constitute it as symbolic of the presence of Christ. The chair of teaching where the priest presides is also a symbol of Christ. Other churches, however, with a different concept of ministry, might not want to "preside" at worship and might not easily appreciate this symbolism.

These considerations are not fundamental obstacles to sharing a church building. However, they may be things that have to be discussed with those with whom one is considering such an arrangement. For instance Catholics understand these symbolic furnishings as permanent fixtures which should not ordinarily be moved.

Other sacramentals may also have to be explained or discussed in order to avoid misunderstanding. These include: crucifixes, candles, holy water, statues and stations of the cross.

c The Tabernacle

The Tabernacle, where the Blessed Sacrament is reserved, is often a focus of sensitivity. There are different customs as to where the place of reservation is located. Since Vatican II it has come to be seen as proper to have the place of reservation outside the main Sanctuary. The introduction to the Roman Missal envisages it as outside the main Sanctuary. However, this is not yet the norm in this country.

In some Churches the place of reservation is in a separate chapel, visible from the main body of the Church, but separated by doors that can be shut. This leaves

the Church itself for the celebration of the Eucharist and, when the Eucharist is not being celebrated, for other appropriate purposes.

If the Blessed Sacrament is not present, there is no reason in principle why the Church itself cannot be used by other Christian groups for worship. Nonetheless, it will be important in any use that is allowed to take care that any irreverence or scandal is carefully avoided.

d Crypt or Hall

There should be much less sensitivity connected with sharing the use of premises other than the church building itself.

There is no reason in principle why a church hall should not be used by Other Faith communities even for worship. There are examples from different areas of the world of church premises being used by Other Faith communities for worship. There are many examples of Christian groups using church halls for worship and community groups using such premises for a variety of purposes.

It might sometimes be necessary to take care to ensure that a visiting group does not cause offence by using the principal worship space as a meeting place prior to their congregating in the crypt or hall.

e Schools

Sometimes Catholic schools with pupils from Other Faith communities are asked to provide a prayer room for their use. There is no reason in principle why such a request should be refused.

In other situations, Catholic schools may wish to consider allowing local community groups the use of their premises outside school hours. This can be a way of developing good relations between the school and the local community; but questions of security and payment of teachers or caretakers for extra hours may require careful negotiation.

f. Which Groups

There is no simple rule for deciding which churches, faith communities and local groups should be allowed to use church premises. However, with regard to Christian churches, membership of the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland (CCBI) could be one possible indicator. The CCBI now includes a number of black majority churches as well as mainstream denominations.

3 Shared Churches and Schools

In recent years, in this country, the Ecumenical Movement has seen the emergence of shared churches—i.e. a permanent arrangement by which two or more Christian Churches share the use of a church building. There are currently more than twenty places in England and Wales where Catholic parishes share the use of a church building with the Church of England, the Methodist Church and/or the United Reformed Church.

Such permanent arrangements suggest that there should be no reason in principle why more flexible arrangements with smaller churches and other religious communities or secular groups should not be possible. The **experiences of Catholic parishes involved in** shared-church arrangements may also be helpful to those contemplating opening their premises to others. A list of those shared churches involving Catholics is included in the appendix. (For further discussion of this topic see "Shared Churches" by Nigel Dees, *Liturgy*, Vol. 2, no 5, June 1978. Also see "Pastoral Practice: Sharing Services" by John O'Toole, *Priest & People*, January 1995)

There are a few examples of inter-church schools currently in existence. (For a discussion of one such experience see "Roman Catholics and Anglicans United in School" by Sr Barbara Brent RJM, *Priests and People*, January 1995)

4 Ecumenical Discussion and Experience

Since the early 1970s the topic of sharing church buildings has been under serious discussion in ecumenical circles; and in a number of situations mainstream Christian Churches have entered into sharing arrangements with smaller churches.

Churches Together in England have produced a report of a working party entitled "The Sharing and Sale of Church Buildings". This brief document traces the history of the ecumenical discussions and offers recommendations and guidelines both for guest churches and host churches. It is a very useful pamphlet for Catholic parishes contemplating sharing its premises with others.