

Church Facilities Hiring Policy

St John's receives a variety of requests for use of its facilities. We are aware that our building functions as a community space, and also of the need to maximise income in an age when it is very hard for a congregation to be able to fund all the necessary costs of the church and its work on its own. We have a longstanding partnership with various organisations who use the space for non-religious purposes, especially the Farncombe Music Club and the Associated Board of the Royal School of Music. We are currently investigating refurbishing the church kitchen as a means of providing better facilities both for ourselves and to market to potential users, whether individuals or groups.

However, there are sensitivities over the use of church facilities for particular purposes. Objections to potential uses which might prove lucrative to the church can be made on various grounds, ranging from ideological inappropriateness (arguments over whether yoga can be categorised as a non-Christian religious practice, for instance) to noise, cleaning issues or availability of the space to church members. Of course different people will choose to draw the line in different places, and it can even be the case that issues which may be particularly problematic in some eras may not be to the forefront of our minds in others. It still ought to be possible, and in fact is necessary, for the church as a whole to come to some broad conclusions about use of its space that most people will accept.

This policy is an attempt to work out reasons for agreeing or refusing to host a particular event.

A. The Significance and Purpose of the Church Building

In past times churches housed all sorts of secular activities and this is often used as justification for doing so again today, whether those purposes are play groups or post offices. However, before relatively recent times the church was the only communal space available in many communities, and that is not the case today. In Farncombe there are many other spaces where secular activities can take place, and we should not, perhaps, be completely controlled by our very real need to make our facilities pay their way as much as they can.

We can base our thinking on remembering what a church is *for*. It has a *sacramental* character; firstly, because the sacraments of the Church of Jesus Christ take place within it (and the lamp of the Presence burns constantly before the Aumbry to remind us of this), and also because it functions as a sacramental presence itself. What we mean by this is that it is the place where God has promised he will be present to meet his people; he is present everywhere, but the church building represents his promise to 'hear us when we pray in faith'. That means the church itself, as much as the activities that take place within it, acts as a window into heaven. And we know that the values, priorities and nature of heaven are different from and in many ways at odds with those of the world. Although sin and weakness penetrate the Church because it is composed of mere human beings, yet those human beings are aiming at something higher, and have their hearts set on God's Holy Spirit; that's why churches have gargoyles facing outside, and angels facing inside. This is what the church building means. It's the only space set aside to represent the highest aspirations of our human character, and should be safe from the worst aspects of the everyday world, even if it doesn't always manage it. It should be a place where souls can rest from the temptations that afflict them the rest of the time.

B. The Church as a Safe Spiritual Space – Sins and Virtues

A useful way of thinking about what those temptations may be is to remember the Seven Deadly Sins – namely, in case we may have forgotten, Pride, Anger, Sloth, Lust, Gluttony, Avarice and Envy. Churches should be very wary of introducing activities into their premises which are open to these things. Of course, eating and enjoying food is not gluttony, nor is finding legitimate joy in playing a piece of music well, pride; two people may discover they fancy each other while dancing but that does not make it essentially a lustful activity. Nevertheless, keep these things in mind.

It may be even more fruitful to consider, as well as the Seven Deadly Sins, the corresponding Virtues of Humility, Peace, Faith, Chastity, Moderation, Generosity and Charity. The activities a church sponsors or permits to take place, or even advertises as taking place elsewhere, ought to promote or at least not undermine the virtues.

Alcohol is a particular issue, not because there is essentially a problem with it, or even because some people find themselves addicted to it, but because it tends to lower inhibitions and therefore can lead us to do and say things which we wouldn't when sober. Alcohol is responsible for great social disturbance and churches ought to question the casual way this drug is treated in wider society. We may feel this is compounded when alcohol is not merely consumed on church premises, but profit is made from its sale.

C. General Principles

In accordance with these thoughts, St John's will not host the following sorts of events:

1. Any event with a definitely non-Christian religious ethos and nature, except in special circumstances; including, for instance, mystical or occult activities such as palmistry, or more advanced forms of yoga.
2. Any event involving the selling of goods for non-charitable purposes, except in special circumstances (for instance, should it ever become feasible to move a community facility such as the post office to the church premises, or as a means of promoting social entrepreneurship).
3. Any event involving the promotion of unhealthy body-image or excessive habits of consumption, for instance fashion shows (unless these were for the purpose of displaying students' work or some similar cause).
4. Any event charging excessive ticket prices, or promoting sorts of consumption which are not an option for the general public (this might apply to corporate dinners).
5. Any event involving elements tending to arouse sexual desire (this wouldn't exclude, for instance, music or drama which merely dealt with sexual matters).
6. Any event involving elements tending to glamorise violence, for instance violent sport (though not excluding martial arts whose focus is on self-defence).
7. Any event sponsored by specific political parties, or political organisations whose aims tend towards social disintegration, arousing fear or mistrust.
8. Any event allowing patrons to drink alcohol to the point of intoxication.
9. Any event held by a potential commercial hirer whose business is held to be contrary to the ideals of the Church.
10. Any event involving elements which treat cruelty and unkindness lightly (for instance some comedy productions).

These restrictions would apply to both the church and the room. In addition, while permitting alcohol purchased in the Church Room to be brought into the church during sit-down concerts or theatrical events, the PCC should not allow alcohol to be sold in the sacramental space of the church itself.

In some circumstances clarification about the nature or elements of an event may be required and negotiation may be appropriate. In all these matters the Rector or both Churchwardens of St John's constitute the final authority.