



Rooms to let

Hiring out your church premises

A28 Articles series: Administration

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So you've decided to hire out all or part of your church premises for the first time, to make these available to other users in a more extensive way than before, or to review your present lettings system. This article is designed to help you think through the issues.

It can be used as a check-list or you may prefer simply to select the sections that are most relevant for you. There are nine, divided into three parts.

US AND THEM

- 1 Clarify purpose and vision
- 2 Assess the spaces available
- 3 Identify your target users

NUTS AND BOLTS

- 4 Fix the pricing structure
- 5 Take advice on legal details
- 6 Beware potential problems

SERVE AND VOLLEY

- 7 Serve professionally
- 8 Set up management and staffing
- 9 Market your product

The article does not cover formal long-term leases.

Hiring out your premises can be a wonderful way of demonstrating good stewardship of the assets you have inherited or built. Many church buildings remain underused for much of the week. It can also be a great means of developing links with your local community and encouraging people onto your site in an unthreatening setting.

But hiring out rooms, or even your worship area, is a business venture: you are selling a product in a market place with competitors. It's worth doing it properly. Here's how.

Us and them

This first part looks at you and your motivation, at the product that you have to offer, and at your possible customers.

1 Clarify purpose and vision

It sounds so obvious but, if you are wise, you will first consider carefully why you are hiring out your buildings (purpose) and what you are praying will happen as a result (vision). Here are four broad purposes.

A Generating income

There is nothing wrong with maximising the return from the financial resources tied up in church buildings. If you have rooms that are available for much of the week (a product) and people in your area have a need for meeting and activity spaces (a market), it makes sense to offer your product for hire (the sale). You have a responsibility to be a good steward of your assets and you may need to increase church income.

Be aware though that there will be a range of costs that have to be taken into account (see section 4) and demand from the marketplace may not be exactly known, so a simple business plan is required. It may be necessary to invest funds first (in upgrading premises or providing equipment or staffing) before you can go ahead.

B Serving the community

The purpose for your lettings policy should flow from your church purpose. If part of that relates to practical service to your local community, then the offer of your buildings to community groups and individuals would be a natural part of that.

There are several implications of such a purpose.

- 1 It may mean you want to hire out rooms to certain groups at below market rates or even free of charge.
- 2 You may be expected to comply with certain requirements that could conflict with your own Christian values or your church's trust deed. This is especially likely if you receive grants from your Local Authority or other funding bodies.
- 3 There may also be conflict with your own requirements for church activities, because either you want the use of the same space at the same time or external usage causes damage to property or equipment.

C Enabling Christian outreach

You may decide that your buildings can be used for more evangelistic purposes.

- 1 You want to use rooms for running area-wide Alpha-type courses and other specifically Christian activities which seek to draw new people in.
- 2 You include evangelistic displays at the entrance and waiting areas in the buildings, or you have church members loitering with intent.
- 3 If in appropriate locations, you may want to use your church as a community or drop-in centre and see this as a distinct aspect of your outreach ministry through its staffing.

D Sharing your facilities

This is more likely to apply to your worship area. It may be that your church building has wonderful acoustics and is in demand as a venue for concerts. Or you may have one of the few large spaces in your region and be used for large-scale events. Perhaps you can use your buildings to lay on national activities or to offer as a recording studio.

Purpose leads to vision

So what is your real purpose? If it is a mixture of two or more of this list, which is the priority? How does this all fit in with your church's stated purpose? If it does not do this, how can church members be expected to understand what it is all about and support the use of their buildings as you hope?

But if your purpose tells you why you are letting out your buildings today, it is helpful to some idea of how you would like things to look five years from now. In Christian terms, what do you have the faith to believe God might fulfil if you are faithful to your purpose, or what are you praying will result? Here are some possible 'visions' from the four purposes above.

- 1 The business being handled superbly, with high satisfaction levels from all users, and the provision of a steady surplus contributing at least 20% of church income.

- 2 The church widely seen by the local community as the key provider of local services so that when needs arise people naturally come first to the church for help.
- 3 A steady movement of people becoming Christian disciples from little or no church background with the use of your premises playing a key role in most of their stories.
- 4 As full a diary as you want of concerts, major meetings and other events that mean that the building is being used to its capacity, utilising all its good features.

Unless you have been able to articulate some clear ideas of what things might look like in a few years' time, unless your leaders are sold on such a vision, and unless this is part of your wider church vision, you are unlikely to make great progress.

What you need for any Management Group (see section 8) are business enthusiasts: people who can see that you need to run your hiring activity as a good business, but who also have a level of excitement as to what this could achieve for God. This will mean monitoring progress at fixed points each year to assess whether the lettings policy you have devised is proving successful or not.

So just how committed are your congregation to the use of your buildings and the hiring out of your rooms? Aim to make it a central feature of your church's overall plan.

2 Assess the spaces available

It is now necessary to take a realistic look at your site before you consider what kind of people will want to book the spaces you have. If you have only a large and draughty hall with wooden flooring and a high ceiling, you are unlikely to attract business users for training sessions. Or small committees.

Room space

Map out exactly what you have to offer. You may have a large hall, a small hall, two small committee rooms and a foyer. But if one of the committee rooms leads off the hall, you cannot let that when someone else is using the hall. If another room is up a steep flight of steps, the Arthritis Group will not be booking.

Having spaces with partitions can be helpful as you can offer different layouts and sizes. But the sound-proofing may not be up to protecting Mr Brass' trumpet lesson from the Backside Committee meeting.

For each space consider floor area, room height,

accessibility, heat, light, ventilation, access to refreshments and loos, safety factors, floor covering, sight lines, etc.

Don't forget your main worship area in this. It may be just right for major speaker meetings, concerts or for use by a homeless congregation. But in these cases consider any restrictions you would want to apply.

Parking space

This is more important than you may realise. If you want to attract business users for small conferences, you may need almost as many parking spaces as people coming. Parking will be one of the first points a professional Event Organiser will raise with you. Consider:

- 1 The number of parking spaces you have on your site (and signage to help newcomers find the area and park efficiently).
- 2 Spaces for organisers to unload equipment close to their rooms.
- 3 The availability during weekdays and in evenings / weekends of nearby street parking or public car parks, which then need to be shown on clear maps on your website and in print.
- 4 The issue of church members needing to park at the same time as an external booking.
- 5 Short-term parking for parents dropping off and picking up children for parties, dancing classes or youth events, especially if a second set of parents arrive at the same time as the first are collecting.
- 6 Disturbance to neighbours as users park along their streets or turn in their drives.

Reception space

Reception involves your own administration – a place for your Administrator or Receptionist to be based and therefore by the main entrance to keep an eye on people arriving and leaving. But you will also need waiting areas, such as for parents waiting to collect children after activities. On a cold winter's night or wet afternoon you cannot expect them to wait outside.

You also need to consider how groups gain access and then leave the building. If you have staff on duty at all times (including evenings and weekends) there is no problem. But if you expect hirers to collect a key in advance and return it later, you need clearly documented locking-up procedures and a considerable degree of trust in people who use your facilities.

Storage space

If you have longer-term lets, your customers may well need storage space so they do not have to remove everything each week. The most obvious example would be a playgroup, but keep fit, healthcare and social service users would value a lockable cupboard or catering storage.

You also need to consider the storage of your own tables and chairs. If children are running around a hall, you don't want piles of stacking chairs or collapsible tables just leaning against a wall somewhere. Accidents will happen.

Kitchen space

You will probably need some kind of area for preparing hot and cold drinks safely and then serving them into the meeting spaces by hatch or trolley. This also entails washing up and storage facilities.

But you may also have full kitchen facilities to offer which raises issues of health and safety, food hygiene, regulations for access, cleaning, and so on.

If you let your kitchen be hired by groups responsible for their own catering, you will need to decide on what certification you require and whether you should request deposits for possible breakages.

Loos

Consider quantity, quality, cleaning and provision for changing babies and use by young children and the disabled. The Over 60's club will not appreciate a visit to a Victorian water closet through the vestry. Two loos will not be enough if you have a group of 20 just stopping for a quick refreshments break in a conference.

Noise and access issues

What's it going to be like for neighbours if you have a late night-party taking place with loud dance music pounding away for two or three hours? And what if a church group is trying to meet in the room next door? You also need to consider disabled access and facilities and check that you are in tune with the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act.

3 Identify your target users

Here is an analysis of the kind of customers to have in mind when setting up or reviewing your present list of users. There is clearly overlap within this list. Every church is different in terms

of facilities and location so you need to build your own list appropriate for your site.

Consider your own unique selling points: perhaps you have a rural church centre set in quiet surroundings (ideal for another church's Quiet Day) or a High Street location in a multi-cultural area (where ethnic groups are likely to book you). Here is a check-list:

- commercial customers – the local Council for a health-care or social services activity, a small business running a training event, business meetings of all kinds;
- local community groups – activities such as Pilates, Zumba, ballet classes, Judo, bowls, other sports activities or committee meetings for local action groups, MP's surgery;
- choirs and music groups – for concerts, practice sessions;
- children's activities – playgroup, Parents and Toddlers, after-school club;
- youth activities – Scouts/Guides, clubs;
- other churches – for Saturday awaydays, staff meetings, Sunday services for those that have no premises of their own;
- individuals – for music tuition, family gatherings;
- charities – educational groups, speaker events, annual meetings;
- ethnic groups – parties, various meetings, other faith groups;
- parties – for children, teens and adults, wedding receptions.

This last point is a major earner for many churches, but there can be problems arising from noise, over-running and lack of clearing up.

You may even have a dual-use building (doubling as a health or community centre), but these are special cases.

Here are some ideas of how to search out possible customers.

For longer-term bookings

You may be in the fortunate position of being in demand from groups who want to make long-term commitments (see part 6 for some of the dangers, though). One or two of these can give stability to your finances. Here are typical examples.

- 1 A local Parents and Toddlers or playgroup, whether run by church members or not.

Be aware that standards need to be high for playgroups with OFSTED inspections, and this could have significant impact on what such groups will expect from the buildings. There may also need to be significant storage areas for toys and equipment.

- 2 Counselling, health-care and fitness groups may well be looking for a weekly booking or more. Scouts and Guides and other youth movements will be similar.

For mainly daytime customers

Remember that commercial customers will expect quality facilities and most will need to find parking. If the quality of your rooms is poor, you may not find business users want to hire.

- 3 Using the 'one-mile rule' (many organisations are looking for sites no more than one mile from their base), take a map, draw a circle at one mile, and research that area thoroughly for the kind of groups listed below.
- 4 Look in particular for small charities (go to www.charitycommission.gov.uk then 'Find a charity' then 'Advanced search' or www.oscr.org.uk in Scotland). Try also hospices, nursing homes, health centres, schools, youth activities, caring professions, playgroups, etc.
- 5 Take note of organisations such as Business Link, Chamber of Commerce, NHS Blood and Transplant, Rotary Groups and local community groups. Business Link should also offer you resources on how to go about marketing yourself.
- 6 Social Services at your local Council can prove to be a rich source of bookings.

Visit them in person to show what you have and check on what they might be needing over the next few years.

- 7 Scour your local newspapers for several weeks looking for stories of local organisations and advertisements for local services. Add any possibilities to your list.

For evening and weekend customers

Evening groups such as these may not be quite so particular about quality, but there need to be waiting areas for parents collecting children, and safety features where young children may be running around.

- 8 Local residents groups, parent organisations through local schools, ethnic groups.
- 9 Local dance and exercise groups (Zumba is the new big thing). Yoga may give you a problem.
- 10 You may find that local music teachers need small rooms for teaching instruments to children after school.
- 11 Children's parties prove to be a good source for one-off events, and often on a Saturday when there may not be such heavy demand for other bookings. Though one-off, word quickly gets round local schools and you can find each booking generates another one.
- 12 On a larger scale, concerts and musical events will normally be evening and weekend events.

We come back to actual marketing to your target groups in section 9. But by now you have completed your basic research about yourselves and your potential customers.

Nuts and bolts

The next three sections tackle some of the detail of the market place: the price you charge, the legislation you have to follow and the dangers to be prepared for.

4 Fix the pricing structure

But how much do you charge? By now you will have a good idea of your key purposes in hiring out rooms and this will underlie everything written in this section. You may need to maximise your return on this asset or you may want to serve your community by offering facilities at below-

market rates.

The key point here is to differentiate between business users who expect good quality but who are prepared to pay for it and local and community groups who are looking for reasonable quality at a really keen price. You may want one group to subsidise the other.

Research the local market

First, find out which other institutions are hiring out rooms in your locality. These may include other churches, community halls, business centres, hotels, conference venues. You need to discover their pricing structure and get some idea of the standard of the facilities they are offering. Your customers are going to need to see you give added value compared with the market in some way. This may be because of your quality of rooms, the extras that you offer (such as catering), your location, your facilities such as parking, your efficiency and friendliness ... or your pricing.

Most hirers will buy on price and then select from similar prices on the extras on offer. This means you are unlikely to be able to set rates that are above your competitors unless the benefits are obvious. If the quality of your rooms is not so good, you will need to price yourself accordingly.

Be sensitive as to how you go about your research. Never approach the users of other facilities. Check out websites, get hold of promotional literature and ask hirers direct. You will presumably not want to have a cut-throat attitude to St Basil's Church up the road, but you can be realistic when comparing yourselves with the Fawltly Spires Hotel.

Fix a simple, one-tariff structure

Show your prices on a straightforward chart so they are completely clear and you are not hiding any extras. The normal method is to give hourly rates and clarify whether VAT is chargeable or not. You may decide that you want to charge different rates for daytime compared with evening and weekends because business users will probably pay more than individuals and community groups.

If you publish different tariffs for different groups (eg. a second tariff for local community groups) you run into trouble in defining where the boundary lies. People will try to persuade you they are really a community group even if they are a global corporation. So if you then define the boundary tightly (eg. reduced rates for registered charities) you find that the National Trust gets the discount but the Back Street Residents Association does not.

Consider, instead, publishing one tariff (which might have different rates for daytime compared with evening and weekend) with a clear message that there are discounts available for particular types of group with details for those who email or phone. This generates personal contact which you want in any case. But the receptionist or whoever handles enquiries needs to know exactly

how this works and to be able to give the right answers to enquirers, although these should never be finalised until the booking is in writing. Once you publish all your discounts, you can end up with problems.

Charge for all extras

The advice of most people in this market is to charge for all extras provided. If a group needs to use the fixed data projector, if a large gathering needs a PA system, if people are using flipchart pads, if you are providing refreshments, charge accordingly.

If you want to offer a better deal to an individual or community group, you could throw in an 'extra' free of charge. But publicise the norm.

The use of chairs and tables should never be charged for. Make this point clear on your tariff. If you say nothing, individuals booking rooms often ask about it.

Decide on set-up and break-down

Many groups will need to get in some time ahead of their scheduled start time to set the room up and prepare equipment and materials. A function may end on time but it then takes the organisers half an hour to pack and tidy up.

So, first, decide on who prepares the room and then packs it away afterwards. If you have staff available you might offer to do this yourselves: so the customer arrives with the chairs and tables all laid out in the design they stipulated. At the end they just walk away and you put it all back again – or prepare it for the next user. Your pricing includes this. Other churches will not be in this position and ask every group to pack the whole room back to how they found it. Some users will fail to do this.

But what do you do about making the room available for enough time between groups and charging for these times? You may simply ask customers to book and pay for the total time they need the room (so they book 9.00 am. to 4.00 pm. when the meeting itself is from 10.00 am. to 3.30 pm.). Or you may offer an hour without charge at either end of the booking. Some double up the pack-up of one group with the set-up time for the next, but this is best avoided unless the two groups both agree to it.

Consider your total costs

Remember in all this that your receipts from hiring are not the same as your surplus. You will have a number of costs to be offset against the money you take in. Here are some of the most common ones:

- reception and bookings staffing: perhaps a percentage of a Church Office Administrator's time;
- caretaking and cleaning: might be staff wages or contracted out;
- heating, lighting, other electrical power;
- refreshments, kitchen costs (you may price separately for these);
- depreciation of equipment and furniture / renewals;
- damage to building, equipment and furniture;
- insurance costs and any legal fees;
- marketing costs (website, brochure, signage);
- office administration expenses (consumables, use of computer, bookings software, etc.);
- capital cost of the building.

Bookings

Always take a deposit for any booking unless it is from a well-established customer whom you can trust. You will need a carefully worded cancellation policy or lastminutecancellations.com will take you for a ride. Churches can sometimes be seen as a soft option – you need to show a level of professionalism that makes it clear that this is not true for you.

Special terms

On the other hand, be flexible enough to do a special deal with a small community group just starting up. You might offer them a generous discount for their first five bookings until they are established, but in this case you might want them to agree to take a different room sometimes so that you can give priority to a normal booking paying the full rate.

Repeat business

You are obviously keen to get regular bookings from clients. The time you spend in wooing a customer and setting up the first booking can then be shared over a monthly commitment rather than a one-off event. Be aware of the considerable dangers in booking too far ahead and committing yourself to something you later regret (see section 6), but a medium-term weekly booking for the Slimline Weight-loss Group could provide an easy source of income.

You may therefore wish to consider incentives by means of discounts for a certain number of bookings. But don't be too generous. Once again, don't go public on any particular arrangements. Say it can be discussed. You may want to offer more to the Over-80s Lunch Club than to the Guild of Merchant Bankers who can easily afford your normal rates.

5 Take advice on legal details

This article does not include long-term leases, nor can it cover all the legal issues of normal letting so go to your professional advisers. Here are some of the areas to check up on.

Insurance

You are unlikely to be an insurance expert so check everything very carefully with your broker or company. Hiring out should be covered on existing contents, buildings and public liabilities but there may well be exclusions that you need to be fully aware of, so that you can explain them in detail. You may need to ask some hirers to show evidence of their own public liability cover.

For example, Ecclesiastical Insurance only give liability cover for private social events for those who use the premises on no more than three occasions per hirer during the period of insurance (normally a year) and not for non-social events at all. Cover is then on a 'contingent' basis, ie. it only applies with your agreement and provided no other insurance is in force.

They ask you to obtain written confirmation from any hirers whenever necessary that they have public liability cover for their activities while the church premises are being hired. If someone does not have their own cover the Church Council has to give official clearance for the booking and it then becomes a church event. Other insurance companies have different arrangements.

Health & safety and risk management

This is an area that can never be tightly defined, but you would be wise to print out a proper risk management for hiring out rooms on your site to show that you recognise the dangers and have done all you can to minimise them.

Apart from accidents on site (which will be little different from use by your own congregation apart from unfamiliarity with the premises), you might consider use of unfamiliar water boilers, cookers and washing-up machines, parking and traffic congestion, children on the premises,

buildings not being locked up securely after an event and injuries from activities and games. You will also need to check on fire regulations and ensure that you have complied with all current legislation on this. Don't keep ladders around the premises that are not securely fastened.

Some churches insist that all electrical equipment brought in by hirers has a PAT certificate on it.

Safeguarding

It is wise to obtain written confirmation from any children's group that they have a child protection policy and use the DBS disclosure service.

The Equality Act 2010

This is a complex area of legislation, but it is possible to refuse to hire to certain groups in certain circumstances without being guilty of unlawful discrimination. Much will depend on the activity for which the group intends to use your buildings: worship by another faith is different from a children's party for another faith family.

You can refuse an application to avoid conflict with the strongly held religious convictions of a significant number of your church, but here you would have to have evidence that the activity in question will cause problems as well as evidence of church members' convictions.

You must take professional advice in these cases as the interpretation of the law is not straightforward and you could find yourself having to defend your actions in an expensive legal battle. Remember too that to cancel an existing booking can place you in breach of contract so take care.

Licences

You will need to check out your licences if hirers want to show film clips, play CDs or arrange concerts. If your worship building is covered, be aware that PPL/PRS licences do not cover separate buildings. Get advice from Christian Copyright Licensing International (CCLI) at www.ccli.co.uk. But some churches have found that they need to apply direct to PRS and pay at a higher rate.

Booking agreement

It is essential that all hirers complete and sign a formal booking agreement before their booking is confirmed. This collects the information you need to know about them and sets out your normal conditions of hire. Once the pro-forma is

drawn up it should be checked by your legal advisers.

With the booking form there needs to be a listing of terms and conditions. These should cover booking process, payment arrangements, all conditions of hire, use of equipment, no smoking policy, fire procedures, hygiene, insurance, safety, children, noise levels, alcohol, how the rooms are to be left and much more. This is likely to be a long and detailed document but it must be given to every hirer on booking.

There is not room in this article to provide a sample but to give yourself a starting point try the following sources:

- 1 Other churches that let their rooms out who are prepared to show you their terms and conditions or where these are on their website.
- 2 Your denomination or diocese may well have sample documents. For example, the Baptist Union Corporation Ltd have Guidelines PC10 *Hiring of church premises* which includes a list of conditions that fit onto one side of A4.
http://www.baptist.org.uk/Articles/368778/BUC_Guideline_Leaflet.aspx.
- 3 The book *Making church buildings work* by Maggie Durran (Canterbury Press) contains sample booking forms and terms (in considerable detail) in the appendices.
- 4 Stewardship sell a 'Hiring agreement pack' from 'Resources', then 'Online shop':
www.stewardship.org.uk.

Value Added Tax

If you turn your hiring into a major business, it might just be that you could hit issues on VAT thresholds and liability to rates.

If you are constructing a new building which is zero-rated because for charitable use, you might run into problems if more than 5% of the building is for non-charitable purposes, and become liable for VAT on all or part of your capital costs. Get professional advice in all these cases: this article cannot cover specialist issues such as these.

Trust deed

If you are a church with a trust deed, have it checked out for exclusions to use.

This article is not designed to cover all the technical details that you may come across and if hiring is a major concern you should follow up the above references and take professional advice where required.

6 Beware potential problems

It's all too easy in your enthusiasm to accept every booking that comes your way. But this may land you in difficulties and it can be tricky to extricate yourself from some of these. So it is important that whoever is on reception knows the guidelines of what they can accept and which requests need the pause button pressed. Here are some common pitfalls to watch out for.

Long-term bookings

It's great news that the Balshoi Ballet Babes want to book your hall every Saturday morning for the next year and this will give the steady income stream you have been hoping for. But, wait a minute. Your own church has always used the whole site for the Autumn Fayre, and your Alpha team were intending to run the weekend-at-home in the hall this year. Neither set of leaders has booked the space because they've never had to and never thought there could be a problem. Beware any contractual booking for longer than, say, four months. Go carefully.

Bookings that clash in other ways

What if a silent meditation group have a long-standing booking for a side-chapel in the church and then The Decibel Drummers book to practise in the main worship area at the last minute? Or if a local college book a hall for an exam but parents are collecting from the PreSchool Playtime Group in the corridor just outside? A one hour booking from 7.30 pm. blocks a room for a whole evening. The same booking at 6.30 pm. allows another group to use the room from 8.00 pm. and gives you two incomes.

Saturday bookings

Saturday bookings are key and a rich source of income from parties. But be aware that, even if you ask for the room to be left tidy, you may find yourself on Sunday morning with some urgent cleaning work to be done. You need to have some kind of caretaking arrangements for all weekend events.

Sunday bookings

These can be tricky if they block your own church's activities. There may be time and room today for a booking made for three months' time, but then your young people's work needs to expand or you want to lay on a special activity for a visiting speaker and you find yourself with

problems. However you may well want to offer your premises to another church for weekly services on a Sunday afternoon or evening.

Wedding receptions

Danny and Beth are being married in your church but otherwise you know nothing about them. The booking of the whole site for the reception seemed a good way to make money, but that's a mighty large number of crates of beer being carried in and there could be trouble by midnight, especially when things run two hours late. Wedding receptions, except for church members, are best avoided unless organised by a professional agent.

Noise and inappropriate entertainment

A group has booked in for a Saturday night but no one bothered to check out just what sort of activity it might be. You had it down as an 'adult party'. So did they – with a very different meaning! There is no reason to ban parties other than for children, but be careful over teen and older events. Not to mention young children's do's that are not properly supervised.

Drawing lines

Be ready for booking enquiries that may arise which simply need a clear policy prepared in advance (whether to accept or not). Are there any innocent-sounding activities you might have problems with? If something like Yoga presents a problem, work out your policy in advance. What if groups from other faiths would like to use your premises for worship? Don't be put on the spot by the first booking you get like this. See also section 5.

Never compromise

If you devise a policy and agree that certain groups or activities fall outside your boundaries, never make exceptions or you'll make trouble for yourself. Have a clear booking policy in print and available to all. You want to avoid allowing people to get some way down the booking line and then tell them you cannot take them.

Beware enquirers who work out who is the softest person on your church staff and then book through that person (often the Minister!) or at least gain their permission and then put the Receptionist in an impossible position. All staff and leaders need to know the score on this one.

Serve and volley

Having checked out the details, the final three sections tackle your quality of the service you provide and the way you sell yourselves (hence volley!) to your potential customers.

7 Serve professionally

This is a section about attitude.

If you are a retailer and want to sell goods, you need to attract people into your shop. You want to show off your products in their best light, you need to entice people to wander inside and browse.

So you ensure that your shop is clean and looks great, you train your staff in customer care, you announce special offers and you present your whole range in an attractive way. If the shop looks tired and the goods poor quality and if the staff don't smile or make any effort to help, the trader will go out of business.

A few rogue traders may have a different attitude. They may try to sell shoddy goods to an unsuspecting public, make aggressive offers that are economical with the truth and employ sales staff who target the most gullible shoppers

Some churches feel awkward about being in business, but that is what you are if you are seeking to let rooms. As Christians we not only want to attract our customers well, we have a driving motivation to serve them, because we want our business also to be a witness to the values of the Kingdom of God. Few churches will want to be rogue traders (I hope!), but a good number are poor traders.

So the first thing you need to do is to decide on your attitude to business. Are you going to be, as they say, 'business-like' and do it well? Here are some examples of how all this might work out.

The name of the facility

Consider the name you give to the church buildings you have available. Compare selling the 'St Luke's parish church hall and annexe' with publicising the 'Luke Street Centre' or some such term.

Terminology used

Check out your language. It is better to think in terms of 'customers' / 'guests' than 'hirers' / 'users'. It is more professional to talk in terms of 'rooms to let' than a 'hall to hire'. Present people with a 'tariff' rather than 'hire charges'.

Your staff/volunteers

Does your Receptionist smile when a hirer arrives? Do you offer to serve the hirer by showing them round in person, offering to go the odd extra mile? Do you answer the phone in an attractive and welcoming way? Is your Caretaker only too happy to serve those packing up as they lock up? Are your people dressed smartly?

The entrance

Get friends who do not know your buildings to have a good look at the way in and tell you what they see. Does it look welcoming? Is it attractive? Is it easy to find and signed well? How is it lit at night? Is it neat and bright or looking as though it needs a coat of paint? Is it open or, at least, can you see inside, or is it closed and giving a message 'Keep out!'.

Positive signing and displays

Is there anything that tells you that you are welcome, possibly with a photo-display of staff and office-holders? Or, instead, do the notices tell you not to park here, or not to leave buggies in this area? How do you express the need not to block the fire exit? What about the notice-boards – are they tired and needing renewal?

Quality

I remember visiting one church to run an event to find the mugs were cracked, nothing seemed to be in matched sets, the cutlery was dirty, the bare floor unswept. The worst problem was a complete lack of tea-spoons – we had to give our delegates pencils to stir their sugar into their hot drinks. No repeat booking there!

If you want to find customers, and ones that will bring repeat business, make sure everything looks good. This may involve money spent on decoration, good equipment and grounds maintenance. Then you need to keep it that way with a regular spruce up schedule and a programme of replacing equipment and renewal of microphone batteries.

Rooms need to be kept tidy. A committee room with children's toys piled in one corner is not good. A hall with tatty notices on display boards will not appeal.

Furniture

You may have a stack of uncomfortable plastic chairs but people coming for an event expect something better today, especially for a speaker meeting or a training day. Your folding tables may be old but still fine, but are they clean?

If you are trying to woo daytime business users, check out what they would expect as the norm when it comes to seating and furniture in general: they will not book (or at least not rebook) if they have not had a comfortable time with you.

Children's needs

If you want to market your rooms to children's groups or for children's parties you will need durable children's furniture (such as low level chairs and tables), and toys and games that you expect to renew on a regular basis.

Training facilities

If you are marketing yourselves to business organisations for training, you will need to provide the right equipment. A fixed data projector for each training room is now a must (and they are not cheap) with suitable screens and set-ups for however the room is laid out. You will also need white boards as well as moveable flipcharts. Interactive white boards are now becoming normal in schools.....

Heating, lighting, sound

You will need to ensure that your buildings are hired out at an appropriate temperature (winter and summer issues here), with adequate lighting and, for halls, reasonable acoustics. If you allow hirers to adjust the heating levels, you need to explain what they can do and arrange some limits on thermostats and switches.

Loos

The quality people expect today is signage about wanting "to keep these facilities squeaky clean so please tell us if this is not so", a schedule of when the toilets were last inspected and cleaned, hot water and blow dryers or paper towels.

You may not have a brand new facility but have you done enough to make spending a penny feel like you've invested a good number of pounds? And of course it goes without saying that you provide changing areas for babies and proper facilities for the disabled.

Disabled facilities

Talking of disabled loos, the building needs to show that you have paid proper attention to all

the legislation but, above all, that you care for people. Check out ramps, signs, loops.

Health and safety

No need to go mad on this, but the building must show that it is as safe as can be from fire, tripping accidents, people being placed in vulnerable situations, and so on.

Assessment

You might consider asking customers to complete an assessment card, so they can score your total product under a number of headings and suggest ways you could improve the service. Ask them to note anything that is not working properly so you can correct it without delay.

Of course the image starts with the quality of your website and promotional literature, but more about that in section 9.

8 Set up management and staffing

Unless you have a major facility to hire out and decide to create a separate company to run it, it is likely that your income and expenditure on the business will simply fall within your church's general fund. But it is unlikely that your diaconate or PCC will have the time and energy to keep a close eye on the business, so it will normally be a wise decision to appoint a small Management Group.

Keep it small in number, include those with hands-on responsibility and define clear terms of reference with respect to the ultimate decision body. As stated in section 1, these are people who will enthuse about the business as well as ensuring it is run properly. Give the group plenty of responsibility – and accountability.

Then you need one person to be the Manager. In some churches this might be the Church Administrator, but it could just as easily be a member of the congregation who oversees bookings and supervises staff or volunteers such as receptionists, caretakers and cleaners.

One responsibility of the Management Group will be to keep in close touch with the congregation. Good communication both ways will minimise the difficulties that can arise. Here are some likely ones:

- church members cannot use a room they thought was theirs because it has been booked by an external customer for at least part of the time required;
- rooms left untidy and dirty after a booking;

- noise levels deemed unacceptable;
- damage to the church's property;
- kitchen equipment missing or in the wrong place;
- toilets left in a disgusting state.

Here now are the key roles you will need to fill. They might be all one person, but they probably will span a number. The golden rule is to sort out the roles first, then decide how you are going to fill them (whether by paid or voluntary staff).

Bookings

The three keys here are the availability of someone to handle an enquiry or booking the moment it comes in, the ability to take on-the-spot decisions about any discount or special terms (or to get authorisation without delay), and the need for total reliability in processing the booking.

If you want to hire to business users, it is no good if enquiries and bookings go to someone who is out at work during the day. Someone who phones or emails about a possible hire needs an immediate answer, or as near to this standard as is possible. If they cannot find what they want to know, you'll lose the booking to the Plush Paradise Hotel down the road.

The diary, showing who has which rooms when and what set-up and tidy-up times are allowed, needs to be kept whether in paper format or online with meticulous care. Nothing destroys your reputation more than a double-booking or an unrecorded one. Never accept a booking not on a standard form.

Reception

When people arrive they need to be greeted, shown to their rooms and checked to see if all is as they expected it. If they had asked for board-room layout and this has not been done for some reason, the Receptionist needs to be able to take immediate action. If the church has a staffed office, it will probably be the Office Administrator during the day, but what about the evenings and weekends?

The Receptionist needs to understand principles of customer care and set a positive example of welcome and professionalism.

Caretaking

The role of caretaking will include opening up the building and locking up afterwards (unless those who use the premises have to lock up themselves and bring the key back the next day). There is

also the laying out of rooms for each hirer: the correct number of chairs and tables in the requested layout, plus refreshments.

The role may extend to cleaning, though this may be handled by a different person or contracted out. But for regularly used buildings, toilet cleaning may need to be dealt with more frequently than once a day.

Catering

Try to arrange refreshments to be available for groups by offering coffee and tea by means of thermos jugs, bottled water (sparkling and still) and good quality biscuits – with an appropriate person charge. This means someone being available while each group is in the building. In some cases you may want to go further than this and have someone or a group who can prepare simple meals. At least offer recommended external caterers and aim to do a deal with them so that they give you a discount which you keep as an arrangement fee.

If instead you give hirers access to your kitchen, be aware of health and safety and food hygiene legislation. You will need to be clear as the responsibility of the hirer to wash up (with instructions for the use of any equipment) and leave everything tidy.

Customer care

In all the above, customers are going to assess your rooms and consider rebooking in the light of the attitude shown by the people they deal with. It only needs a surly Caretaker to make it very clear they want to go home for a group to decide to go elsewhere next time. This is not to say that discipline is not necessary: if someone has booked up until 10 pm. they ought to be out of the building by then. But this can be put across in different ways.

9 Market your product

So everything is now ready for your customers to come knocking on your door. But unless you are an exceptional case, they won't. You need to go out there and sell what you have so that all those target groups you identified in section 3 know you exist (and for this they need to be told several times in different ways), realise that you have what they need, and calculate that it will be worth their while buying your product.

Many churches are rather coy about marketing themselves but, although you will want to avoid hype, there is no need to undersell what you have. Here are some key ways in which you can go about this.

Signage on site

Don't ignore the advertising space available to you on your own property. Sell your rooms by promoting them on good quality signboards outside your entrance, on the building itself or, if you can manage it, by local Council signs pointing to the building in the vicinity. Suggest people can pop in and look around (if you have staff there for this). Much will depend on your frontage: if you are on a busy main road you have a head-start compared with another church down a side-street. Be careful not to infringe local planning regulations but don't be shy.

But don't ignore the opportunities inside either. If you have parents waiting to pick up children from a ballet class, that's the place for a leaflet rack telling them that you are a superb venue for a children's birthday party. It may also offer a chance too to remind your regular congregation, as they walk past on Sundays that these rooms are for hire.

The printed brochure

This can be anything from a one-sheet-of-A4-folded-into-three glossy leaflet, just like all those you see in your local tourist office, through to an A4 page-size card folder with various professional looking leaflets inside, or a colour booklet. It can be simple but it needs to look good – if you have good facilities a photocopied mono A4 sheet is unlikely to do you any favours.

The brochure content needs to include:

- your church-site name, full address including postcode and all contact details especially website;
- description of what you are offering (what kind of rooms, how many each will seat in different layouts (theatre style, horseshoe, board room);
- furniture and equipment available (from training items such as data projectors through to children's toys);
- availability including set up and clear up arrangements, caretaking, cleaning, etc.;
- your price tariff;
- a map of where you are with travel details of how to find you by car, train, bus, with a map which should clearly show where customers can park (whether on site or local streets);
- where to buy snacks and sandwiches nearby if appropriate;
- points to sell you to particular customers: say you have small tables and chairs for young children and a range of toys if you

want to promote yourself for children's parties;

- include testimonials from satisfied users with permission, especially known local businesses or charities;
- booking details.

Needless to say, include colour photographs of the various rooms on offer, showing them set up for a meeting or in use for an event.

You need to give it to church members to hand to friends, church staff ought to have copies on them at all times to distribute at any opportunity, the leaflets need to be prominently displayed inside the building, and you will use them for direct promotion to potential customers.

The website

This may be its own site, linked from that for your church. Or it may be a group of pages on your church website. But in either case, make sure it is easy to reach, has a high Google search rating and makes a good job of selling your rooms. If you want to attract business users, the website needs to look professional. Remember that you may be in competition with local hotels and conference centres.

Pay attention to the following, and check out good examples from churches that have significant conference facilities:

- help customers navigate correctly;
- provide quality photographs of each room;
- make it easy to book (links to the booking form from each room-description page, etc.);
- make the price tariff easy to follow;
- repeat the pricing for each room on that room's own page to make it clear;
- link to recommended caterers if you are not offering this yourself;
- keep it up-to-date at all times – so someone needs to be checking it weekly;
- content needs to be as the printed leaflet.

Market your website at every opportunity – so the URL should be memorable and as short as possible. Consider arranging online booking.

Your own congregation

One of your most important marketing links should be the members of your own congregation. Inform them of what is available, help them to market the rooms to their friends,

keep reminding them of what you are doing and why. But for this to work there needs to be real ownership of the facilities so people are keen to see the venture succeed.

The special events

If you are marketing your rooms for the first time or instigating a new marketing campaign, the four methods already covered are unlikely, on their own, to give you many new customers. You will probably need a somewhat more direct approach too.

One idea would be to hold occasional 'come and see us' events. You lay on specific one-hour sessions with printed invitations to potential

customers with RSVP. You might need one daytime event and one evening one.

At these the idea is to show off your rooms so they will need to look good with a few people on hand who can promote them well and answer questions. You will need to offer quality refreshments, but you might even do a lunch and a supper if you want to impress. Ensure people have a simple pack of materials to take away.

In all this the personal touch is so important. Try to forge links with the people who come, whether they are representatives of local businesses, administrators from the Council or local groups. Get the name of the key person who can make decisions and follow up the event a fortnight later with a phone call.

So there are nine areas to consider and act on. Whether you try them and have experiences to pass on, or whether you can add advice to this article, please contact me so I can improve future updates.

This article is available at www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Articles then A28. John would like to thank Stewart Johnston of Wycliffe Baptist Church, Reading and Kevin Lawrence, then of the Trinity Churches, Shrewsbury, for their input and advice based on their extensive experience in letting rooms at their respective churches.

See also Article A38, *Appointing an Operations Manager*, and Training Notes TN33, *Danger at church!*, TN44, *The message of your buildings*, and TN102, *People who visit the church office*, on this website.

Contact John if you would like to enquire about the possibility of an external audit of your own lettings or concerning the use of your buildings.

Cartoons are by Micki Hounslow for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication, Administration. File A28 under Administration.

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