

Faith Spaces in College Managing a Dedicated Room

Let's start with the good and the bad...

Good – this is something that was virtually unheard of in the last decade of the twentieth century where any faith group meeting – e.g. a Christian Union – had to beg or borrow a room to meet in. Groups met in corridors and corners and there is even the famous story of a group being designated a room for the following term only to find that the block had been demolished in the holiday.

Bad – these rooms have been the cause of much angst for chaplains, staff and students with even reports of colleges being so afraid of the tension that they have closed them down.

**Toni Coulton,
Director of Festive,
suggests five ways to help
you manage a dedicated
Faith Space in a college.**

Why have a room at all?

1. College timetables are such that without a dedicated space it can prove impossible to locate somewhere for the many activities that bring such richness to college life: gatherings of groups, explorations of faith, a place to observe a faith requirement, somewhere for spiritual help, a quiet place for reflection and a place of inspiration. All these and probably others you can think of are reasons to make sure the faith room in college works well.
2. For a college the provision of a room indicates an understanding that provision needs to be made for the whole person. It demonstrates that Equality and Diversity policies of the college take religious and non-religious belief seriously and that the college has some delivery of the 'S' (Spiritual) of SMSC and Wellbeing on which they will be inspected.

In the past some rooms were dedicated as a faith space because of the requests by one faith for a dedicated prayer space. Whilst Festive would whole heartedly support all those who want to declare that faith is part of everyday life, we have observed that colleges providing such spaces for a specific use have had many problems managing expectations and maintaining them. Each case is different so please do contact us directly if you are encountering problems with the use of your room at college.

It may all be in the name

This may seem a bit strange but we have discovered it is much better to call these spaces 'The Faith Room/Space' than to call them the 'Prayer Room'. This is because the word prayer denotes certain things to certain people and for the Islamic faith it will raise expectations that certain strict provisions are made that it may be impossible for a college to provide. The space needs to be open for all to use – whether they sit on chairs or kneel on a mat, whether in fact they want to pray or just raise lots of questions. It is a space for all faiths and none.

Decoration is key

One of the first things that colleges seem to want to do is put all the religious symbols they can find on the wall of the room. They are often able to source these quite easily. Festive would suggest that this is not the best decoration for the room as rather than showing inclusion (which is why they are introduced) it brings division and causes some groups not to even want to be associated with the room. Minimalism is certainly the advice we give, with decorations that reflect the population of the college. Students' contributions made with careful thought being given to any religious sensibility can really make the room something that the college is proud to acknowledge.

What to put in the room

This is significant – Christians like chairs for most occasions whereas many other faiths would certainly expect an open space. So never overcrowd the room with furniture but have a Plan B so you can bring more seating in if required.

Muslims do not pray in areas where there has been footfall as they hold that to put something under the foot is to show contempt. It is therefore helpful to have a rolled mat in the room big enough to cover an area that would be appropriate for prayer. A notice on the roll that 'shoes must be removed before standing on the mat' is vital.

This is part of the college so it will be expected that one of the purposes of this room will be informative.

- People will want to know what faith provisions there are – this may be someone on staff to tell a student or a student CU leader. A well-ordered notice board is key. Ongoing contact is best through the college intranet and details of how to contact people from the various groups should be clear in the room.
- People come to the room to find out about local places of worship – if this information can both be real and virtual this is best. Display it well.
- Tutorial groups studying the local community will often visit the room in the hope of learning more for their course – it is helpful to liaise ahead of time with tutors so that they and their students have a profitable visit.
- Staff and Students will come looking for information to help with their courses – this will be mainly customs and practices but again real and virtual pointers as to where this information may be discovered helps.
- A small collection of sacred texts is helpful – Christian groups have bible studies so require a number of copies. Be careful that all these texts are on a shelf and kept in good order. It is probably best not to have too much other written material left around as monitoring this can be hard.

Using the room

Access to the space will very much depend on the position of the room within the college. Some are in an area easily monitored whereas others need to be kept locked when empty. Whatever the situation some things are helpful:

- Give a clear indication of who is responsible for the room at any given time.
- Have a code of conduct for the room – what it is for, noise level, eating, rules of discussion, etc.
- Be clear when the room has been booked so that people will not expect to find it empty.
- Have a monitoring system with people signing in when the room is used.
- Be careful that the room does not become the
- dumping ground for any reason.
- Try to avoid any one group monopolising the room to the exclusion or discomfort of others.

End Notes

¹ You may find our '**Guidelines for Dialogue when discussing matters of faith**' a helpful tool for your faith room. It is available to download from our website.