

## **Guideline Leaflet L06: Guest Congregations**

This leaflet was prepared to help local Baptist churches who are asked to allow part of their building to be used by another Christian group.

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The date on which the leaflet was last updated can be found on the download page.

# L06: Guest Congregations

**These notes are offered as guidelines by the Legal and Operations Team to provide information for Baptist churches.**

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[L17 Legal and Operations Team – Regulatory Information](#)

**These notes can never be a substitute for detailed professional advice if there are serious and specific problems, but we hope you will find them helpful.**

**If you want to ask questions about the leaflets and one of the Baptist Trust Companies are your property trustees, you should contact them. They will do their best to help.**

**If your church property is in the name of private individuals who act as trustees they may also be able to help.**

## INTRODUCTION

This leaflet is prepared to help local Baptist churches who are asked to allow part of their building to be used by another Christian group. This can be a very similar church that functions in a different language, or a very different style of church that does not have their own building.

## ARE THEY A PROPER CHURCH?

When an enquiry is received there are often questions about the group. They may not be known to you. They may not use a name for their church that you recognise. You may feel uneasy about allowing a group to use your building that promotes beliefs that contradict your own. Identifying the group may be an important part of deciding whether any letting or sharing is possible, and if so which parts of the building can be made available.

If you want to check, you could ask:

- Are they known to your local Churches Together group?
- Are they members or associate members of Churches Together in England?
- Make a web search.
- Contact our Faith and Society Team at Baptist House, telephone 01235 517700.

## CASUAL HIRING

It may begin with a hiring arrangement. Information about hiring churches premises is in our guidelines leaflet PC10 *Hiring of Church Premises*. Even though a Christian group is asking to use the building the usual paperwork is necessary.

As with any new user; it may be unclear in the early stages whether the group is reliable in using the building responsibly – or not!

The church should be asking a guest congregation to confirm that they need to make their own insurance arrangements, as well as taking steps to obtain confirmation that the church's policies for the protection of children and vulnerable adults are followed. These issues are explained in the PC10 *Hiring of Church Premises* leaflet. These points are important for financial and legal reasons, but the church's reputation could be enhanced or spoilt by the activities of a guest congregation using their building.

## **POSITIVE ADVANTAGES**

There can be very positive advantages for a local church. The hiring arrangement can provide income. Keeping the building in regular use will help keep it in better condition. The increased use of the building can help enhance the church's profile in the area, especially where the two groups have similar aims and objectives.

Over time, friendships may develop and a closer sharing or merger may be suggested. However, in the early stages, it is vital that the host church and the guest congregation have a clear framework of expectations and responsibilities.

## **SHARING RELATIONSHIPS**

It is important to understand the emerging relationship. Sometimes the initial discussions do not deal with practical matters clearly. Relationships may be good at the start, but deteriorate quickly where there are different expectations on simple things like tidiness, doing the washing up, and ensuring that the building is locked at the end of a session!

It is vital to understand who is the host; and who is the guest. Although a deeper friendship may form later, it is important that the relationship starts on a clear basis.

A small Baptist church may be delighted that a new group are coming to use their building. They see this as enhancing their work and seeing their building being used more regularly. However, if the host church quickly feels that they are being 'taken over' or 'taken for granted', or there is a lack of respect, the relationships will soon deteriorate, and possibly break down.

## **MUTUAL AIMS**

Where a Christian group is asking to use a building, there will often be shared aims. The guest congregation may not be a Baptist church but they are probably doing good Christian work in ways that are not possible for the host church.

The incoming congregation may have a lot of young people, but the age profile of the host church may be older. The differences will be more obvious where the host church and the guest congregation operate in different languages. Cultural differences will play a part, and goodwill and patience will be required on both sides.

However, shared aims in mission and shared values should help the new arrangements to flourish. It is important that clear conversations take place at the start to understand any shared aims and mission priorities, and to avoid conflict later.

## **DISTINCTIVE CHARACTERISTICS**

Each congregation will have its own distinctive characteristics. A guest congregation may have a different style of music so issues around noise levels and the needs of the church's neighbours should be considered.

There may be a different approach to the length of services; a host congregation may have a morning and evening service as well as several opportunities to meet for fellowship, prayer, and Bible study during the week.

A guest congregation, especially those that do not operate in the English language may gather members from a much wider area. They will often want to have a much longer meeting once a week that includes worship, prayer, Bible teaching and an opportunity for fellowship. It should not be assumed that a hiring for a church group for a weekly meeting will only involve an hour or two hours of time.

The guest congregation may want to use the premises for meals so arrangements about the use of kitchens and other equipment will need to be discussed and practical arrangements agreed.

## **THE BUILDING – ITS IMAGE AND SIGNAGE**

Where a guest congregation is using a building regularly they will want to put up signs indicating that this is their 'home'. They may want to publicise the dates and times of their events alongside the activities of the host church. This situation needs to be carefully managed to ensure that the style and size of signs are appropriate.

Where a guest congregation is holding a special event it may be appropriate for their signs to be much larger, brighter, and more distinctive than the notices publicising events of the host church. However, this should not be a regular pattern.

It is important that the overall effect is that the church's public profile, the notices outside the building, and the quality of signs is managed well for the benefit of both groups.

## **BUILDING – AGREED USES**

It is important that clear arrangements are made about the way the building can be used.

What is the host church's policy on serving alcohol? Will they want to insist that the guest congregation follows the same pattern? Similar questions may arise in relation to gambling, a rock concert, or other forms of entertainment.

Are there any parts of the building that cannot be used?

Can posters or notices be put up inside the building, and if so where? Will the guest congregation need a notice board? What if drawing pins are used on a newly painted wall??

Can outside space be used – or might this cause too much disturbance to neighbours?

Can the guest congregation use the church piano or organ, and is there any restriction on who plays it? If there is an electronic instrument or a PA system who can use it and who can adjust the basic settings on the equipment?

The host church needs to be sure that children are well cared for – because the community may not distinguish between the two church groups if there is a problem.

## **FOOD AND PARTIES**

The host church may be used to holding the occasional tea party, but a guest congregation may see the sharing of meals and holding social events as being an essential part of their shared life.

Each group needs to take clear responsibility for the preparation and serving of food at their events, ensuring that all necessary regulations are followed.

## **HOUSEKEEPING**

This is an important area and is likely to be the biggest cause of frustration.

Arguments may not arise because of theology or different worship styles, but will probably be caused by untidiness, failure to take out the rubbish or forgetting the washing up!

This can work either way round. The guest congregation wants to know that the building will be ready for them to use when they arrive. So does the host church.

A very clear set of arrangements need to be made in which it is clear:

1. Who is responsible for opening the doors and locking up afterwards?
2. Is there an alarm system that needs to be set?
3. Which rooms are available for use?

4. Who is allowed to use the kitchen?
5. What equipment is available for use?
6. Do the people using the kitchen need to have food hygiene training?
7. What are the agreed standards for tidying up the kitchen after an event? These will need to apply to the host church and any guest congregation.
8. What about rubbish disposal? Are there arrangements for recycling, where are the bins, how often are they supposed to be emptied? Who puts them outside to be emptied?
9. Is each user of a room responsible for cleaning it at the end of their session? If so where are the vacuum cleaner, sweeping brushes and cleaning materials? Who is paying for the cleaning materials? Is this included in the hiring charge? Is there a regular cleaner who will do these tasks?
10. What about the heating system – will this be preset? Will the guest congregation have access to thermostats, and should they be able to turn heaters on and off?
11. What arrangements will need to be made to ensure that the heating system is working effectively so that the building is warm when the next group arrives to use it?
12. Who is the person in the guest congregation who has responsibility for ensuring that the housekeeping aspects are covered?
13. What about car parking – can the guest congregation use the car park?
14. What is the expected arrival time?
15. What is the expected departure time?
16. Will the host church be holding an event soon after the guest congregation is supposed to finish? What if the church members arrive for an event and find that the car park is still full of cars belonging to the guest congregation and they are still tidying up?

## **MONEY, PAYMENTS AND BILLS**

It is normal for a hiring charge to be made. This does not need to be an amount that is set so high that a guest congregation cannot afford to use the building. There may be very real benefits for a host church in allowing their building to be used but money does matter, and can be a source of problems.

In most cases it will not be possible to separately assess the costs of electricity and, heating, or water. However, the extra costs of welcoming a guest congregation may be significant especially if thermostats are altered or lights and heating are left on at the end of the session, especially if this is not discovered for a couple of days.

Some thought needs to be given to a realistic contribution to these expenses.

What will happen if the host church discovers that the extra use of their building by the guest congregation creates costs that are far beyond their normal expenditure and are not covered by the initial hiring charge? How will the financial cost of welcoming a guest congregation be measured?

## **REVIEWS**

A regular review is important. This should be discussed when the initial arrangements are made. It is easy to forget to arrange reviews on a regular basis, especially if everything is going well at the start. However, a regular structured discussion about the sharing arrangement will be helpful. Solving small problems at a regular routine review meeting will be much easier than trying to solve a big problem at a crisis meeting when people are already upset and cross!

## **TENANCIES – LEASES – LONG TERM ARRANGEMENTS**

Where a guest congregation has exclusive use of all or part of a building in the long term, some more structured documentation might be needed.

For more permanent arrangements, especially where the guest congregation needs greater security to plan their long term activities, a Lease may be required. This is usually a much more complicated document and a larger amount of legal work would be needed to prepare a Lease. There is more information about Leases in our guidelines leaflet PC11 *Churches and Leases*.

It is very important that there is either a hiring arrangement or a formal Lease. If not, the host church could accidentally create a formal long term commercial letting arrangement.

A commercial tenancy can be implied by the actions of individuals at the host church. These actions can include exclusive use of part of a building and regular financial payments. When the arrangement is classed legally as a business tenancy it can be very difficult to bring it to an end.

Making formal arrangements is not unfriendly. Recording information clearly does not indicate a lack of sympathy with the aims and objectives of the guest congregation. It is a way of protecting both parties in the short term, and the longer term.

## **BUILDING WORK AND IMPROVEMENTS**

Sometimes a guest congregation will want to make changes to the 'Baptist building'.

Sometimes this can be agreed on a sensible basis, perhaps with the guest congregation making a contribution to the costs. However, there are some important issues to consider.

By accepting a cash contribution the host Baptist church will be raising expectations that the arrangement is long term. It would be easy to understand that a guest congregation would feel upset if, after contributing towards the cost of essential repairs, they were asked to stop using the building at short notice.

On the other hand, where a contribution has been made, this does not mean that the host congregation can never take independent decisions ever again, or that they never have a right to terminate the hiring or letting arrangement.

Changes to a building cannot be made informally. Permissions will be needed and churches that are planning any alterations should refer to our guidelines leaflet PC04 *Redeveloping or Altering Church Premises*.

Where a building is a listed building, a special application to the Listed Buildings Advisory Committee will be needed. For more information please refer to our guidelines leaflet LB01 *Introducing the Listed Buildings Advisory Committee*.

## **SHORT TERM AND LONG TERM EXPECTATIONS**

The host church may hope that the guest congregation will later want to become part of the Baptist church. Where this happens and there is a growing affection, and understanding of what belonging to a Baptist church will mean, this is good. The church should seek support from their Regional Association, to ensure that there are realistic expectations and to ensure that everybody understands what is involved in belonging to a Baptist church.

It will be important for the guest congregation to understand that being a Baptist church involves a combination of characteristics. It is not just practising baptism by immersion.

The Baptist Basics leaflets are a good place to start. This series of twelve leaflets explains the important characteristics of a Baptist church. Reading each booklet is important, but to give an indication of what is covered, here is a list.

### **1. Why be a Baptist?**

Key features of Baptist identity are:

- The Lordship of Christ

- The authority of the Bible
- Baptism for believers
- A believers' church
- The priesthood of all believers
- Church membership and Church Members' Meetings
- Interdependence
- Sharing the faith
- Religious freedom

## **2. The Congregation**

Each local congregation is important, a place where Christian believers gather, for teaching, fellowship and mission. A local Baptist congregation will try to shape their life around the patterns in the New Testament.

## **3. Believers' Baptism**

Baptists derive their name from their practice of baptising believers by immersion in water. This is a personal decision, not something decided for us. Baptism is a continuation of the New Testament pattern where individuals come to faith – then express their faith by being baptised.

## **4. Church Membership**

The church is God's project in the world. In a Baptist church believing and belonging to a local community of believers is important. The members – who have actively joined the church – play an important role in working together to shape the life and mission of the church.

## **5. The Lord's Supper**

Baptists share in The Lord's Supper as a sign of thanksgiving, remembering Jesus' death and resurrection, his promise to be present among his people, and to come again. The Lord's Supper – for Baptists – is a continuing sign of God's Kingdom – come and coming! It is a privilege not a duty. It is shared by believers, all equal at the celebration, sharing bread and wine together.

## **6. The Church Members' Meeting**

A Church Members' Meeting is when the local church members meet together to consider the life and work of their church. Each member is important. A members' meeting will involve careful speaking and prayerful listening before necessary decisions are made. Baptists believe Jesus' promise to be among those who gather in his name. The members' meeting is therefore an important event where the church members seek to understand what Jesus would want them to do, and they call this 'discerning the mind of Christ together'.

## **7. Stewardship**

Baptist congregations share resources and use them for the church's mission. This will include using the regular offerings of the members to maintain the church buildings, pay for the support of a minister or visiting speakers, and giving to other organisations. Money given by members is the main source of finance in a local Baptist church – so generosity is seen as a pattern in the Bible – and a practical necessity.

## **8. Leadership**

Early Baptist groups chose leaders from among the members – in contrast to having a leader imposed on them by an external authority. People were chosen because they had the personal and spiritual qualities described in the New Testament for Deacons, Elders, Pastors, Administrators and Evangelists. The pattern of members choosing leaders continues with leadership characterised as being a servant leadership where people seek to be helpful to the members and enable the church to grow.

## 9. Children

Jesus showed an exceptional love for children – and Baptists welcome children to their churches. Local churches will usually have a range of activities to help children understand the Christian story. Many churches will include children and families in many church activities – so church is where they belong not just where they are taught!

## 10. Radical Dissent

The early Baptists earned the names 'dissenters' and 'radical' because they made following Jesus their priority, and would not conform to the pattern of thought and religious worship in society. This radical approach is still present as a characteristic of Baptist groups today, promoting the benefits of a free society and a free church. This radical approach is also seen when Baptist Christians join others to campaign for change – especially against injustice in our world.

## 11. Mission

Baptists have a passion for sharing the good news about Jesus in the world. This will often be focused on mission through the local church in their community, but will include engaging in mission around the world. This will take many forms, responding to human need, seeking to transform society and encouraging and nurturing believers.

## 12. Lifestyle

Being a Christian means following a new life; shaped by the Bible and Jesus' example. A local Baptist community should present an alternative lifestyle shown in the reality of lives transformed by faith in Christ. This should become obvious in the way a church functions as a community, and the values it demonstrates.

However, the guest congregation may not share all our ways of working. They may not want to have a relationship. They may not want to be a Baptist church. They may simply want to hire a hall. Their approach to worship, church government, church leadership, and their style of worship and other activities, may be distinctive and different. Becoming part of our Baptist family may not be part of their plans.

### MEMBERSHIP FALLS AT THE HOST CHURCH

We would hope that both the host church and the guest congregation flourish. However, there are occasions where the host church is small and the membership continues to decline. If this happens then closure may be the only option for the members of the Baptist church.

Where the Baptist church closes the property may need to be sold. This can mean that a guest congregation loses their premises.

If a Baptist church is struggling and might close, there should be conversations with the Regional Association and with the church's property trustees. This might be the Baptist Union Corporation or one of the regional trust companies listed at the end of this leaflet.

In many Baptist churches arrangements are already in place that state what will happen to the building if the Baptist church ceases to exist. These arrangements may be inflexible. There may be little scope for negotiation after a formal decision to close has been taken. If a small Baptist church is considering closure the process must be done carefully. **A final church meeting must not be held before advice has been taken.** For more information see L07 *Church Closure*.

### A CLOSER FRIENDSHIP – THE GUEST CONGREGATION JOINS THE BAPTIST CHURCH

Sometimes the friendships between the guest congregation and the host church develop.



The guest congregation may operate according to Baptist principles, but use a different language. Where there are many similarities in approach, the guest congregation and the host church may decide that they can become one church

### **Case Study**

A church welcomed a group speaking another language to use their church. The arrangements worked well and over time the two congregations became friends. The ministers also formed a strong relationship and recognised that they could work effectively together. The 'guest' congregation joined the Baptist church so there are services in English on a Sunday morning and services in another language on a Sunday afternoon. There was then one church membership and two ministers serving the same church.

Timing is important. Once a host church has taken the final decision to close it is often impossible to back track. This can mean that a guest congregation, even if they are also in membership with the Baptist Union of Great Britain, is not able to continue to use the church building, without special arrangements being made.

Baptists are a distinctive group. They have valued certain key principles. It is important that the guest congregation understands clearly what it means to become part of a Baptist church. They should not expect to join the Baptist church and change it. They should not expect to join the host congregation then ask them to set aside important principles that have governed the life of the church for generations.

Sometimes, when a small group of members in a Baptist church are struggling to maintain their work it is very helpful if a guest congregation uses their building as well. However, there are times when the small Baptist membership is squeezed and eventually overwhelmed by the group that shares the building with them. Instead of the roles being clear and the guest congregation understanding that they are 'only guests' there is a takeover. The Baptist congregation continues to decline, since they are unable to raise their profile in the community or to attract new members because of the strong competition within their own premises.

However, sometimes a merger can be a good thing – and should be considered. Much could be said about the overriding priorities of extending Christian mission, but any merger must be undertaken on the basis of the informed consent of the Baptist church members, and an intention to continue as a Baptist church, so as to enable the 'new' church to continue to use the 'Baptist building'.

### **AMALGAMATIONS AND MERGERS**

Where a guest congregation is not keen to accept Baptist principles and does not simply want to 'join the Baptist church' the arrangements need to be considered very carefully. It is likely that the use of the church building is fundamentally linked to the congregation using it being 'a Baptist church'.

Nevertheless, an amalgamation between what used to be two separate organisations, with different identities, is sometimes requested. This might mean that both the Baptist church and the guest congregation need to close their existing structures to form one new fellowship. However, this must only be done when legal advice has been obtained to ensure that the new organisation is entitled to use the Baptist building for their continuing work and mission. There are many issues to be considered on an amalgamation that may not apply where a group of new members are joining the 'host' Baptist churches. For more information please refer to guidelines leaflet L04 *Church Amalgamations*.

### **DOCTRINES, ATTITUDES AND PRACTICES**

Our core beliefs as Baptists are important. However, the Baptist family includes a range of theological perspectives. Part of our history, and one of our strengths, is the way we have learned to walk together with other Baptist, and other denominations, despite our differences. This is easily misunderstood. When working with a guest congregation, especially where an amalgamation is likely, it is important that this principle is understood.

## **Freedom of Conscience**

Baptists value freedom of conscience. Therefore, it is quite possible for Baptists to hold a range of views on matters such as war and military service. There is a Baptist peace group, but there are also military chaplains and military personnel that are supported financially as part of the Baptist family.

## **Politics**

Baptists have campaigned and engaged in political debate and action throughout history. Today political engagement is still important, although Baptists would support a range of political parties and express a range of views.

## **Women**

The Baptist Union affirms the role of women in our churches and does not restrict any roles to either men or women. Each local Baptist church can exercise their freedom of conscience in this, so a decision can be taken by a local Church Members' Meeting to only seek a minister who is male. However, it is important to understand that this freedom for a local church does not change the agreed policy for the Baptist Union and the Regional Associations, nor should there be any question of acting in a way that does not affirm the place and value of women and men at all levels of the Baptist Union.

## **Ecumenical Relationships**

Baptist churches affirm the value of ecumenical relationships. Individual local churches can make their own decisions about how they participate, or not, in dialogue and shared activities with other Christian denominations in their area. However, where a merger is happening, it is vital that the incoming guest congregation understands our national ecumenical relationships and our hope that churches will be involved in local ecumenical activity.

## **Buildings and Property Trusts**

Many of the buildings used by Baptist churches are subject to rules that indicate how they can be used. The welcome and the relaxed attitudes of a host congregation can sometimes give the impression that 'anything goes'. However, there will usually be legally binding arrangements about the core characteristics of the congregation using the building. For example, in many churches it is necessary for the minister serving the church to be on the register of persons accredited for ministry (ie they must be recognised and affirmed by our ministry department). Therefore, the choice of minister for a local Baptist church may not be an unlimited and free choice. In many churches formal decisions must be taken by the Church Members' Meeting, in line with established patterns of Congregational Church Government.

## **Relationships with the Baptist Family**

A local Baptist church in membership with the Baptist Union of Great Britain will have benefits and responsibilities. The Union and Association will want to help the church develop its life and mission. We will try to help if there are problems, and the church will have the opportunity to create friendships with other Baptist churches in their area. Relationships with Baptist work overseas are possible through relationships between local Baptist churches and BMS World Mission. Baptist churches are encouraged to support national, regional, and international Baptist work by setting aside 10% of their general fund income. 5% is for the Baptist Union's Home Mission Annual Appeal and 5% for BMS World Mission.

It is possible for members of Baptist churches to become involved in regional and national events – and it is anticipated that all Baptist churches will want to do this.

Association Trust Company	Contact
<b>Baptist Union Corporation Ltd East Midland Baptist Trust Company Ltd</b>	Baptist Union Corporation Ltd Baptist House PO Box 44 129 Broadway Didcot Oxfordshire OX11 8RT Telephone: 01235 517700
<b>Heart of England Baptist Association</b>	Heart of England Baptist Association BMS Birmingham 24 Weoley Park Road Selly Oak Birmingham B29 6QX Telephone: 0121 472 4986
<b>London Baptist Property Board</b>	London Baptist Association Unit C2 15 Dock Street London E1 8JN Telephone: 020 7692 5592
<b>Yorkshire Baptist Association</b>	17-19 York Place Leeds LS1 2EZ Telephone: 0113 278 4954
<b>West of England Baptist Trust Company Ltd</b>	West of England Baptist Trust Company Ltd Little Stoke Baptist Church Kingsway Little Stoke Bristol BS34 6JW Telephone: 0117 965 8828

This is one of a series of *Guidelines* that are offered as a resource for Baptist ministers and churches. They have been prepared by the Legal and Operations Team and are, of necessity, intended only to give very general advice in relation to the topics covered. These guidelines should not be relied upon as a substitute for obtaining specific and more detailed advice in relation to a particular matter.

The staff in the Legal and Operations Team at Baptist House (or your regional Trust Company) will be very pleased to answer your queries and help in any way possible. It helps us to respond as efficiently as possible to the many churches in trust with us if you write to us and set out your enquiry as simply as possible.

The Legal and Operations Team also support churches that are in trust with the East Midland Baptist Trust Company Limited.

**If your holding trustees are one of the other Baptist Trust Corporations you must contact your own Trust Corporation for further advice. A list of contact details is provided above. If you have private trustees they too should be consulted as appropriate.**

**Contact Address and Registered Office:**

Support Services Team, Baptist Union of Great Britain, Baptist House, PO Box 44,  
129 Broadway, Didcot OX11 8RT

Tel: 01235 517700 Fax: 01235 517715 Email: [legal.ops@baptist.org.uk](mailto:legal.ops@baptist.org.uk)

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