

RELIGION

Airbnb-style app answers prayer for church halls

Users flock to booking system for everything from birthday parties to martial arts classes

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Wednesday January 03 2024, 12.42pm, The Times



The church of St Mary, Hornsey Rise, which uses the Sharesy app, opens for a Greek Christmas party in London

SONJA HORSMAN FOR THE TIMES

Hundreds of churches, synagogues, schools and village halls have signed up for an Airbnb-style app that allows people to hire them for events such as children's birthdays, taekwondo classes and study groups, with £1 million of bookings already made.

The creators of the [Sharesy](#) app are aiming to expand nationwide to help people to discover venues that they never knew were available for parties, exhibitions, concerts or classes.

Many places of worship and village halls are run on a shoestring by volunteers who often lack the time or expertise to advertise that they have venues for hire or to arrange invoices, payments and contracts.

[Sharesy](#) acts as a listing service for community venues. For churches with dwindling congregations, finding a new source of income can be crucial in staving off closure.

Hiring out church halls or naves for social and community events would bring in revenue and revive the mediaeval tradition of churches serving as community hubs for local people, with the hope that some of those who come through the doors for non-religious occasions might be tempted to return as worshippers.



Felix Atkin, the founder of Sharesy, said that community venues were “chronically under-utilised”.

A survey by The Times of 1,200 Church of England priests this summer found that 71 per cent of respondents felt churches should be doing more to offer their buildings “for use outside of service times by community groups such as playgroups and yoga classes, for events such as exhibitions and concerts, and for amenities such as cafés and post offices”.

Felix Atkin, the founder of Sharesy, whose wife is a deputy head teacher at a primary school, said he had wanted to start “a social enterprise that would support schools in our local area” to hire out their halls.

He said that many community venues were “chronically under-utilised” and “don't tend to have the expertise in the venue to manage them”. His research showed that it took up to 30 calls or emails between a venue and a potential hirer, from the initial inquiry to the final payment, making it “horribly inconvenient” for both sides.

More than 800 venues have signed up, a quarter which of are places of worship. They are mostly in the London area to ensure a density of available venues but the team is aiming to expand, with “lots of interest in rural areas where parish halls and churches are heavily under-utilised and really in need of that funding”, Atkin said.

CASE STUDY

‘It takes the stress and pressure off me’

Aiyaz Ahmed, 48, runs MAF75, which delivers self-defence classes including taekwondo for under-12s and both taekwondo and Krav Maga for teenagers and adults.



Aiyaz Ahmed said that Sharsey “takes away the hassle” when trying to book community spaces for his taekwondo and Krav Maga classes.

He hosts seven classes a week at Finchley Baptist Church in northwest London, block-booking the venue through [Sharesy](#).

“It takes the stress and pressure off me to worry about invoicing the church and making sure the classes are all lined up,” he said. He said the church had seen “an increase in clubs signed up to use the church hall” since signing up to the app, adding that it “just takes away the hassle” for venues and bookers.

Ahmed said he “didn't know so many existed” before looking at the number of community spaces for hire in his area on Sharesy.

The Rev Tamsin Merchant is the Church of England's area dean for Islington. She said of churches in her area that “some have really struggled, especially since the pandemic” and said many of their ancient buildings “require large sums of money spending on them”.

She listed the church of St Mary, Hornsey Rise, where she is vicar, on Sharesy on a deal that involved Sharesy taking no commission for the first six months and 15 per cent thereafter. The church has had children's parties, toddler groups, a dance class and a maths class booked.

Merchant said that when churches could take on volunteers, they would rather deploy them into the church's ministry “rather than on administration” but said the income that her church had generated through Sharesy now allowed them to “pay someone to come along and open and close up” after bookings.

“Part of being on the [Sharesy](#) platform and it becoming more well-known meant that people began coming to enquire about booking,” she said. “For us, it's been a really good thing.”

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