Spaces for reflection and prayer are still rare in UK workplaces. But there’s growing interest in their potential – for meeting the needs of people of different faith groups, and of over-stressed employees.

Words: Rob MacLachlan
Organisations creating the sorts of spaces you see in these photographs tend to be motivated by one of two strands of thinking. The first, and more functional, is a desire to meet the needs of faith groups, particularly the religious commitment of practising Muslims to pray five times a day (of which two or three times may be during their working day). Muslim employees generally prefer to have a prayer room on site, rather than having to travel to the local mosque; their employer will, in turn, benefit from the reduced disruption. Such spaces are typically open for use by people of other faiths – or no faith – as well.

Creating these rooms may be one of a range of policies adopted to comply with the employment equality regulations, which have offered protection from discrimination on the basis of religion and belief since 2003. But prayer rooms – which, ideally, should be located near facilities for ritual washing – are too often seen “in the same functional way as toilets or storage spaces”, says Chris Hewson, who works on the Multi-faith Spaces research project based at the University of Manchester.

Hewson says organisations in the public and voluntary sectors tend to be more aware of the benefits of providing multi-faith spaces. This is especially true in public services and retail, where there is the extra business argument that customers have prayer needs as well as staff.

The second broad motivation is to offer employees a space in which to have “room to think” and de-stress, by taking a short break from the relentless pressure of the modern workplace. A good example was the Guardian Media Group’s quiet room (see picture, overleaf), built in 2005. This room “completely transformed what was a drab, above.

Above: St Ethelburga’s interfaith tent, in a courtyard behind the church in the City of London, is ‘an experimental meeting space where people of different faiths can explore together’. Right: Prayer room at Islamic Bank, London, designed by Morgan Lovell. Centre: the reflection room at the Marie Curie Hospice in Newcastle, designed by Helen Sanderson, is a sanctuary for patients, their families, and the hospice’s staff. Far left: Quiet room at Westfield Stratford shopping centre, designed by David Walker.
redundant office corner into an inviting, ambient and calming sanctuary," the Guardian’s then head of HR, Naomi Lever, who commissioned the project, said at the time.

Helen Sanderson, who designed that room, is an artist and interior designer who runs a consultancy called Quiet Rooms Designs. A more recent client is the Marie Curie Hospice in Newcastle, which decided to replace its chapel with a space that could better meet the diverse religious and spiritual needs of all its patients, their families and the staff. The hospice consulted widely on what would appeal to users and, as a result, Sanderson came up with a theme based on water and waves (see page 48). “This links all the elements in the room,” she explains, “including the central water feature, the specially commissioned wall sculpture and stained glass window, and the design of the glass door panels, which creates privacy for those inside.” According to Gill White, the hospice’s facilities manager, “the combination of water, light and glass is very effective and contributes to a very peaceful and contemplative space.”

One church that is leading the movement towards multi-faith prayer rooms and quiet spaces is St Ethelburga’s, in the heart of the City of London. Its Bedouin tent (see previous page) is a welcoming space for all. The church also has a best practice guide for employers: Recovering the calm.

More advice, and even a travelling exhibition, will be available from the Multi-faith Spaces programme at the University of Manchester from March next year.