



Appoint a church photographer!

TN22 Training Notes series: Communication

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The idea for these notes came from a church I visited where the Minister (it turned out) was a keen photographer. The lounge area and the meeting rooms were covered with enlarged photographs of church activities and groups. The visitors I was with were fascinated. They went round looking at the pictures – and I realised again the power of the visual image.

What I have tried to do here is to sow a seed for an idea, show what might be possible, and ask for your further ideas. I would be particularly interested to hear from people who act as church photographers, whether officially or not.

An idea worth exploring

Churches love words. There is nothing wrong with that as such. All of us rely on words, whether spoken or printed, to get through to others. Our faith is based on Jesus Christ who is called the 'Word' and on the Bible as 'the word of God'. These notes are words.

But people love pictures. We see this in the power of movies, our TV culture and people's daily use of digital photography, even if only with their smart-phones.

In particular, people love hearing about and seeing pictures of people. That is why TV soaps are so popular and why both national tabloid and local newspapers are based on stories about people with photographs of people.

Experiment: take a copy of any national tabloid newspaper and work out: (a) the proportion that is filled with pictures; (b) the proportion of pictures that centre on people. Now do the same for any local newspaper. And for your church's publications as a comparison.

Jesus loved to tell stories about people and to tell them so vividly that he was in effect painting a picture. So if his Church today loves words but fails to use pictures, this is something to question.

A few years ago it cost money to include pictures in print. Photocopying photographs was never very successful, screening them was troublesome and printing them properly very expensive. So churches, working on restricted budgets, did not produce much in the way of printed photography.

But things are different now. Digital cameras, smartphones, the web, colour printers in the home and new methods of (proper) colour printing mean that full colour imagery is now available to everyone.

So much so, that words alone seem dull. People do not want to read leaflets that are not designed well and illustrated well. The Church needs to wake up and make greater use of photography (the type of visual image I focus on in this piece). My guess is that most churches have someone in their number who would be only too pleased to use their camera for God.

So, go for it. Announce a new church appointment: Church Photographer. Even if you appoint one person to co-ordinate, there are probably others who can be part of the team. From just-turned-teenager to zimmer-frame user, enthuse your snappers whether with cameras or smartphones, and use the results.

It could transform your knowledge of each other, your effectiveness in outreach, your image in your local community, and your buildings.

Eight uses to consider

Here are eight possible uses for photographs in your church – please email me to suggest other ideas to add to this section.

1 Individual portraits of everyone

Several churches have photo-displays of leaders and office-holders to help people know who they are.

A smaller but growing number of churches now take photos of each member (or family) in the congregation and display the results in photo albums available to all, or on display boards, or even print them in a booklet or prayer diary. It's a great way to help people learn who others are, especially those they have seen around for years and now feel too embarrassed to ask for names. Small churches can place such photos on a map of the area to show where people live.

But too often these albums or displays are not updated with newer members on a regular basis. Children's photos quickly go out of date. An official Church Photographer would be responsible for ensuring that all new members (however defined) get added to the rogue's gallery and family photos get updated.

2 Internal newsletters

Digital cameras and smartphones mean that it is easy to add good photographs to newsletters and notice-sheets and then print them straight from the computer for best quality. For this you need a good collection of stock photos of different people, groups, activities, etc. but add to this on a regular basis so there are new photos in each issue. See article A9 on this website for details of an internal newsletter and how people-photos are a vital part of this.

3 **Visual church displays**

Photographic displays in church or hall/lounge areas are brilliant for attracting people's attention. A Church Photographer can either liven up a whole area of a building with large prints from church groups and activities or have an ever-changing display featuring particular areas of church life.

So one month there is a photographic display of a recent children's activity, then one of the Christmas party, then one of the special celebration service, followed by a series on the Music Group, or different home groups – the possibilities are many.

4 **Church building guides**

If you meet in a building of special interest, liven up the leaflet about it with plenty of photos, especially those from strange angles or showing views not normally seen by those who use the building. But why not add interest by including people within these pictures? Provided it is done sensitively, it need not detract from the view and can show off the building's use.

5 **Leaflets for local distribution / welcome packs**

I see some brilliant examples of church leaflets for letterbox distribution or for members of the congregation to give away to friends, but not nearly enough. To sell your church in an attractive way needs good photographs of leaders, church groups and, especially, 'ordinary' church members who describe what the church means to them or why they joined. But this kind of leaflet, which can become a powerful means of outreach, needs really good portrait photos. The same would apply to a welcome pack. An official Church Photographer can ensure quality.

6 **Websites**

A good church website will have plenty of photos on it. Most of these will be of people. The site needs new material added regularly and other views changed. This calls for someone responsible for ensuring both that the photographs are available and that there is enthusiasm for keeping them changing and updated. As with visual displays, photos of recent church events are especially important. An out-of-date website is not a good advertisement. See Article A14 on this website for more detail. By the way, be careful with permissions for photos of children – A14 covers this point.

7 **Press releases**

Most churches have regular 'stories' that the local press would regard as highly newsworthy. Yet few churches have press officers, or those who understand how to write an effective press release and get it to the right outlets.

But press releases without photos are unlikely to get much attention on the news-desks. Add a couple of really good human-interest photos, and a relatively dull story can leap into life. In times past the paper sent a photographer to cover the event you publicised. Now that is unlikely: many local papers no longer have photographers to send. But say in your emailed press release that you have photos available (perhaps with a low-grade outline) and the editor is much more likely to take note.

8 Photography as an outreach strategy

Why not link up with local photographic clubs or enthusiasts to use your church building for photographic exhibitions? The aim here would be to encourage people who would never normally come through your doorway to use your site. Or run occasional displays of intriguing photographs of sacred spaces, again to attract those for whom the visual image might be a more appealing introduction to Christianity than printed words. The idea of photographs in evangelism might well enable some of your more creative church members to come up with other ideas.

These are some ideas for a Church Photographer. You may not want to follow all of them, but they offer the foundation for a job description. And perhaps there is some keen photographer in your church who would love the chance to take on such a responsibility.

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN22. They cover one aspect of church communication, an area John writes and trains in. For how a photographer's skills might be used in a newsletter see Article A9, *A church members' newsletter*. For the same skills on a website, see Article A14, *Create a quality website*. For training on communication, see Article A54, *How to get a message across*. Training Notes TN38 & 39, *We've got news for us / you*, and also TN68, *How not to write a newsletter*, make the point that news has to be visual. TN89, *Hold the front page!*, covers media releases and TN123, *Speaking-to-camera tips*, advises on video work.

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication, Administration. File TN22 under Communication.

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