



The message of your people

TN137 Training Notes series: Communication

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Anything that is visible communicates messages to those who see it.

Training Notes TN44, *The message of your buildings*, considers what our church plant and grounds might communicate to those outside the family of faith who see them or use them. It does this by comparing our church buildings with a number of local pubs to highlight the contrasts.

These notes sit alongside TN44 by considering how the church members who use those buildings may, together, communicate messages for good or ill to those who live or work in the local community.

Might it be that we can preach Good News to all who will hear while at the same time demonstrating decidedly Bad News by our corporate behaviour?

The warnings that follow are against saying to the local community, “We don’t love you”, “We are not interested in you”, or “You do not appear on our radar”.

Church members might be horrified that they could be putting such messages across. But place yourself in the shoes of someone who lives close to your church building and consider this from their point of view.

The setting assumed is a church building in a community context such as a village, housing estate, urban area or small town. But the same will be true, though perhaps to a more limited extent, for churches located in a city centre or in suburbia.

Here are seven ways in which church members may send out messages that, perhaps unwittingly, conflict with the gospel message they long to put across. For each, you will then find some ideas for how to communicate more positively.

Seven warnings ... and some positive ideas to put things right.

1 The cars we park

Some churches have adequate car parking space on their own ground so this is not an issue. But many churches require members to park in local streets and this can cause problems. Local residents may not welcome an influx of vehicles parking outside their homes on a Sunday morning, especially if doors are slammed and people talk loudly. Even worse is when cars block access to driveways or create traffic problems on narrow roads. This can apply as much to a village setting as to an urban street-scene.

Church leaders need to alert members of the problem, teach considerate behaviour, and point out the dangers of communicating a negative image of the faith. How about a letter dropped into all local homes explaining that the church is trying to do all it can to minimise disturbance and offering an email address or text number to report anything local people are unhappy about? But if you do this ensure that any complaints are personally and promptly followed up or you exacerbate the problem.

2 The noise we create

Some churches have a tradition of greater exuberance than others, but loud praise songs with the band or organ at full volume on a summer's day with the windows all open can create an unwelcome disturbance to local families seeking a peaceful lie-in or day off. The same may be true of church bells or a chiming clock. The problem may also be a late-night booking from an external group hiring the premises, or even a children's party in the grounds on a Saturday.

Are there other ways of cooling the building in summer other than opening all the doors and windows? It might be helpful for someone to talk to people living next door to show the church cares and wants to improve matters. If the noise comes from people booking rooms, can you restrict the use of background music or the hours available for hire in your Ts and Cs?

3 The behaviour we show

Our faith may not be commended if people known to be church members use inappropriate behaviour and language or over-zealous proclamation in their local work-places, at the school-gate or in the local pub. The thinking here is of a local community setting where people know who goes to church. What if the church's staff go out to a local restaurant for a meal and, being a confident group, behave in a boisterous way that is unreasonable? This is not a plea to avoid enjoyment but underlining the issue of behaviour in a close-knit community.

Encourage everyone to seek to be both a witness for their faith and for their church in everything they do during the week. The message given by the gossiping clique of church parents picking up their kids from the local Primary School can be as negative as the next-door neighbours, known to attend the church, who let their children run riot in the garden or play loud music late at night; so face this issue in your teaching programme.

4 The involvement we avoid

But just as damaging can be the church whose members take little interest in the issues that impact the community all week. If Christians steer clear of the local political parties, fail to patronise the general stores and choose to belong to clubs in other localities, there is going to be little respect for the church by those who live nearby.

If the church can be seen to take a real interest in matters such as local crime, organise litter picking days for the whole community, or let their building be used for their MP's or councillors' surgeries, this can counter the negative messages you might otherwise give. Food banks and debt counselling are organised by many churches to demonstrate practical care. What is your church doing to enable local people to report anti-social behaviour or help the vulnerable?

5 **The welcome we omit**

We may well be seeking to create a warm welcome to visitors to Sunday services, but the local community may be coming to other events mid-week. Take the Toddlers group where the signs people see are unnecessarily negative such as 'Don't park buggies here' or there is a lack of anyone to advise organisers of activities where keys are kept or why the hot water boiler is not working.

If people come to mid-week events, will they find a church member to give a personal welcome? What about those in the community coming to a funeral? Would they receive a positive image of your church?

Churches need to consider mid-week welcomes as much as Sunday ones. Bright banner displays and tidy racks of promotional literature about the church create a positive image. Good signing, clean loos, proper levels of heat and light all help. But the best welcome is personal and perhaps there needs to be a team of church members willing to be on hand to give that welcome as outside groups use the building. The same applies to 'life event' services such as funerals.

6 **The presence we hide**

If church members commute in on Sunday, there may be no personal presence in the local community all week. So this probably needs to be provided through people known to represent the church, in particular the Minister and church staff such as Youth Worker or Community Worker. They, or known church members, need to be seen.

If the Minister is regularly visible in the local area, moving around by foot or bicycle more than car, perhaps in dog-collar uniform for those who wear them, and if he or she gets to know local shop-keepers and residents, that can create a hugely positive message even if most church members live elsewhere.

I have been impressed by the Minister who walked his dog around the city centre streets early every morning, talking to everyone he could, and to another Minister who was so embedded in his local town that when I walked with him down the main street, a whole range of people who were not church members stopped him to talk.

Encouraging your church members to buy properties in the area can give a positive message of involvement in the community.

7 **The attitude we display**

Finally, take the case of the church where members almost all come to the building from further afield as in the previous point. This can take place when:

- the church has a well-defined tradition that attracts people from a wide hinterland, such as people travelling to a village church from nearby towns;
- the church offers something other local churches do not: such as youth and families work, or quality choir and music, but members have little connection with the area around the building;

- there has been a church population shift such as people moving out to another area but retaining loyalty to the church they perhaps grew up in.

In such cases church members may display a consumer attitude that finds a church to suit their needs and where they are comfortable, but they then lack an incentive to serve the area. Such an attitude may impact several of the previous six points in a nuanced way that is lost to the church members themselves.

To get around this the leaders may need to consider recommending such people to serve and witness in their local churches rather than coming to their chosen hub, or strongly encouraging everyone to recognise that membership of this church involves a commitment to serve the area it is placed in. But it is not easy to win this one, and church leaders may be somewhat nervous of frightening key leaders and members away.

Group discussion

Many church websites describe their church as 'vibrant', 'friendly', 'inclusive' 'welcoming', or all four! The tests for such adjectives are normally seen as Sunday services. But church members in the local community communicate too, perhaps even more so. What messages are your church members sending out to those who live nearby? What can you do about it if you feel there is not enough that is positive?

Here are group discussion questions based on this topic.

- A Which of these seven warnings might apply to us? Which are the ones where we acknowledge there could be an issue?
- B What other negative messages, not included in the list above, might we be showing to our local community? Do we need to ask them rather than make assumptions? How should we go about this?
- C What simple and immediate actions can we take to correct the areas we have identified?
- D What longer term solutions do we need to work to? How should we go about these?
- E Do we also need to consider the messages that our buildings put out? If so read Training Notes TN44, *The message of our buildings*, also on this website.

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN137. See also Training Notes TN44, *The message of your buildings* and, on a related theme, TN113, *What to avoid on your website*.

Contact John if you would like to enquire about the possibility of training in or review of some aspect of church communication.

Cartoons are by Micki Hounslow for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN131 under Communication.

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