



The message of your buildings

TN44 Training Notes series: Administration

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What message do your buildings (if you have them) give to those who go past or seek to enter? Comparing one church building with the pub across the road from it gave me some food (or should I say drink?) for thought.

One day I was doing a spot of consultancy work for a church (for that is my job). The staff daringly took me outside and asked me to tell them what the building would say to a complete stranger.

I stared at it for some time and that gave me a problem: should I be polite or honest? As consultants are paid to be the latter I told them what impression it gave me (with its peeling paint, shoddy feel, litter-strewn car park and overgrown garden) and then pointed them across the road to the local hostelry. This was a mass of sparkling window boxes, hanging baskets blazing with colour, a brightly painted front and welcoming signs. I'm not the pub type myself, but I knew which building attracted me more.

Buildings play a part in welcome

If we want our churches to create positive images of welcome and openness to those outside, our people are the key elements. But don't let's underestimate the power of the message given by our buildings too. In these notes I only have space to focus on the external features, but here are seven tests. How do you score?

For good measure I will keep the comparison going with your local pub. Perhaps I will be assuming the worst for the church and the best for the inn, but it won't be too far from the truth. I have in mind the kind of pub that serves food and seeks to attract more than just 'the regulars'. It may well be part of a national chain.

One way to use these notes is to get a group of leaders to stand outside your site. Score yourselves out of 10 by comparing your buildings with the best examples of your local pubs and

other eateries. An even better way would be to ask a few people who have nothing to do with your church to carry out this exercise for you. Tell them they have to be honest!

Here are seven external tests and a score card for each one. 10 means you are brilliant. 0 – you haven't even started.

Test 1: The building itself

The King's Arms will usually have brick or stonework that is clean and attractive, the paint-work will be in excellent condition, the colour scheme may be a fraction garish but it will be bright and give the impression of recent attention. If it is one of the larger chain-restaurants, it is probable that the whole building will have been given an expensive face-lift in the past few years.

The impression will be warm and homely, welcoming and appetising. If it is not, then it may attract the genuine locals, but it will not succeed as a commercial venture by attracting the passing trade and by bringing new people in.

So how does your church building score in comparison? OK – so you may have a medieval or Victorian building that makes some things (like face-lifts!) difficult. But, taking whatever you have into account, you can still check out matters like the appearance of the brick, stone and tiles, the look of the paint-work, maintenance on gutters and other details, and a feel of attention, care and tidiness.

Your score: 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0

Test 2: Sign-boards

The go-ahead Red Dragon will of course have its pub sign hanging outside in full colour. But there will be more than this. There will be signs showing menus, special brews on offer and, above all, a large black-board with carefully painted chalk-like notices to advertise what the house is offering.

What about your church? Test your sign-board by top pub standards, not by the other churches down the street. Is the name (and logo?) proudly displayed in well-painted or crafted signs? Is it clear what your building stands for?

Are there appropriate black-board or other signs telling you what is on the menu, in language that people will understand and at a size they can read? How many of your present words would be gobbledegook to a typical 30-year-old who has never been to a church service? Does everything look colourful, tidy, well-kept?

Test all this not by asking church members what they think, but by stopping real people out in the street and asking for their honest impressions. Don't forget your blood pressure pills!

Your score: 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0

Test 3: The grounds and surrounds

Outside the Plough there will be picnic benches with bright sunshades. Where there is a garden it will have lawns that are cut regularly and beds that are well tended and fully stocked. There may be a children's play area with good equipment. But above all there will be window boxes and hanging baskets presenting a riot of colour cascading from every window throughout the summer. The secular pub celebrates God's rainbow colours of creation.

What about the surrounds of your church building? How does it compare with the Plough? Many older church buildings want to speak of new life but are surrounded by death in the form of a graveyard. So there is a real obstacle to overcome, but what better way than colourful flowerbeds, cared for week by week, and litter-free gardens? A tidy garden preaches a message of care. Vandalism may be a problem for some but I suspect that quality grounds are less likely to be attacked than unkempt ones.

Your score: 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0

Test 4: The car park

Pubs with successful restaurants, like the Queen Anne, plan for the motorist. There will be an ample car park with a good surface, well signed and marked out in bays, brightly lit at night. A main way in to the building will be from the car park. The route from road to park to entrance must be an easy one.

As for your church, you cannot always adapt medieval buildings and surrounds (especially graveyards!) for the car so creative thinking is required. Have you invested in good parking facilities, with a clear way in to the building? Is there clear signing so that people arriving for the first time can see exactly where to go? If people have to road-park, does the website provide helpful advice and, if necessary, are there church traffic wardens on duty on Sundays to ensure local residents are not inconvenienced?

The best test is to ask a stranger arriving for the first time by car. How was it for them?

Your score: 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0

Test 5: The entrance points

Entrances are hugely important. They have to be easy to find and then get through. At the Horse & Groom there are warm air blowers at the doors and good lighting. The tables and lights just inside the windows have been chosen to create an atmosphere of friendly warmth.

Too often at the church across the road there will be a heavy wooden door that looks firmly closed. The church door is one of the greatest obstacles today. Compare it with shopping malls where doors are virtually invisible, where glass has replaced solid walls to allow you to gaze inside. Security will be a problem for many churches, but you need to find some way to make your entrance stand out so that anyone can see how you get inside.

Your score: 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0

Test 6: External lighting

The Green Man is a picture at night: with bright lights, colourful signs and spot-lit window-boxes that call out 'We have a warm welcome for you here!'.

If you are following a green agenda (perhaps in contrast to the Green Man!) you will not want to waste light, but I hold that most church buildings are appallingly 'underlit' – both inside and out. External lighting needs to be seen as a safety feature: many dank, dark churchyards have dangers lurking behind every tombstone. Even simple security lighting can make a big impression and deter local teenagers from gathering in the church grounds after dark.

Your score: 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0

Test 7: Disability awareness

The Pig & Whistle has had to take note of the Disability Discrimination Act so has ramps, rails, good disabled loos, and so on. Churches have been good at introducing induction loops inside the building, but slower to adapt the entrance and surrounds to help those who need such help. Christians should be making disability awareness a major agenda item, not for commercial reasons but because we of all people should care for others.

This extends to more than just the obvious points listed above. Paving stones on the path to the building need to be repaired to ensure an even surface, where there are steps these need to be painted white so they are obvious to all, you need railings at key points, and the doorway needs to show the correct disability signing. Some church buildings present real problems in these respects, but have you done what could be reasonably expected?

Your score: 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0

How's your score?

So we have the visitor-friendly King's Arms, Red Dragon, Plough, Queen Anne, Horse & Groom, Green Man and Pig & Whistle. What of The Anchor (one pub name with a distinctly Christian foundation)? In which one or two of the seven tests did you score least? Now is the time to do some thinking to see what you can do to overcome the problems.

Did someone mention money? Of course it all costs money, but then you put your money where your mission lies, and a major part of any church's mission must be in reaching those outside the church (even if going to them rather than waiting for them to come to us will usually need to be the first step). When it comes to items like hanging baskets, how about getting your keen gardeners to prepare and donate one each?

I am not pretending it is easy if you have an old building in an out-of-the-way or tough, urban location. Of course you cannot turn a Victorian barn into a sparkling, attractive pub-like building overnight. But what can you do under each of these seven headings to make some difference, however small? After all, churches are in the business of providing food and drink – in more senses than one.

But of course welcome through buildings is only a small part of the whole. The serving staff (and the menu) are more important and the impressions there start as soon as people step inside the building and meet the regulars. I mean, of course, the congregation.....

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN44. See also Article A31, *Helping people back to church*, plus Training Notes TN14, *Setting up a Newcomers Team*, TN33, *Danger at church!*, TN117, *Building project preparations*, TN122, *Your eco-church check-up*, and TN135, *How to conduct a disability audit*. Also, as a companion to these notes, TN137, *The message of your people*.

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN44 under Administration (with a link to Communication).

John Truscott, 24 High Grove, St Albans, AL3 5SU
Tel: 01727 568325 Email: john@john-truscott.co.uk Web: <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk>