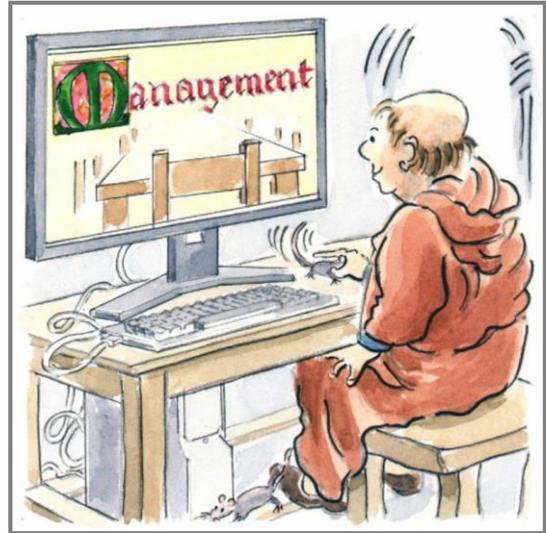


# Helping people back to church

## *Basics we often overlook*

**A31** Articles series: Management



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**The annual 'Back to Church Sunday' has proved a big hit with churches of all denominations. The key elements include a service that is attractive to those who have moved away from regular church worship and a welcoming congregation who go out to invite people.**

But why not have a 'Back to church Sunday' attitude every week? If so, you need to do some careful planning for some of the supporting aspects of your church that can welcome or detract almost as much as your style of service and your people can.

This article seeks to highlight some of the background issues you need to face if you are to encourage people who have drifted away from Christian faith or church to return. We consider what needs to happen **before** the welcomers get to work.

How can you make the route back to a church event as easy for these people as possible, whether they are brought by friends or come on their own? Such issues run the risk of being ignored in some 'welcome' training.

This assumes you have your own church building. If you hire a school or community hall, you will need to adapt one or two of the points.

To make this come alive here are three case studies to illustrate the ideas that follow.

**Gary** is a member of your church, single and in his 20s. He works in a local shop and is trying to persuade his work colleague **Gladstone** to take another look at the Christian faith. Gladstone drifted away from his Pentecostal church upbringing about four years ago.

**Guy and Gloria** live locally but gave up their church membership years ago after an unfortunate incident with the elders at their Baptist church. But their teenage children are friendly with peers who are members of your church and belong to a Sunday evening young people's group. So Gloria is wondering about trying your church out and hopes Guy will come with her.

**Gill** has been retired for several years and is trying to encourage her Bridge partner, **Gladys**, to come back to church. Gladys used to belong to an Anglican church before her divorce but she sees no point now.

# Presence in your local community

A great place to start would be for your 'church' (in all that word might mean) to be on the map in your local community. It would be useful if Gladstone, Guy, Gloria and Gladys had already come across it in a positive light. That could come about through the impression that their friends (or their teenage children's friends) give of it, but there are other points too which will be relevant to a wider circle of those who have drifted away.

## Three strands

First, the building. Church is of course all about people not buildings but for our argument here, building has to come first.

When presented with an invitation to something at St Cecelia's Church or Community Chapel, does Gladys know where that is, especially if she does not live in the immediate locality? More than that, does that building create a good impression in her mind? She is much more likely to take a second look at a leaflet about somewhere that's known to her in a positive light.

Secondly, the people. Even if Gladys knows the building is there, does she have any idea of the community of people who have that building as their home?

If Guy and Gloria's knowledge of church dates from 20 or more years ago, do they imagine it's as it was then? Have they got the idea that this is a group of people where they might fit (because of age, style, interests, or whatever)?

Thirdly, what do these people do in this building? Weekdays as well as Sundays. If Gladstone joins them one Sunday, what will it be like? Noisy like his previous church, or formal and deadly dull? But these days some services feel like a trad *Songs of Praise* and others resemble a rock concert, so the idea of 'back to church' is no longer back to a standard format of event.

All three of these are important and point to the need to plan, if necessary, some kind of strategy to build awareness, if that does not sound too grand. If your congregation are going to be confident enough to invite a friend to come back to church, it will help a great deal if the church has a certain and positive image.

## Create a strategy

If the building is fit for purpose, if the people there are a crowd others would want to associate with and if the activities are attractive, then you need to consider how to broadcast that information.

Remember, the aim of this strategy is for those living in or engaging with the local community to

- 1 Know your building and have a good impression of it.
- 2 Know some of your people and feel they might fit in with them.
- 3 Know something of what your people do in your building and find that interesting.

The key to achieving all this of course is to have church members who get involved in the local community and who talk openly about their church and their faith. Also to have a programme of social activities and Alpha-type courses that members can invite friends to. But what needs to come first?

Here are ten ideas to consider. Although all of them support all three parts of the strategy suggested, the first four link in particular to the first part, the next three to the second and the final three to the last.

### 1 Smarten up your building

It matters not whether it is Norman, Victorian or 1970s. It needs to look the best it can be if you are going to point people to it. This involves issues such as maintenance, tidiness, paintwork, colour, surrounding grounds, lack of litter, clear signage especially its name, and anything that shows love and attention whether window boxes, cut lawns or changing displays.

### 2 Use locators

If the building looks at its best, you need to go out of your way to help people find it. If you are the village church on the green, this won't be a problem. If you are a chapel in a back street you are going to need to do some work.

Quote the postcode everywhere for the use of satnavs, print maps (with proper copyright clearance if necessary) to locate you both on your website and on everything you print, quote the road or street name with the building name, have a logo that shows the outline of the church in some simple way if this is distinctive. If your local authority will put up street signs, this will help. Or you can simply use a strap-line to help locate you: 'the church on the hill', 'the spire in the shopping centre', or whatever.

### 3 Get the community inside

It can be a step forward if people come to your building for reasons other than for 'church'. If you have rooms to let out, children's parties and other activities can be not only a money-spinner but a valuable way of getting parents and children onto your premises and familiar with the inside of the building.

If several local clubs use your hall for their meetings, you have scope for church displays in the foyer. Some churches can be used as counselling centres, rural post offices or tourist attractions. If none of that applies in your case how about the idea of church-hosted lunches for the community, mums and toddlers groups or playgroups, and many other ways in which people get used to the building.

This will be especially important for Guy and Gloria because they may be trying out a Sunday service without anyone coming with them. If they have been inside before, at least some of the fear of the unknown is reduced. If your website links to live-streamed services, that will help.

### 4 Create a corporate image

This is a different kind of point, but it is important that Gladstone immediately links the flyer through his flat door, the notice on the church signboard and the sticker he sees in Gary's car. Such 'branding' does not have to be left to the large companies and can be achieved quite simply by the use of consistent fonts, design ideas and colours. Some creative language can help too: 'The Lakeside Centre' may, if relevant, be better than 'Gasworks Chapel' (and then change the logo from a gasholder to a lake!). It takes time but consistency in visual design can be powerful. See Article A2 on this website, *Watch your image!*, for more on this.

### 5 Design your website for non-members

People want to hear news about people. So resist every temptation to lead with your doctrinal statement on your home page (that can come elsewhere on the site) and, instead, have photographs of people, tell people-stories and introduce people. This is what will attract Gladstone, Guy, Gloria and Gladys.

Many church websites introduce their leaders and staff, but why not focus as much on ordinary members? Each of them will have something extraordinary worth highlighting. At the same time make sure your web address is memorable not complicated, and sell it on all your literature.

FAQs for most non-members will be about what to wear, whether the kids will be safe and happy, whether the loos are clean, and how long an event will last. Avoid Christian clichés and

liturgical language – or put that (if you really have to have it) on a page designed for Christians wanting to know more about your church.

See Article A14, *Create a quality website*, for more on this.

### 6 Print colourful, people-centred leaflets

The same points apply to the print you produce as invitations or locality letterbox drops. Have photos of ordinary people, two sentence stories of why they belong to your church, bullet point explanations about what goes on. Get a gifted communicator to write this up, and beware any Minister who wants to include a complete description of the gospel! That comes later. Pictures of people are what make leaflets attractive – though do beware pictures of children and always obtain parents' permission.

Gary and Gill are most likely to use leaflets they know will be of interest to those they pass them on to, ones they can hand over with pride rather than with an apology. Try Article A21, *The use of print in outreach*.

### 7 Advertise

The best (or worst) advertisements will be your own members, but utilise every other means available to get your presence known. If the local press has a column for churches or church services, use it. If local shops take advertising cards, why not? Car stickers are a brilliant way to get your name seen regularly in the shopping areas and car parks. Gladstone has already noticed Gary's as mentioned above. Paid advertisements in the local press and radio may be possible for some churches. Advertise who you are and what you do.

### 8 Create a social media presence

You may by now be used to using Facebook and Twitter in-house, but they can be valuable means of drawing in a wide number of people outside the church (but often outside the area too). Younger people will get a great impression if they see you use such means – and if church members regularly retweet helpful messages, a lot of people start to hear about you pretty quickly. To help outsiders see what goes on at Sunday services, live stream them on YouTube and link to them. Then Gary can show Gladstone what's on his mobile at their next lunch break.

### 9 Use your local media

Most very ordinary churches are full of people-stories that your local press and radio would love to get their hands on. OK – they sometimes report what you'd rather they did not, but if you

take the initiative and build a relationship through regular media releases (with photos), you can get positive messages about yourself into the local media on a regular basis. It needs someone who knows what they are doing to be given this responsibility – but this is a powerful means of building local awareness.

See also Training Notes TN75 on this website, *Writing for the media*. Also TN89.

## 10 Give-away programme cards

Finally, something pretty basic. Give each church member a handful of attractively printed cards promoting either Sunday services or the smaller groups they belong to, and ask them to give them to friends and neighbours. But don't just list times and places, include some photos of the activities, explain what goes on to someone who's out of touch with church, and answer the kind of FAQs listed above. You might want to combine this with No. 6 in the list above.

## Summary

Most churches simply wait for people to 'come back to church'. Here are ideas for a possible plan to help Gary, Gill and others go out and encourage them back, or there for the first time.

Remember, the key ingredients are your members and how they go about this. But here are ten tools or resources to back them up, to encourage them to do it, and to make them proud they are members of your church.

If this all sounds too much to cope with, take action on just one or two of these points. In any case they will not all apply to every church in quite the same way. Keep in mind the three-fold strategy they support: help people know the building, know the people, and know something of what the people do in the building.

But that's only a first step. You now need to consider how to attract people inside. It is here that many churches, without realising it, put up all kinds of barriers.

# Let me in!

How do you encourage someone inside your building? If Gladstone comes with Gary or Gill brings Gladys, this may not be too much of a problem. But Guy and Gloria may come alone, and you hope many others will too. And getting inside most buildings for a stranger isn't quite as straightforward as you might think. Here are four stages: locating the site, reaching the building, finding the door, and getting inside.

## Stage 1: Locating the site

Let's think more about the idea in the last section about using locators to identify your building. This applies whether you have a well-known local landmark as your building (but remember that it may not be well-known to people from outside your immediate locality), a chapel in a side street, or no property of your own but you use a local school or community hall.

It may also be helpful to make it clear where you are in relation to public transport routes (see also Stage 2 below). Gladstone may come by train if he lives some way away as this was a work network link, not a home one, so explain you are 'only a five minute walk from Churchminster railway station' if you are. Gladys may use her bus pass so tell her that 'bus routes 16, 24 and 35 stop right outside our door'.

Most won't need to have a section starting 'If landing at Birmingham International....' but I have seen that. On the other hand, if you host international conferences on your premises...!

## Reminder of our case studies

**Gary** is a member of your church, single and in his 20s. He works in a local shop and is trying to persuade work colleague **Gladstone** to take another look at the Christian faith. Gladstone drifted away from his Pentecostal church upbringing four years ago.

**Guy and Gloria** live locally but gave up their church membership years ago after an unfortunate incident with the elders at their Baptist church. But their teenage children are friendly with members of your church and belong to a Sunday evening young people's group. Gloria is wondering about trying your church out and hopes Guy will come with her.

**Gill** has been retired for several years and is trying to encourage her Bridge partner, **Gladys**, to come back to church. Gladys used to belong to an Anglican church before her divorce but she sees no point now.

All this needs to be easily found on your website and on your outreach literature, not tucked away as a matter of little importance. Test your website now: if I am interested in joining you for a Sunday service or any other event, is it immediately obvious where I can find details of your programme for next week and exactly how to get to you?

It is no good judging this yourself. Try it on friends of yours who have never been to your building and watch them to see how quickly they can find the information by starting off at the Google search website. Gary might suggest to Gladstone that he has a go at this, just to get a conversation going. Any delay in the search and the would-be visitor may give up.

## Stage 2: Reaching the building

So, they know where you are. But how do you get there? Here are a number of points to consider, very much for those who are not being brought personally by a church member. Let's start with help for people coming by car.

- Is the route straightforward, especially for those without satnavs, or are there complications such as one-way streets or dual carriageways? If so, you will need to guide people to you in some clear way on your website and in your literature.
- When they get to you, where do they park? This is probably the point that most concerns me whenever I am visiting a strange church and I am rarely told unless I ask. You may know there is unlimited street parking and cannot see any need to announce that, but that will not be known to many of your visitors.
- When are people likely to visit you? Sunday parking may be quite different from weekdays if there are yellow lines around your area. It may be possible to short-term park for a one-hour service, but what if there is lunch afterwards and you need three hours?
- Do you have a church car park? If so, say so (key point) and direct people to its entrance. But if your regulars fill it up on a Sunday morning, consider reserved bays just for visitors or asking your regulars to park further away so that there are always spaces.
- In your car park are there clearly marked bays and spaces for the disabled? Is the surface in good order without hazards for tripping or slipping? Are you able to drop off those with limited mobility right by the entrance to your building?

- Do you need to advise people to use local car parks? If so, explain clearly about charges. Guy and Gloria would be more likely to come if you say something like, 'We recommend you park in the Riverside car park shown on the map – it is free on a Sunday and costs £2 for up to four hours on a weekday'.
- Would it be visitor-friendly to have car park wardens on duty? A number of churches now do this so that visitors can be guided to the best streets, or so that your car park can be filled to capacity and still let anyone out early. This may also be necessary in areas of high vandalism with a warden on duty throughout your services.
- Are those who live locally inconvenienced by cars parking across their driveways or annoyed by your cars on their verges? This is a major issue of witness which may require sensitive communication and discussion with your neighbours. You may need parking wardens in this case too.

I parked in a certain church car park two days before writing this. The surface was quite uneven and when I returned to my car after rain it was in a lake which did not do my shoes much good. So, how welcoming is your car park to a visitor? And does it have 'reserved for staff' notices up on several bays to put people off?

For those coming by public transport you may need, somewhere, clear instructions from the station or the bus stop, together with some idea of frequency of services, especially on a Sunday. For buses you will need to name the stop they should ask for. Then check it out by travelling the route yourself before Gladys gets confused because you missed out one vital piece of information.

You may have missed the point that there are two exits from the station and Gladstone takes the one that leads away from your church rather than towards it. Or that the bus drops Gladys opposite the church but there is no easy way across the busy street at this point. If your church meets in a school or community hall, remember that taxi drivers will need that information, not the name of your church which may mean nothing to them.

If this sounds a fraction pedantic, check it all out with a number of visitors in a gently informal way and find how straightforward they found the journey – although it is worth remembering that it is those who did not get as far as your door that you really need to talk to!

A church I visited recently had on their literature something like, 'Parking is difficult around here so allow plenty of time to find a space'. Helpful up to

a point, but it did not tell me where to look for spaces! Another told me to 'turn left out of the station' but failed to mention which station (there were two) or what to expect once I'd turned left.

In all this keep Gladstone, Guy, Gloria and Gladys in your sights all the time. You are seeking to understand their needs and meet them. You may need to go out of your way to be concise and clear, to avoid putting unnecessary obstacles in their way.

### Stage 3: Finding the door

We are not there yet! You might be surprised how often I find it is not at all clear how to get into a church building, or into a school being used by a church. The more barriers you put in Guy and Gloria's way, the more likely they are to be stressed by the time they get to you – if they haven't already turned round and gone home.

Here are some typical situations I have been in at a strange building. To a local they may sound trivial. To some visitors they are real barriers.

- Guy and Gloria are in the car park and can see there is a gate into the churchyard on a grass path, a doorway into what might be a church hall, or they could walk out back onto the road and go right round. All this needs is some signage telling them where to go. Without it, they have questions.
- Gladstone is walking through a gate into a churchyard and there are porches on three sides of this medieval building where he is due to meet Gary inside. But he is not told which one to go to. He may look a fool if he chooses the wrong one. Once again you need some signs.
- The path through the churchyard divides and both go round to the other side of the building in opposite directions. No one is in front of the visitors and there are people coming behind so if they take the wrong route they will look silly. Again, all that is needed is some signage to the entrance when this is not clear.
- The door Gladys can see is large and solid with no glass in it. She expects it to be the way in but it is closed. Is that the route to take or not? What she cannot see is the new glass-fronted entrance round the side.
- In this school or modern church building Guy and Gloria can see several possible ways in but nothing tells them which is the one to use. If the church is hiring a

school, this needs mobile signage with the church's name and clear directions.

- It's a dark winter's evening and it is raining. There are no lights in the car park and grounds and Gill and Gladys will feel vulnerable. There is only one dim light-bulb hanging over the church entrance. There may be signs to tell them where to go but Gladys cannot see them. So, are your church car park and path clearly lit?

While walking to the door, assuming it is clear where to go, newcomers cannot but help notice the environment. Some old church buildings have a real problem here because their building is surrounded by death in the form of a graveyard. But whether that is your problem or not, consider the following:

- tidiness and litter, especially if the local teens were in your grounds late on Saturday night;
- the state of the buildings in general;
- the state of your grounds, grass, flowerbeds, etc.;
- the quality of signboards and direction signs;
- the 'feel' that this church community actually wants the visitor to be welcome;
- the possibility of a covered way from car park to church entrance;
- facilities for the disabled: ramps, rails;
- signboards that are attractive and right up-to-date.

### Stage 4: Getting inside

So our 'back to churchers' have found the site, parked the car, been helpfully directed to the door. But in some churches the problems are not over yet. Before our visitors meet your welcomers, they have to negotiate the entrance. This might be the biggest barrier your newcomer has to overcome.

The key issue here is visibility. Can the newcomer see inside? If they cannot they may become anxious at what to expect. Your whole aim should be to reduce such stress levels, to put the visitor at ease as far as possible.

The design of the church entrance is an important factor in any attempt to be visitor-friendly. Much will depend on security and the area you are in. The more open you make yourselves, the more prone you are to vandalism and attack of some kind. The more secure you are, the less friendly you appear.

In shopping malls many of the shops no longer have doors: during opening hours you move seamlessly from the walkway into the store. Where there are doors, they are likely to be glass, they will be open or they will open as you approach them. The inside of the store will be clearly visible from outside and there will be displays of the kind of goods on offer.

So have a good look at your church entrance, or the way in to the school or hall you hire. Does it offer a real welcome, does it invite people in, is it clear where you go and what you do?

Of course many buildings date from centuries ago and you may be somewhat limited in what you can change. But in general at least consider:

- glass instead of solid oak;
- open instead of closed;
- human welcome outside as well as in;
- ramp as well as steps;
- hot air blowers inside rather than a draughty entrance;
- appropriate floor covering rather than cold flagstones;
- brightly lit instead of dim bulbs;
- colourful signs rather than tatty notice-boards.

It would be such a shame if Gladstone, Guy, Gloria and Gladys all had raised blood pressure by the time they actually got inside. You want them to be as relaxed as possible, so think carefully what you need to do to achieve this.

## A note on 'big' events

So far we have had a typical Sunday in mind. But there are times when you have many more visitors at one service than normal. Examples include a Christmas carol service, a baptism service with a large family contingent, and a special invitation event.

In these cases it is essential to plan ahead, not just for the internal seating if that is an issue, but also for how people can get to your door hassle-free. Here are some special needs you ought to make allowance for.

- More cars than your car park or the street you are in can hold. So consider special instructions on your invitations or promotional literature on these occasions, and ask regulars to park elsewhere or walk.
- Crowding outside the main door if there are constrictions for large numbers to get in, especially if it is cold, dark and wet. So you need stewards both inside to move people along to seats and also outside to order a queue and make people feel welcome.
- People waiting outside for other friends and family to arrive before having the courage to go in. So perhaps you need an official meeting point.

So we have now managed to get our returnees to the door. But before the welcome team get to them, they may be having a good look round at what they can see.

## Speaking without words

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Who, or what, speaks to the visitor returning to church?

Gary will, we hope, speak to Gladstone when they meet up inside the building. Gill will of course speak to Gladys. One hopes your welcomers and other members of the congregation will spot Guy and Gloria and welcome all these 'back to churchers'. But are you aware that those are not the only voices our visitors will hear?

Here is an exercise. Pair up with a friend who belongs to a church whose building you don't know and swap services one Sunday, reporting back afterwards. With something like this the usual idea is to test the human welcome. But this time be on the lookout for the non-human messages you hear in a strange environment.

Here are nine messages I so hope your visitors will hear, on top of all the encouraging chat from those who have brought them and from other church members. You might also like to check out Training Notes TN44 on this website, *The message of your buildings*.

## Let me show you the way

Once inside is the visitor needs help to see where to go:

- for the service or event they have come for;
- for any children's activities;
- for the loos, now or later;
- for the quick exit if necessary;
- for refreshments afterwards.

Some of these may not be quite as obvious as you think. A personal welcome will of course include directions and guidance, but to put the visitor at ease you need to let them see that everything is signed clearly for when no one is there to guide them or for when they do not want to ask.

What is the equivalent in your church of the supermarket's signs suspended over the aisles? Or consider the signs in a busy London Underground station for someone who has not been to the capital before.

In several churches once you have come through the welcoming entrance you really need insider knowledge to be able to work out where to go next. The worship area is elsewhere in the building, the loos are hidden away in a back corridor, and surely you knew that you drop toddlers for the crèche in the Minister's house on the other side of the road.

*You* know exactly where to go, but the visitor does not. So, if your building layout is anything other than obvious, consider:

- large, simple direction signs hanging from the roof/ceiling;
- doors clearly labelled at a size that makes reading easy at a distance;
- a building plan on the website so the visitor can see what they are coming to;
- the plan repeated on your service sheet or visitor pack;
- children's groups signed in a way that the child can follow;
- a manned information point with displays.

These all need to look professional: someone's misspelt, handwritten message is not going to inspire confidence from Guy and Gloria, or anyone else for that matter.

## Please sit down and relax

Have you noticed what the seating is like in coffee shops? We used to expect nothing better than a slightly wobbly wooden chair. Now

we have leather sofas. So, consider how a marketing expert might judge the, er, 'seating experience' in your church. Here are three possible points to make.

First, some of us are struggling with wooden pews and huge opposition in the local community should we dare to try to take them out. But many have now fought that battle and won and been able to install comfortable chairs, some of which stack well. But some seats are OK for the human bottom but unkind on the human back – or vice versa. In this department, quality matters much more than it used to.

Secondly, have you considered what the change in worship culture has done over the past 20 years? Before then most church services had people moving around quite a bit: stand for a hymn, sit for a reading, kneel for a prayer, and so on. Now many churches have a long block of singing, then a long block of sitting. So comfort becomes even more of an issue.

Thirdly, it is not just the pews or chairs, it's also their layout. Does this give space to hide a bit for those visitors not keen to fill up the front row? Are there enough spaces for a family arriving late to find five seats together without trouble?

Consider what your seating, and kneelers if that is what you have, 'say' to the visitor as they arrive and sit down. I can think of church buildings I've visited where the message coming across has been:

- we're going to make this next hour feel like at least two;
- we save lots of money here: you can see how cheap we are;
- this was quite good enough for the Victorians, so it can do for you too.

Put yourself in Gladys' shoes, especially if she is getting on in years. Basic comforts really matter for her.

## I want you to feel at ease

I travel by train quite a bit in the course of my work and the temperature and the brightness of the coach contribute much to the comfort of the journey. I can remember one trip when the heat control stuck at full power on a hot summer's day, and one when one's breath turned to ice on the inside of the windows.

Some train companies have nice new rolling stock that has good central lighting or individual lights over the seats, but one train company (my lips are sealed) has nice new rolling stock with a light every third or so set of seats, so it's hard to work and read at night.

You may be used to your church. The visitor may judge everything by comparing it with his centrally heated, well-lit home. A twelfth century building with a roof height that would cover three storeys is not going to be easy or cheap to heat and light, but could you at least consider if there are actions you could take?

You need to consider investing in the best methods of heating to warm the people rather than the stonework. You need to try to improve the dim lighting to something approaching what we are all used to at home. That is unless you are deliberately trying to create a twilight ethos. And you should aim to minimise problems caused by draughts.

All this comes at a price, but if your aim is to welcome people back to church, this is bound to have budgetary implications. Some of our buildings are far from cosy – compare yours with the next-door pub for example, an environment that Gladstone may be much more used to. So perhaps, to be visitor friendly, you need to think even more radically than the above.

## **I'd like you to hear me**

In these days of sophisticated sound systems where the sound desk sometimes has a more prominent place in our church building than the pulpit, we seem to have more problems with audibility than our forebears ever did. They knew how to throw their voices and the music was led by a massive organ.

Today the younger members of the congregation are used to a volume level that would have turned their grandparents deaf in a week, and some of their grandparents are in fact pretty hard of hearing anyway and rely on machinery including your induction loop. Your band (if you have one) want to drown out the singing and the preachers and leaders think they can mumble away because that microphone will, by magic, transform everything. It doesn't, as you probably realise.

But what do your sound levels for both music and speech say to your visitors?

Musicians need to be conscious of how they come across to a range of people sitting in the congregation.

Do you train your service leaders and those who read lessons and lead intercessions in how to use a microphone well and how to project their voice whether there is a microphone or not? If not, everyone may be struggling to hear when what you want them to focus on is the meaning and application of the words. And it may be visitors like Gladys who are most put off if they cannot hear.

For the visitor this is all part of the welcome – or lack of it. A magnificent sermon will, after all, be lost if the visitor is unable to hear it.

## **It's as clear as daylight!**

As churches shift from books to screens we lose one set of problems but gain another. So check up on places where sight of a screen is difficult and where monitors may need to be installed. Look out for visual blockages such as pillars. Also screens that are not high enough for people to be able to see over the heads of the row in front of them. Or those that are so high that the front rows gain a crick in their necks as they gaze skywards. Any problems like these could put a visitor off and make them feel less than welcome.

If you project all the words of services and hymns/songs onto screen, is the font size large enough for a visitor who does not know any of the words to read them easily? If you include video clips, is the projector powerful enough for easy visibility on a day when the sun is shining brightly?

For those who still use books, does the service leader give enough instruction for a visitor to find their way around, especially if they have never seen this book in their life before? As with all these points the congregation know it all but many visitors, even those coming *back* to church, will not. Guy and Gloria may have been used to a liturgy some years ago which was very different to what they find today, even in the same church.

It can be embarrassing not to know which book to turn to next and where to find the page. Zephaniah chapter 3 needs a page number if the visitor is to follow the passage during the sermon. Come to think of it, most congregational members would need one too.

## **Younger people matter to us**

The definition of 'younger people' will need to fit the church in question: children, teens, twenties. Our case studies have not included a family with young children but it is well worth considering the messages given if Gladstone had brought a baby with him or if Gladys had brought her grand-children (or great grand-children perhaps).

Leaving aside the very obvious point of what ages are visible in the people arriving at the building, and it can be quite intimidating for a young family if everyone else seems to be over 60, or for teens if only young children are in

sight, here are points to consider. Choose the ones that are relevant for you:

- play areas and bright, good quality toys visible;
- signs to a crèche and child-friendly loos;
- displays to show that children's work is valued, as you might expect to find in a school;
- signs and explanations in print or on screen to show parents what is provided for children, where they go, how they are supervised, safety arrangements, etc.
- facilities and signing that is clearly child-friendly (consider points such as the height of notices from the ground);
- refreshments suitable for children;
- prominent photo-displays showing zany teens activities;
- signs to dedicated areas of the building for teens;
- notices promoting young adults activities.

And so on. The personal welcome will be so important here, but it needs to be backed up by the messages given by your building.

In some churches, of course, it will be the opposite end of the age spectrum to promote. A church full of teens and twenties may need to show that it cares for older adults.

## Cleanliness is next to godliness

So the visitor pays a visit to your facilities, or needs to change the baby. Will this be a sweet smelling, pleasant experience that offers a real welcome, or will it make it clear that they would have been better off making a hasty exit and reaching home in time?

The 'welcome to our loo' test is one that the mystery worshippers really ought to include on their schedule. For churches with services that last at least 90 minutes and then expect people to stay around over coffee for another 30 or more, a careful check of the ladies and gents would be in order.

Yet again, some of us have medieval buildings and real problems in bringing this aspect of welcome up to today's expectations. Nevertheless, here is what to aim for:

- a sign that indicates that you are aiming to keep the loos squeaky clean day by day and asking people to report any problems (just like in a shop or on a train);
- everything specially thoroughly cleaned on Friday or Saturday, ready for Sunday;

- no clutter or other items stored in the loos;
- hot and cold running water;
- liquid soap rather than an old, hard cake of coal tar;
- efficient blowers, paper towels or clean towels;
- good-sized mirrors;
- baby changing facilities that make it easy, with wipes and other requisites provided.

The cleanliness test should extend well outside the loos, though. Does the whole building look clean, tidy and well cared for? Check tiles, carpets and all flat surfaces. A visitor will spot shortcomings here much more easily than a member of the congregation.

## This is delicious

The quality of refreshment is another message that our visitors will take away with them. A weak cup of instant coffee and a somewhat dated plain biscuit is simply not good enough. A growing number of churches now provide 'proper' coffee, a range of different teas, and home-made cakes which can create a positive impression on our Gladstone, Guy, Gloria and Gladys.

Consider too the quality of the cups (or, more likely these days, mugs) and the option for quality cold drinks too such as fruit juices. This deserves a separate set of notes in due course.

## Everyone is welcome here

Most churches have done much in the area of disability awareness as adherence to the legislation is obviously closely linked to our desire for care for people. But disability comes in many different forms and it is worth considering how your church could help someone who was:

- visually impaired – do you have anything in Braille or people who could help?
- deaf – are there people in the congregation who could sign?
- in a wheelchair – are your internal doorways wide enough, with ramps?
- unco-ordinated – can your congregation cope with all kinds of needs, such as if someone came for a service with a carer and proved to be noisy or with distracting movements?

Naturally there is work to be done to ensure there is a disabled toilet, ramps, disabled

parking spaces and large-print service sheets. Recognising that old buildings are not always easy to adapt, what score would a disabled visitor give you next Sunday?

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The point in identifying these nine features of your building and its equipment is that they all contribute to the sense of welcome for a visitor. Of course the human element is going to be the most important feature by far. And if Gladstone and Gladys come with, respectively, Gary and

Gill, that will be their most important reaction to what they take part in. But a wonderful human welcome can have the shine taken off it by a cold building, a less than perfect loo and an uncomfortable pew.

If we want people to come back to church we need to ensure that the experience is a positive one. People's expectations of comfort and quality are considerably higher now than a few years ago. A church that does not make some attempt to match this new level may well not see visitors returning.

## What it's all about

This is an article that has included plenty to do with buildings, administration, communication and planning. But at heart it is all about how we look after people and care for them. Its basic message is to put ourselves in the visitors' shoes – because most church members have conveniently forgotten what it's like to be new again. But most of us were once.

Now to tackle the real, human welcome. And then to consider the crucial issue of why we want to bring people back to church anyway, and whether we are simply thinking of membership numbers or faith in Jesus Christ and the building up of disciples. For an overview of all this try Training Notes TN109, *A test for your church's welcome*.

This article is available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Articles-index> then A31. It is an expanded version of three items originally written for the former trade magazine *Maintenance and Equipment News*. See also on this website Articles A2, *Watch your image!*, A14, *Create a quality website*, A21, *The use of print in outreach*, and A28, *Rooms to let*, plus Training Notes TN14, *Setting up a Newcomers' Team*, TN39, *We've got news for you!*, TN44, *The message of your buildings*, TN63, *How not to write a newsletter*, TN75, *Writing for the media*, TN83, *The service isn't over yet*, TN89, *Hold the front page!*, TN109, *A test for your church's welcome* and TN146, *Be hospitable!*

Contact John if you would like to enquire about the possibility of using his consultancy or training services on any issue of church welcomes.

Cartoons are by Micki Hounslow for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication, Administration. File A31 under Management (with a link to Administration).

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