



The service isn't over yet

TN83 Training Notes series: Planning

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Churches often spend time planning their Sunday (or weekday) services with care: liturgy, preaching, music. They may even carefully consider the welcome at the start. But what about the 'welcome' at the end?

These notes are designed to help you consider what happens at the close of the formal part of the service (I am carefully avoiding the phrase 'end of the service'). It is worth taking care to plan this in as much detail as any other part, especially with newcomers in mind.

So to guide your thinking here are 25 points to ponder – this is best done as a group exercise by your Ministry Team, Staff, Worship Group or Newcomers Team.

Engagement: Ten questions you may forget to ask

Before you look at practical issues regarding refreshments, it is worth analysing just what is going on at this point. It is important to think first and take action second.

1 Is this after the service or is it part of the service?

What is your so-called church 'service'? If it involves meeting both God and each other, then might not coffee 'after the service' give quite the wrong impression as a phrase? It is worth working out when your 'service' ends.

2 Does it take place on site or elsewhere?

If you want to hold people so you can engage with them and they build real relationships with each other, the route to refreshments needs to be easier to find than the route to the exit. It's a bit like the way out through gift shops at National Trust properties!

3 What is the purpose?

Think just why you want people to stay – preferably from their point of view and for their benefit. If it is so they can develop relationships, this will only work if almost all the congregation recognise this and are prepared to get involved.

4 What are the implications if visitors are / are not on their own?

If they have come with friends, do you leave them to talk only with those they came with? If they are on their own, at what point do you want your congregation to say 'Hello' and guide them over to coffee? Is this the job of a specialist Newcomers Team or something everyone gets involved in?

5 How is this time 'sold' as something worth staying for?

The service leader's announcement can make it sound as though coffee is the normal next activity in the programme or an optional extra for the keen group. Whether you are a regular or a newcomer, do the announcements in the notice-sheet, on the screens and from the front sound as though it's worth staying on?

6 What happens in the one minute at the close of the formal service?

A visitor will often make up their mind whether to stay or not in the few seconds following the close of the formal liturgy. This may depend on what they can see and feel about other people's reaction to their being there. A word from a welcomer when they reach the exit may be too late.

7 What if parents need to link up with their children?

If regulars or visitors with children let them go to crèche or young people's groups, do you train your leaders of such activities in how to link them back with their parents with special care and chat to any newcomers?

8 What market research is available?

Don't reinvent the coffee wheel! Visit other churches that seem to be going concerns and analyse what they do on all these issues. You could use these notes to give you a checklist of 25 points to assess. The ten in this list you will need to talk to them about, the following 15 you can observe.

9 Should refreshments be on offer during the liturgical service?

But why wait until the final section of the event? Some churches now have fresh brewed coffee on the go throughout the whole service and encourage people to wander to the back at any time and bring back a mug. It's what younger people are used to and may even expect.

10 What memories should a newcomer have afterwards?

This is a good final question to ponder. My guess is that a month later a visitor may not remember much of the sermon or a great deal about the singing, but they will recall what happened in this part of the service. So let's now investigate how you might run this time.

Refreshments: Ten practical aspects to consider

Here are ten more points, with the emphasis this time on the practicalities. If you are in a brand new church building, life will be easy for you. In a historic church, you may have to think hard and compromise. And for those who meet in a hired hall or school, it will all depend on what is available to you. But here are ideas of what you might aim for.

1 Refreshments – drinks

Many churches have by now switched from instant to real (and fair trade) coffee and may offer a range of different teas as well as decaffeinated options. If you can it's worth offering choices, even with printed menu signs on display to list what is available. But do consider cold drinks too. How about fruit juices? A few churches even offer wine.

2 Refreshments – eats

The promotion of 'tea and biscuits' may have been fine a few years ago but in many areas today sounds somewhat ungenerous. What creates a good impression is top-of-the-range bought biscuits, home-made cakes or doughnuts/buns, possibly with healthy option bars too. You ought to offer what your people would give visitors at home.

3 Refreshments – children

Make sure you have options suitable for all ages. It may be squash to drink for the younger children and appropriate biscuits for them. You may also need to exert a certain amount of discipline!

4 Paid or free

So the above puts pressure on the church budget? You can ask for donations but it is better to do this discreetly so visitors are unaware. Or simply see it as a proper church expense for hospitality with your givers knowing that they are contributing to a legitimate cost for your worship services.

5 Meals at home

Some churches, especially those in student areas, offer a church meal to any who wish to stay, either weekly or monthly. But how about having a few members of any church ready to add a couple of extra people to their lunch-table that day (for a morning service)? Those on their own might appreciate the offer.

6 Crockery

What would serve your purposes of hospitality and welcome better: proper cups or disposable ones? Or do people prefer mugs these days and would that be what you provide for visitors at home? If so, mugs all of one design perhaps with your church name, or a medley of chipped cast-offs in a range of designs?

7 Catering equipment / facility

Consider how you serve your drinks and whether people have to queue patiently for them. Modern boilers have hot water always on tap, or you can prepare it all beforehand in vacuum flasks to speed things up. Invest in some reasonable equipment and ensure there are adequate serving points.

8 **Seating layout and comfort**

Consider too what you offer by way of seating for this part of the service. Some may like to stand, but are there comfortable chairs grouped around tables, all of which are clean and tidy? Does the layout allow for conversations in different groups?

9 **Background music and displays**

Don't forget the ambience! The coffee area offers an opportunity for static displays or data-screens profiling your church's activities. Whether you want quiet music will depend on people's likes, but worship CDs are the choice of some, unless you are in the church building and the choir or music group are still in full flow up-front.

10 **The role of the catering team**

All the above can be ruined if you fail to tell those who serve the coffee (either a regular team or a rota system for the congregation) that they are vital members of the Welcome Team. Their attitude, their look, the way they interact with everyone but especially visitors, can make all the difference. Help them to see they are on front-line duty.

Farewell: Five final points to say good-bye

1 **The early leavers**

It can be most unwelcoming to over-encourage people to stay when they want to get away. Perhaps your service lasted longer than they expected, or they can't wait to escape from you all. You can still make the exit a positive time if there is someone on the door to hold it open for them, to say farewell with a smile and perhaps hand the newcomer a leaflet or card about your church.

2 **The late leavers**

If regulars and newcomers have stayed for coffee and met several people you can still make leaving the building a positive moment for them, the last thing they will recall about their experience with you. Someone on door duty to open it for them and say good-bye with a smile is better than leaving them to slip away.

3 **Reverse route**

Be ready to help visitors on their journey home. It will all depend on your layout, but someone with times of buses or trains might be a good resource if appropriate, or a car park warden to wave cars out onto the road if that would be helpful.

4 **The follow-up**

For a newcomer there is the next step after the farewell to consider: whether something through the post or a personal visit from a member of the congregation.

5 **The role of the Newcomers Team**

You might like to check out Training Notes TN14 in the Resources section of the website for this team. The team have a major part to play at coffee time – but these notes have focused instead on more of the organisational issues.

Note on the role of the Minister

The traditional role of a Minister is to stand at the exit and greet everyone as they leave. But this pattern does not necessarily fit well if virtually no one leaves until later, or even if everyone is moving across to a hall for coffee. It is also somewhat formal for the culture of today.

It may be that older members of a congregation would expect this – and younger members would not see it as important. What matters is that the Minister has freedom to mingle over coffee and speak to those he or she wishes to, visitors and regulars.

Note on church business

What can easily destroy all the planning outlined in these notes are church members wanting to talk to others on church business (the author is only too aware of his own faults in this area!). One idea is to have an unwritten rule that no one is allowed to talk business for the first ten minutes after the close of the formal service.

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN83. This is a revised version of an article that was first written for *Maintenance and Equipment News*. See also Article A31, *Helping people back to church*, plus Training Notes TN14, *Setting up a Newcomers Team*, and TN109, *A test for your church's welcome*.

Contact John if you would like to enquire about the possibility of his running a workshop on any aspect of welcome before or during a service.

Cartoons are by Micki Hounslow for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN83 under Planning with a link to Management.

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