

From Tourist to Pilgrim



Church Visitors and Mission

All of our churches receive visitors. Where churches are open daily they may receive more visitors in the week than attend church on a Sunday. Who are our visitors, and why do they matter to the mission of the church?

National research suggests that around 80% of adults will visit a church or chapel for some reason each year. Of these 20% will be seeking a quiet place, and a further 19% said they were simply walking past and felt the need to go in.

Who are our visitors?

Research by Francis and Martineau in 2001, based on 12,679 questionnaires from 165 rural churches, analysed church visitors:

By Age		By Church Attendance	By Distance
Under 12	5%	41% attend once a week	12% are from overseas
12-19	11%	15% attend once a month	62% from over 60 miles away
20-39	16%	14% attend once a year	15% from 10 to 30 miles away
40-59	37%	30% attend less than once a year	11% from under 10 miles away
Over 60	31%		

What do visitors most value? The top four responses were: a simple free guide sheet; access for the disabled; somewhere to pray; flowers. The research showed that younger visitors were particularly open to creative ways of engaging with the building including: lighting candles, hearing music, enjoying flowers, somewhere to write prayer requests.

So many of our visitors are from age-groups often under-represented in our churches; many of them do not attend church generally; but many of them are open to engaging with the spirituality of the building through opportunities to be still, to reflect, to pray, to listen to music and so on.

Put this all together and we have a significant opportunity for the mission of the church.

John Finney's work in the 1980s and subsequently demonstrated that for most people coming to faith is a journey that takes, on average, four years from first stirrings to a point of definite commitment. Along the way there will be significant moments or episodes. A visit to a church might be one of these.

Three Key Messages

How can we so engage our visitors that the experience of their visit is located in the context of the Christian faith to which the building stands witness? Three key messages we can communicate to all our visitors are:

The church is a welcoming place –

The ways in which the church is kept open, maintained and shared with others reflects true Christian hospitality in which all are welcomed in a spirit of generosity as part of our response to God's welcome to us.

The church is a sacred place –

The church and its grounds provide a place of encounter with God. Here prayer and worship are offered and shared. This is holy ground that our visitors are invited to experience and explore for themselves.

The church is a life-giving place –

This is where a community of Christ's disciples meet to grow in a living relationship with God that transforms and sustains their lives and inspires their life in the world.

What might all this mean in practice?

A welcoming place

Paul Bond in his book *Open for you* talks about the importance of preparing our churches to receive the Monday to Saturday congregation.

This will include clear, friendly signage; up-to-date notice boards; access for wheel chair users and pram users; consideration about lighting; making sure its clear which door is the way in and how to open it; perhaps a bowl of water for visitors with dogs; perhaps a facility for visitors to make themselves a drink.

And what will we provide to make children feel welcomed and valued? If we have a designated area will it truly be a children's corner with something of good quality for a variety of ages or is it really a toddlers' corner unchanged since the 1970s?

Groups such as the National Trust, English Heritage and the RSPB now make great efforts to do welcome really well and have raised people's expectations. We should be even keener to make our churches welcoming as an act of Christian love and service.

A sacred space

One way is to provide a guide that explains the Christian significance of the various parts of the building. In this diocese Painswick church is amongst those that have cards at various points explaining what the font is for, why the Bible is important and so on.

Could we display pictures showing the church in use – a wedding at the chancel step, a celebration of Communion by the altar, children's activities taking place in the children's corner and so on?

Many visitors value an opportunity to pray. A place to leave prayer requests – such as a simple bowl or a prayer tree, is good, as is the opportunity to light a candle or – as an alternative, place a pebble in a bowl of water symbolising the people we are praying for being immersed in the love of God. Can we encourage visitors to take away a free prayer card with them?

Research suggests that many visitors also value gentle, prayerful music being played in church as a way of filling the space and enhancing the experience.

And then there is the churchyard. Many people will walk through our churchyards and visit graves who will seldom go into the building itself. Can we create a spiritual garden in part of the churchyard using Biblical, sensory and healing plants, sculpture and places to sit and reflect?

A life-giving place

One way is through telling the faith stories of people connected with the church – the saint in whose name the church is dedicated, the story of people from the church's past, or, best of all, the stories of people in the congregation now and why their faith matters to them. If there isn't much space for display boards an album with these stories in – and pictures too – can be a good alternative.

Copies of the Gospels for people to take away are good to have around, or as a development of this theme copies of No Ordinary Man – Luke's gospel interspersed with stories about the church today.

The two leaflets produced by the diocese – You Belong and Where is the Church – are also good to have available.

You might want to develop a pilgrimage trail which invites people to ponder their own faith and beliefs as they explore the building and suggests ways in which they can find out more about Christianity.

Remember, too, that most of our visitors will not be local. To help them follow-up their experience can any leaflets we have point them to helpful websites like rejesus, the faith section of the Church of England website, or a church near you, designed to help people find their own local church when they get home.

A Selection of Resources

Why Jesus? Nicky Gumbel (Alpha Publications, Holy Trinity Brompton, Brompton Road, London. SW7 1JA. T: 0845 644 7544) There is also a Why Christmas? version.

Spelling it Out... a leaflet on being a Christian subtitled 'an ordinary churchgoer offers to explain' and part of a series of leaflets first written by Kate Rhodes for Bolton Abbey. It is available from Tim Tiley (see websites below).

The Light of the World Also available from Tim Tiley. It features Holman Hunt's famous painting on the cover and then gives the background story and an application of the message for our lives.

No Ordinary Man St Luke's Gospel in an attractive format including Christian testimonies and stories (Deo Gloria, deo-gloria.co.uk; T: 020 8651 6246). Deo Gloria produce a range of other materials suitable for those on a 'spiritual journey' and who may know little or nothing about Christianity. A sample pack of these materials is available for £11 and is worth ordering.

Websites Worth Exploring

www.rejesus.co.uk (designed for non-church people wanting to explore Christianity)

www.deo-gloria.co.uk (includes a range of outreach material)

www.churchtourismassociation (for further advice on being a welcoming church)

www.achurchnearyou.com (a useful website to have on visitor literature – the site does what it says in its name, enabling people to find their local church)

www.cofe.anglican.org (the Church's national website is always worth exploring)

www.timtiley.com (website for the popular supplier of prayer cards, greeting cards and other material for visitors and church members alike)

Books

Creating a Culture of Welcome in the Local Church: Alison Gilchrist (Grove Evangelism series, Ev 66)
Open for you: Paul Bond (Canterbury Press, 2006)

Widening the Eye of the Needle: Council for the Care of Churches

Welcome...

French... Bienvenue
Italian... Benvenuto
Spanish... Bienvenido

Portuguese... Boa vinda
Dutch... Welkom
German... Willkommen

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