

And last, but most important of all

HOW DO WE TELL VISITORS ABOUT OUR CHRISTIAN FAITH?

Visitors provide an amazing opportunity for the church to explain its beliefs to those outside its membership. The church does not need to go OUT to these people. They have voluntarily come IN.

A casual visitor may not stop to buy a book, but a poster or leaflet may catch their eye.

Consider

- Ask the congregation what they believe about God and the church. Print the results (artistically / imaginatively) and display on a board near the font – ‘This is our faith’
- Create displays at Christmas / Easter about the meaning of these festivals
- Create a display of the Beatitudes with accompanying photographs
- Display signs beside font, pulpit, altar etc. describing their purpose, without using technical religious language – add good photographs

In a secular age it is a real challenge to present the truths of the Christian faith using comprehensible, attractive and gentle language and imagery.

It is right that we should seek to impress and inspire visitors with the fascinating history and beautiful architecture of our churches, but is also important that we should seek to engage them in the faith for which those churches were built.

For more information please contact:

The Revd Eileen McLean (01668 214 748)

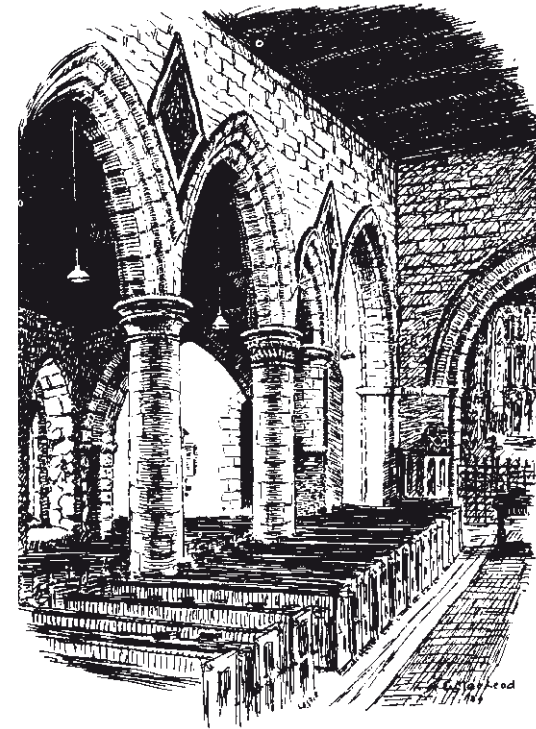
Vicar of Bamburgh and Ellingham

or

The Very Revd. Christopher Dalliston (0191 232 1939)

Dean of Newcastle Cathedral

Church Buildings



Encouraging Visitors
on a
Spiritual Journey

All churches are visited by people from outside their regular worshipping congregation. All welcome visitors to weddings and baptisms and funerals. People from the local community people come to 'civic' services. Some attract many tourists. A great number of these visitors never attend regular church services and may be ignorant of the basics of Christianity.

Churches are places of faith. That is why they were built, to worship God and to draw people closer to God. When visitors come into a church, for whatever reason - interest in its history or architecture, simple curiosity, a place out of the rain, or as a wedding guest – this provides an opportunity to plant or nurture small seeds of faith, to stimulate growth in spiritual awareness or exploration.

Congregations need to seriously consider the impression which the church building makes on a casual visitor.

Try standing at the entrance and putting yourself in the shoes of a non-churchgoing stranger

Does it seem like a museum, confirming prejudices about the church, as an out of date and irrelevant institution?

Does it feel dingy and unused? Or clinical and soulless?

Or does it feel alive and active, with a special sense of sacredness, which may inspire 'why' and 'what' questions?

PRINTED MATERIAL FOR VISITORS

A church does not need to provide lots of literature for visitors. But it is worth bearing in mind that most tourist attractions, such as castles, museums and gardens offer well-produced guides and information leaflets. Visitors to churches may have expectations that something of this kind will be available.

GUIDELINES

Home produced material

Seek out parish skills in Word Processing and Desk Top Publishing
Clear hand-written posters are very acceptable
Check periodically that they are not becoming dog-eared
Photocopying must be well done i.e. not smudged or lopsided
Think of using a colour other than white

Welcome boards and leaflets

Must be immediately obvious when a visitor comes through the door
Not too wordy - well-spaced layout
Add a human touch - 'enjoy your visit' – 'thank you for coming' ...
Include a short prayer
End with a prayer for the visitor – Celtic blessing – 'Peace be with you' ...

Church Guides

Larger churches may have guidebooks for sale, black-and-white or coloured. Consider also having a simpler free leaflet or portable board
A folded A4 sheet can include a brief history and a church plan – but, do not overload with information – 'white space' makes for easy reading

Explanatory signs and history boards

As above, be very aware of clear layout
Do not use church 'jargon' without explanation e.g. *sacrament, liturgy*

Special features

Make the most of stories about special people or events connected with your church. Visitors like stories – they add humanity. Provide leaflets or boards which are not too technical – just 'tell the tale'.

Children's guides

Short, interactive, informative – not just 'count the mice', 'where's the font?'
Work with a local school to get the level right; children's own ideas are often best.

Well presented material, clearly thought out with the needs of visitors in mind, gives an image of a church which is part of the modern world and respectful of those who come through its door

THIS CHURCH IS ALIVE AND LOVED

and used regularly by an active Christian Community

To be a Christian is to belong to a body of people who live in the way of Jesus Christ. They worship together, care for each other, and are concerned to help their neighbour, in the parish and wider world. They are active, not passive, in their faith. How may this be conveyed to the casual visitor?

Good Practice

- Well-kept churchyard
- Well ordered and up to date notice boards
- Photos of PCC, Parish events . . .
- Well presented displays of current children's work in church and schools, Mothers' Union and other parish organisations
- Children's corner which is attractive and looks well used
- Parish magazines which are not just about 'church' events
- Mission Statement on display
- Publicity for varied kinds of social events, church and community
- Opportunities for the congregation to learn more about their faith
- Information about charities / voluntary organisations / 'help' / agencies
- Signs of working with other churches and the local community
- Up to date displays about Mission links
- Signs of working with Overseas Aid agencies
- Fair Trade displays
- Loose-leaf ring binders recording recent flower festivals, exhibitions, details of charities supported . . .

Bad Practice

- Yellowing notices curling at the edges, one on top of the other
- Old photographs
- No evidence that anything happens except Sunday Services
- Children's Corner with decades old books
- No evidence of connections with the surrounding parish
- No evidence of concern for the needs of the poor of the world

The average visitor will not notice the details. Impressions matter. Impressions of a dying inward looking community, or of a cherished building where things happen, and people work and pray for those in all kinds of need.

Every church can convey three important messages to those who visit it

- **The people of this place are glad you are here. This place is for you.**
- **This is not just a beautiful old building, it is a *sacred* space; however you may understand that word *sacred***
- **This church is alive, loved and used regularly by people who are committed to following the way of Christ**

A visit to one church is unlikely to be a life changing experience, though that is possible.

Visiting several churches over a period of time, may have a cumulative effect, favourable or unfavourable, regarding the places, the people who worship in them, and the faith they hold.

Every single church has a responsibility to consider its own image and how it contributes to the whole picture.

This leaflet provides some practical and simple suggestions for church congregations.

Some are very obvious, some are only relevant in particular situations.

They are offered to stimulate parish thinking. All buildings and parish situations are different. The imaginative possibilities are endless.

WE ARE GLAD YOU ARE HERE

A feeling of being welcomed is not in itself going to plant seeds of faith. The absence of welcome, or a tainted welcome, will almost certainly have the opposite effect.

Good Practice

- 'Open' or 'Welcome' signs at the gate
- 'Welcome' on entrance door or in the porch
- Flowers in the porch – which can be very simple
- Well presented, easily visible, welcome literature and guides
- Sensor lighting as door opens
- Quiet music playing - *very much a matter of taste*
- Means of making a free cup of coffee
- Dog bowl of water outside the door
- 'Thank you for visiting' on the exit door
- 'Peace be with you' (or similar) on back of external notice board

Bad Practice

- Closed church with no indication of how to gain access
- Lots of 'keep off' / 'do not' signs in churchyard and church
- Dark, dingy and dusty building
- Old and faded literature / notices
- 'Welcome' signs lost in a welter of parish notices
- Too many 'Welcome' notices are effusive and lack integrity
- Visitors literature lost among magazines, mission material and PCC minutes
- Leaflets, specifically for visitors, which contain church jargon words
- Noisily talkative stewards or clergy or church members
- Too pushy stewards
- Instant requests for money immediately inside the door

A better alternative may be to provide a box on the way out saying 'Thanks for visiting; you may like to contribute ...'

The important point is that the church is seen to be expecting visitors and has put some thought into making them feel wanted and welcome.

THIS IS A SACRED SPACE

When a regular worshipper enters a church building it feels sacred instantly because it is associated with personal memories of worship and prayer and significant spiritual moments. This will not be so for many visitors.

Some churches are particularly blessed in their setting, architecture and artefacts. Even the most secular of tourists are likely to experience these as 'special' places, producing a sense of awe and wonder and peace. Congregations need to ask whether their church building differs from other ancient and beautiful places – does it offer an explicitly spiritual experience?

Good Practice

- A simple prayer at the door, clearly displayed
- Quietness and simplicity
- A quiet chapel / corner with icons, candles or carvings as a focus
- Easily visible and attractive prayer cards/leaflets, books of meditations, bibles – in pews and significant spots.
- Candles available to light, (on metal stands, planted in sand, or tealights placed among pebbles), with appropriate prayers nearby.
- Prayer request books, boards or trees, with an explanation of how the prayers will be included in the church's worship.
- Prayer pools offer an imaginative alternative. A pebble, for the person, is immersed in a bowl of water representing God's all surrounding love
- Leaflet describing a reflective prayer walk round the church.

Bad Practice

- Tatty prayer hidden among notices at the entrance
- Too much noise and rushing around by 'regulars'
- Clutter of old furniture, papers and tools
- Quiet chapel which is bleak and unattractive and lacking a focus
- Prayer cards mixed up with gift-aid envelopes on pews
- Candle stands covered with old grease
- Quiet place, candle stand and prayer requests in different parts of the church. They are more helpful when near each other
- No pens or paper by the Prayer Board

Quietness, rich symbolism and appropriate well-thought out words are the best helps to prayer and spiritual reflection, for believer and unbeliever alike.