



“FOR I WAS A STRANGER
AND YOU WELCOMED ME...”

MATTHEW 25.35

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EXTENDING A WARM WELCOME

THREE KEY THINGS YOU’LL LEARN IN THIS CHAPTER

- > If you want to grow you may need to change.
- > How to make your church as welcoming as your home.
- > Why structuring your welcome around strangers to the church, rather than those who are already friends, is key.

INTRODUCTION

It is easy to tell ourselves that church is welcoming. We smile when new people come, and make sure they have a coffee and biscuit after the service. But welcome is more than this. From the language we use in signage to the way we structure our service, creating a warm welcome should be weaved into every strand of church life.

Think about when you invite someone to your home who has never visited before. You make sure that they know where you live and where to park. You will have a quick clean before they arrive.

Once they arrive, you offer them a drink and perhaps something to eat. If they have a hot drink you try and make it exactly as they like it. You offer them a comfortable chair and when they ask to use the toilet, you ensure they know where it is. If they bring children you make sure you have toys.

You won't assume that they already know that your spouse is called Terry and your dog is Toby, or that there is a low beam as you enter the living room – you will explain all of this naturally.

You will do all of this because you want them to feel welcome, to have a lovely time and to come again. If you're really honest, you probably also want to ensure that when they talk about their visit, everything is positive and glowing!

This approach needs to be the same with churches. We need to make them irresistible places for people to spend their time. Your welcome significantly affects the likelihood of people returning (and bringing others with them). In short, the way you welcome people, or not, affects church growth. If you are frustrated that your church is not growing, you may need to change the way you do things. Change is not always easy, but the suggestions in this chapter will give you the confidence to extend a much wider, warmer welcome.

WHO ARE YOUR VISITORS?

Consider who your visitors are – both current and the yet-to-be-welcomed. Are they tourists on a day out? Walkers? Grave visitors? Members of the congregation? Families? Guests to weddings, funerals or baptisms? The local school children, teachers and parents? People looking for a place of peace or solitude? Elderly visitors? Or young children? Visitors with restricted mobility?

It may be that your visitors include all of the above. Try to keep their different needs in mind. Remember visiting a church can be intimidating and even quite stressful; some people worry that there are lots of restrictions and rules, and may consider church to only be for people who are “holier” than they are. A closed gate or an awkward front door is enough to put some people off all together. Some visitors may also think that attending church is old fashioned and only for the elderly; it is important that through your welcome, you show that the church is still alive, current, and that the Christian message is open to everyone.

LOOKING AT THE PRACTICALITIES

Parking, access and churchyard

You may have a huge car park, or none at all. What is important is that visitors can plan their visit and know what to expect. Make sure your website is clear about parking and accessibility. Consider whether the pathways are accessible for wheelchairs and prams, if they are uneven or slippery, if there are handrails and where the nearest easy access toilet and baby changing facilities are.



If your church has a graveyard plan, make this as obvious and accessible as possible. Consider introducing seating in your graveyard, or maybe some picnic rugs and cushions in the summer?

What do your signs say about you?

People will judge your church when they look at the condition of your signs and noticeboards. If the signs look scruffy with an out of date poster in them, people will assume that the church itself is uncared for and dated in its approach. When looking at signage, look at the condition and whether they need a clean or a lick of paint. Be vigilant about removing out of date posters.

Look objectively at your noticeboards, or even better, invite someone else along who has never seen it and ask for their feedback.

As you look at your noticeboard your eye should be drawn to a large, warm message of WELCOME, encouraging people into church and putting them at ease. Whilst rotas, insurance certificates and so on may need to be displayed, there is no need to put them centre stage, maybe move them inside the church, or onto the website, (providing those who need it have access to it).

Remember that the welcome in the porch can make the difference between people walking in or walking away. Some may be nervous and will need encouragement to open the door. If your door is difficult to open then leave out some instructions so they don't think it's locked. If you have a service starting, have the door open with a person to greet, smile and welcome people inside.

Amazing A boards

Putting an A board outside your porch is a great way of reassuring visitors that the church is open and they are welcome.

Don't let language be a barrier

Using words such as eucharist, liturgy, sacrament, episcopal, denomination and diocese is bewildering for some people. Churches have a reputation for being full of rules and things you can't do, so try and keep your signs and language as plain, positive and inviting as possible. Avoid formal language and be as warm and conversational as you can.



Plasters, punctures and pups

If you have a lot of walkers or cyclists visiting your church, think about how the welcome to them could be made warmer. As well as water and biscuits, you may be able to offer hot drink facilities. Consider providing a puncture repair kit, a basic first aid kit, plasters, dry socks, or an area to charge mobile phones and don't forget the dog bowl! Always make sure that it is clear that anyone can help themselves; these are gifts for all, not just for churchgoers.



Housekeeping inside the church

By clearing away any unnecessary clutter, your church will appear calmer. It also helps visitors focus on key information. Visitors are often interested in the building's history, so ensure that any information you have on this looks up to date and appealing.



Being down with the kids

Parents may find a visit to church extremely stressful. Many feel that their children need to be silent and prevented from touching anything. How can your church make them feel welcome? Is there a clearly marked area for children to play in? Are there toys and books for different ages? Do you have nappy changing facilities?



Maybe put up a sign to reassure parents that you are delighted to welcome children and fully expect them to be noisy. Try to ensure that there is a Sunday school offer for children and make this fun!

Cake and cushions

If you have volunteers who enjoy baking, consider offering some home baked cakes. This doesn't have to be every day; you could offer it during busy periods

or for a special event. Perhaps scatter some cushions around the church to give a more homely feel? Or have picnic rugs for people to sit on outside during the summer? A cupcake with the message "You are loved" piped on it might just change someone's whole perception of your church and give them confidence to return.



Online

Most people will look online before attending a church – just like a restaurant, holiday or film – we research before we commit. That is where the COVID-19 pandemic was powerless to stop churches reaching people and it gave people the opportunity to watch without having the awkwardness of being watched. Make sure your website screams 'welcome'. It should be clear when your services are, how they can be accessed online (if you are offering this); there should be pictures of friendly faces, and your message to new people should be encouraging, loving and relatable. Similarly to noticeboards, be mindful of the language you use – keep it plain, positive and relevant to new people as well as existing ones. There's more about this in Chapter 10.



Photo credit: © Adam Shaw

CASE STUDY

A welcome in the Wolds – Weighton Wold Group, East Yorkshire.

This group of five parishes sits on the Yorkshire Wolds Way National trail. The Rector, the Revd Caroline Pinchbeck, says the numbers of people who simply visit the churches during the week, such as walkers and tourists, is around ten times the numbers attending Sunday services.

Caroline explained: *"Our spiritual heritage is the conversion of King Edwin of Northumberland in 627 AD by St Paulinus. There is much drama to the whole account which is told in our church windows.*

"We don't have the volunteers to sit in the church and tell this story in person, so we had to think of a way to offer welcome and hospitality to this 'silent congregation'. Some of them may well have questions about faith or are seeking connection with God, and we wanted to address that. Many people are inspired by the story of King Edwin and St Paulinus, and we use this as a springboard for helping visitors think about faith and spirituality today, and for sharing the Good News about Jesus."

If the church is closed, Caroline says there is a plastic box placed in the porch containing bottles of water, squash and biscuits. There is a Bible, some prayer cards with the 'pilgrimage window' explained and the prayer of St Paulinus. Information about local pubs and cafés, a map with suggested routes and some information about the other churches in the Group are also included.

When the churches are open, 'Top ten things to see while visiting our church' is displayed, along with prayer cards and history guides.

WHAT ABOUT FAITH?

“And how can they believe in him if they have never heard about him? And how can they hear unless someone tells them?”

ROMANS 10.14 (NLT)

Visitors to your church should not be able to leave your church building without being offered well-presented information about the Christian faith. The website Lifeworlds.global produces brilliant resources which are free and look really attractive. Consider having information for visitors who may be suffering with bereavement or mental health issues such as depression and anxiety. Ensure that the contact details for support services are somewhere obvious. Likewise, if there is an Alpha course or something similar running, make sure the details of this are up for people to see.

Welcome to this church

WE INVITE YOU TO USE THIS SPACE TO PRAY, REFLECT, MEDITATE OR SIMPLY HAVE SOME TIME OUT

PLEASE MAINTAIN PHYSICAL DISTANCING WHILE YOU ARE HERE AND BE CONSIDERATE OF OTHERS

HERE ARE SOME SIMPLE PRAYER IDEAS YOU MIGHT LIKE TO TRY

 Look at one of the church windows. Is it plain or coloured? Does it tell a story? Can you see the light through it?
Spend some time gazing at the window and ask God to speak to you through it.

 Use your fingers to pray:
Thumb - Give thanks for all the strong things in your life like relationships that sustain you.
Index finger - Say sorry for the times you've judged others or acted harshly.
Middle finger - Pray for all the important people who have power in the world.
Ring finger - Remember the poor, the weak, the helpless, the hungry, the sick, the ill and the bereaved.
Little finger - Pray for yourself. God cares about what you care about and what concerns you.

 Slowly trace the pattern of the labyrinth with your finger on the palm of your hand allowing your mind to clear from extra thoughts and focus solely on following the path of the labyrinth.
"Walk" to the centre of the labyrinth and rest momentarily, sharing what is on your mind with God. Take some deep breaths and observe how you are feeling. Retrace your path out of the labyrinth knowing that God is with you and has heard your prayers.

SAY THE LORD'S PRAYER
This is the prayer that Jesus taught his followers and it is
Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and for ever. Amen.

› An example of a prayer station

Encouraging people to participate and connect

People may walk into your church who have never prayed before. They may find the concept of prayer extremely daunting and not know where to begin. Ensure that you have a simple prayer on display. Introduce a prayer station where visitors are invited to participate in an activity to help them say a prayer, such as a pebble bowl, a stone to hold, to write a prayer or light a candle.

Outside visitors could spot butterflies, count wildflowers, take tree rubbings, discover a labyrinth or sit underneath a tree. These are simple ideas to make visitors feel they are in a welcoming place and encourage them to actively engage with God and with your church. There are no set rules for prayer stations, so be creative. Consider outdoor spaces as well as indoor ones.

Additionally, ensure you have an area where visitors can leave requests for prayer and have a way of showing this is done. This shows visitors that they matter to you and that you care about them.

Ensure that you have a simple prayer on display.

Your church today and a reason to return

Some visitors may think that your church is a beautiful historic building which now stands empty. Think about how you can communicate the life that still exists in your church, and how you can invite them to be part of your church's future.

Do you hold a candlelit carol service at Christmas?

Or a Teddy Bears Parachute Jump off the tower in July?

Or host a regular toddler group?

If you do then shout about it!

Display great photos on an internal noticeboard and on the website, (with the appropriate permissions). If your church is on Facebook, use it for this purpose and promote the page on your church communications. Don't assume that people will read about it in the local magazine.

By the time they leave, every visitor to your church should know when your next service or event is, and how welcome they are.

If your church is on Facebook, use it for this purpose and promote the page on your church communications.

CASE STUDY

Steve Fenning is the Lead Pastor of Forge Church in Suffolk. Steve is the son of a farmer and has always had a passion for rural ministry. The church he leads meets in Debenham and has grown from 24 to 300+ people over the past 30 years (forgechurch.com).

Steve on the key to church growth:

"I am often asked why the church has grown, and I think it comes down to several reasons:

- 1 We are intentional about reaching out to unchurched people and being inclusive in our language. We have a clear vision and a clear mission. People might not like everything we do, but we have a clear purpose and we stick to it.
- 2 We have put real energy into what we offer to children and young people, employing staff to oversee the kids and youth congregations and being involved in local schools.
- 3 The physical environment is so important. We invest a huge amount of time and resources into making our kids, youth and adult venues warm, inviting, creative and enjoyable spaces to spend time in. This involves a lot of setting up each week!
- 4 Maintaining a consistent approach in our worship and teaching style has given the congregation confidence to invite family and friends to services on any week - whether in person or online."

THINKING ABOUT THE SERVICE

Whether your services are online, in person, or both, here are some key points to remember:

- > This might be someone's first ever Sunday in your church, so make sure you are designing your services for the lost and not the found. Always assume you have new people coming and make sure they have everything they need.
- > Whoever you have up front is who you will attract to your church. So if you want to attract more people in their 20s, try and get someone in their 20s to do the opening welcome. If you want to attract a broad range of people, have several different people welcoming and hosting each week.
- > Never assume that people will know who you are, or who other people are. Remember to always introduce yourself and avoid saying things like "Speak to Jane after the service...". Who's Jane?!
- > Briefly explain where the toilets are, or if you're online, how to use the chat facility. Explain how long the service will be.
- > Never underestimate the power of sparkling toilets! Think flowers and hand lotion, as well as nice handwash.
- > Avoid using insider lingo and abbreviations. Don't just assume people know what the PCC is or what 'intercessions' means.
- > Explain the meaning of songs before you sing them.
- > Explain who the author of the book of the Bible reading is and give some context as to when it was written.
- > Keep your sermons authentic and personal, to be enjoyed not endured. People want to see the real you and hear about real struggles and triumphs. That's what Jesus did – he told stories about everyday life.
- > Give people a hook for next week's service or a clear next step, such as details of a fun kids' event coming up, a new course starting which will help people explore the Christian faith, or details of how to get in touch.
- > The welcome isn't just for the beginning of the service. Ensure people are given a warm 'goodbye' and 'hope to see you again sometime' as they leave.

Angling your welcome

Think carefully and objectively about who your welcome is aimed at. Are you serving the wants and wishes of your current congregation, or are you angling your welcome towards those people who haven't yet stepped inside your church? It is very easy to fall into the habit of serving your current congregation over the needs of newcomers.

Here are two true stories of when a church, without realising it, focused their welcome on their current congregation:

- 1 It was suggested to a rural churchwarden that it might be more welcoming to have a basket of children's toys and books in the church, to which she replied, "That won't be necessary as we don't have any children in the congregation."
- 2 During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Diocese of Exeter produced a poster explaining the restrictions and providing contact details if people needed someone to talk to. A churchwarden asked if the contact details section could be removed saying: "There are only about 28 people in the congregation and we all have each other's numbers, so it's not necessary to put any contact details up on a poster."

Both of these people are dedicated and hard-working members of the church, who genuinely want their church to flourish. Their mistake was to focus on the needs of the people who already attended, rather than considering the needs of the many people who didn't.

We need courage to say to the 99 that we are going to make some changes to find the one lost sheep. This may involve going against their preference for the sake of that purpose.

GREAT RESOURCES

Canva is a brilliant online design system which makes it really easy to design attractive posters, flyers, Facebook posts etc: [canva.com](https://www.canva.com)

ReSource: Resources to enable little, local and ordinary churches: resource-arm.net

Arthur Rank Centre: arthurrankcentre.org.uk

Rural Ministries: ruralministries.org.uk

The Further Faster Network: furtherfaster.network

New Wine Rural Team:
new-wine.org/networks-ministries/rural

Lifewords do some great free Christian resources:
lifewords.global/shop

Christian Publishing and Outreach for posters and resources: cpo.org.uk

The **Everybody Welcome** course by Bob Jackson and George Fisher from Church House Publishing:
chpublishing.co.uk

A free digital welcome supplement - **Everybody Welcome Online** - is available from CPAS: cpas.org.uk

Welcome Guide produced by Growing the Rural Church in the Diocese of Exeter:
exeter.anglican.org/welcome-resources

LightWave in the Diocese of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich offers all kinds of helpful resources for rural outreach:
lightwave.community/resources

God for All is an ecumenical coalition based in Cumbria with lots of outreach resources any church can try:
godforall.org.uk/resource-downloads