



Welcoming Churches

Ten Questions to Help Your Church Become More Welcoming

Research shows that churches are often less welcoming than they believe, and that visitors who experience a warm greeting and a hospitable community are more likely to return. Welcoming is not, however, just the responsibility of the staff team – it’s the role of every Christian who attends church. Welcoming others is part of the response we make to the God who has welcomed us.

Here are ten quick questions to help your church community become more welcoming.

Do you expect people to visit?

A church that expects visitors is more likely to reflect on how to welcome them. If your church has lost such an expectation, how might you begin to engage the local community and invite others into the church? You might think about starting a toddler group, a lunch club or an Alpha course, or perhaps work through the Mission Shaped Introduction course

(www.freshexpressions.org.uk/resources-3/mission-shaped-introduction/).

Most people visit because they are invited, and excellent resources for holding an ‘Invitation Sunday’ have been developed by the National Weekend of Invitation (www.weekendofinvitation.com).

What does your church building communicate?

As architects and interior designers know, how a building ‘looks’ communicates a great deal. Churches with out-of-date signage, overgrown grass, and scruffy noticeboards are unlikely to feel welcoming. These areas can all be quickly improved, with small changes making a big difference. A fresh coat of paint in a church hall can also work wonders.

Is your church prepared for all sorts of visitors?

Church is a place where everybody should feel welcome – whatever their age or background. For resources on being a culturally-inclusive church, see



Worship



Learning and Caring



Service



Evangelism

the CTBI material for Racial Justice Sunday (www.ctbi.org.uk/racial-justice-sunday-2019/). For helping your church welcome those with disabilities, see Livability's resources (www.livability.org.uk/resources/more-than-welcome/).

Do you take time to greet visitors warmly and sensitively?

A warm greeting is a crucial first step in making someone feel welcome. If no-one talks to a first-time visitor, they're unlikely to ever come back. Taking time to say a simple hello can be more significant than it might seem. It is also important to take account of why someone is visiting, as someone entirely new to church will require a different response than a Christian new to the area.

Does your church have a welcome pack?

A welcome pack is a simple but effective way of saying that your church cares about visitors. This could simply be an attractive leaflet, with information on service times, the vision and values of the church, and how to get involved.

Do visitors know what's happening in the service?

For those new to church, attending a service can feel like entering a new country with strange customs and unfamiliar language or vocabulary. (Different churches often have different ways of doing the same thing, such as how the offering is received.) To help make newcomers feel welcome, be sure that the preacher or worship leader explains what 'locals' take for granted, such as where to look up Bible passages and when to 'join in' during the service.

Does your church provide quality drinks and biscuits after the service?

The quality of welcome can easily be improved by offering real coffee, nice biscuits and a warm environment. Offering these for free – rather than asking for a donation – can be a worthwhile expense.

Do you chat with visitors after the service?

It's one thing to greet a visitor warmly, and quite another to make sure that the welcome continues after the service is over. Make sure that people aren't left alone with tea and a biscuit, and be prepared to take the first step in starting a conversation. Think too about how else visitors might be invited into the life of the church, perhaps asking if they're interested in coming to a small group, a quiz night, or a film club (or whatever events or groups are run by the church).

Do you know what church is all about?

Church is not simply a social gathering, a religious club or a friendship circle – it is a time to gather together and encounter the living God. Church members should feel confident to explain what church is all about and how their faith shapes them. A good place to start is the free downloadable course Talking of God (www.methodist.org.uk/talkingofgod/).

Do you expect God to be there?

Although it is important to expect visitors to church, it is far more important to expect God! Whether traditional or contemporary, services need to cultivate the sense that 'God is here', and show that God's invitation to a life of discipleship is open to all. For resources on worship within the church, visit the Methodist website (www.methodist.org.uk/prayer-and-worship/).

Going Further

To reflect further about the meaning of welcome, watch "What's Your Welcome?" – either individually, with a small group, or with the church as a whole. This is a simple video resource that's designed as a conversation starter and prompt for those in the church to reflect on what it means to welcome visitors.

To explore in more detail how to make your church more welcoming, look out for the free and



Worship



Learning and Caring



Service



Evangelism

downloadable workshop “First Impressions Count: improving your church’s quality of welcome”. In three sessions, it explores creating a welcoming building, being a welcoming people, and welcoming through inclusion.

Both “What’s Your Welcome?” and “First Impressions Count” are available on the Methodist website (www.methodist.org.uk/for-ministers-and-office-holders/guidance-for-churches/welcome-and-invitation/first-impressions-count/).

For helpful books exploring what it means to be welcoming, see Alison Gilchrist, *Creating a Culture of Welcome in the Local Church* (Cambridge, Grove Booklets, 2004) and Michael Harvey, *Unlocking the Growth: you’ll be amazed at your church’s potential* (Oxford, Monarch Books, 2012).

This resource has been produced by Ed Mackenzie

Ed is the Discipleship Development Officer for the Methodist Church, a role that involves developing and promoting a range of resources to help Christians grow as followers of Jesus. He has previously worked as a teacher, lecturer in New Testament studies, and leader in a Fresh Expression church. Ed is particularly interested in how Scripture speaks to issues of discipleship and mission, and is an adjunct lecturer at Cliff College.



Evangelism