

REACH OUT

CHURCH COMMUNICATIONS

**CHURCH
FROM THE
INSIDE**

**welcome,
news sheets,
magazines
and stories**

LAURA TRENEER

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CHURCH FROM THE INSIDE

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The Bible Reading Fellowship

15 The Chambers, Vineyard

Abingdon OX14 3FE

brf.org.uk

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Introduction

This series of books starts with the understanding that it is primarily and ultimately God who communicates. He's equipped us to take part. If it seems our resources are limited, our time, our capacity, the hope is that these books will show you tools you didn't realise you had, and ways to put them to use. They're best when they're used together, so although the focus here is how we communicate inside the building, this needs to be integrated with how we communicate before people step inside, and digitally, wherever people are all week.

Have you ever seen the programme *Come Dine with Me*? People open up their homes to strangers and try to impress them with their dinner party 'entertaining'. The concept of opening our homes to strangers can be a novelty in British culture, although perhaps less so, we hope, to churchgoers. I met someone recently who asked me 'What does your husband do?' 'Actually he's a church minister.' 'Wow... um, so I guess you must do lots of entertaining? How many people do you reckon you have round in an average week?' My honest answer was more people than she'd had round in a year. She was astonished. But

we'd never describe it as 'entertaining'—just simple hospitality, of the 'help yourself to a cuppa, grab a chair, I'm all ears' variety. It's not flash. We never serve starters.

Is there a risk sometimes that churches, in an effort to be welcoming, offer 'entertaining' rather than hospitality when strangers enter our doors? Do we invite people primarily in the hope that they'll notice and comment on how welcoming we are, or are we focused on offering the kind of occasionally thankless 'hospitality... without grumbling' the Bible speaks of in 1 Peter 4:9? Henri Nouwen describes hospitality as:

the creation of free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place. It is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines.¹

Your church building, or the physical space where you meet, does not belong to you. It has been provided by God as a place that is open to anyone. What is communicated inside to those who enter—intentionally or not—will always be far broader than anything we can control. There is freedom

for us in this. The failures and successes of our communication may well be unseen. Opening our churches is an intentional act of hospitality. If this offers the ‘space where change can take place’, as Nouwen suggests, the changes will be mediated primarily by the Holy Spirit.

Churches have an immense opportunity! Not only do they get to be places of sacramental worship, teaching, communion, fellowship and all those other things that are understood by most UK Christians, though not necessarily by their neighbours. They also get to be lights in their community, changing perceptions of Jesus Christ. Churches get to ask the big questions in the public sphere.

This series is for those who feel responsibility for church communications, and for those who think they make a difference. There is plenty that churches can use from the marketing world, from free resources online and from other churches. The options can seem overwhelming—but time, budget and, let’s face it, imagination, can be limited. I hope the tools in these books will help you form a simple strategy and plan that starts squarely in the reality of your situation. It’s written so that the intimidated can relax and the goal-oriented can focus.

1

Why it matters

I know why it matters, you say! Why on earth would I be reading a book on church communication otherwise? But you'll need to justify to others why you want to make improvements. Here are three of the many reasons to put in the effort.

Crossing the threshold is a big deal

Where would be unfamiliar territory for you? Places you forget exist, perhaps. A bookies for some, a primary school for others. A nightclub. A gym. A snooker club. A casino. A youth club.

Revd Dr Sandra Millar tells the story of going to McDonalds with a friend, both in dog collars:

Both of us began by saying, 'It's years since I have been in here.' Strange memories of taking the children lurked, or even further back to student days. But recently? I have lost touch. Not my world any more. It made me think how hard it is to come into church. We know what it is about and what everything is for.

*We know the menu, the procedure, the practice. But those who come back with memories feel awkward and uncomfortable. Sometimes they want something that echoes the memory, sometimes they just need a friendly smile.*²

Churches can be in this middle ground for people, not entirely foreign, but not familiar either, whiffing not of hamburgers but of reminiscence. The doors in many churches seem to have been built for giants, rock-rimmed and grand. Even the many churches meeting in school buildings have connotations for visitors, as school isn't a positive experience for everyone. The memories confront them the minute the door is open. As Don Draper says in the TV series *Mad Men*: 'Nostalgia—it's delicate... but potent. It literally means, "the pain from an old wound". It's a twinge in your heart, far more powerful than memory alone.'³

If you are on your own, don't know anyone or, even worse, haven't been invited, then crossing the threshold is a Very Big Deal. Or, if you are desperate for church and for God, but are wary of Christians, it can be even harder. This is why churches who are serious about welcome know that it begins before people enter the door—ideally with an invitation and

a person. They also become sensitive to everything that might exacerbate a potentially tricky encounter.

I work with web designers who talk about eliminating ‘user anxiety’ (when we don’t know what to do next) and ‘friction’ (when what ought to be smooth is not). Entering church can be fraught with friction (why am I being given these books and papers?) and user anxiety (where should I sit?). A church that is aware of these things can address them.

Many megachurches in the US employ people full-time to consider their church communication. One describes her job like this:

*Your church has a message. A message of truth, hope and purpose. But before people in your community encounter that message, they encounter your church. Your job is to maximize the things that attract people to the message and remove the things that repel them.*⁴

No church sets out to be unwelcoming. We just forget. We forget that when we welcome a stranger we enact a gospel of reconciliation. It demonstrates that we are in the world, but not of it, loving others as Christ loves us. Again and again Jesus disregarded social norms to reach out to those he noticed,

whether or not he knew their names. Actually in the gospels those he reaches are often nameless to us. Nameless, but known and remembered.

All the research confirms that it is loving relationships that keep people in church. It's what Jesus told us to do: love one another! This means not ignoring people. This means 'crossing the room', as evangelist Bill Hybels has emphasised, as a reciprocal action to someone's crossing the threshold.

Look at a visitor's body language. If it's not attempting to create an invisibility cloak you could say something as simple as 'Hi, I don't think we've met before—my name's Laura', or 'Hello, looks like you've just arrived, can I get you a cup of tea?' Easy words, easier with practice. Then, and this is hugely important, remember their name next time, and the time after, and introduce them to others.

People don't want friendly churches. They want churches where they can make friends.

You may have heard the mantra 'Belong believe behave'. Churches so often accidentally reverse this, and insist through their own behaviour and culture that people first behave ('Do as we do!'); then, if newcomers believe, they can finally belong. 'Belong'

first means proving the statement found on one of the most popular posters from Christian Publishing and Outreach (CPO), where I work: 'Wherever you're from, wherever you're going, you're welcome here.'

Communication isn't just verbal

You may have come across the VARK model of learning styles, or ways we absorb information: Visual, Auditory (through hearing), Read/write and Kinaesthetic (through experience and movement). Which is most prevalent in your church?

Improving communication inside the church matters because it acknowledges we are multisensory, and makes the most of this. Visual communication in churches goes beyond posters and boards. It's the state of the floor, the size of the building, the colours, the paint, the facial expressions. It's the font on the screen as well as the font for baptisms. It's the stained glass, the candles, the clip art, the cross.

Jesus told stories with words, but it was the pictures he created that stirred the imagination. The father running to the prodigal son. The farmer clambering for the lost sheep. Visual communication is how we think. It's how we feel. It's how we remember.

And yet the church communicates in an overwhelmingly auditory way. We sing. We preach. There is more about this later, but it's worth pointing out that there are 250,000 deaf people in the UK. Chapter 4 lists some of those seeking to reach them. In our communication let's not neglect disabilities and special needs of different kinds.

People in churches are disproportionately university-educated compared to the general population. We rely on communication through the written word—and yet one in six UK adults has a reading age lower than an eleven-year-old.⁵

Kinaesthetically, we learn about a church through the comfort (or not) of the seating, the rituals around where we go for coffee, the smells, the warmth (or not). 'Where do I go? Will I knock something over? I don't fit in. It smells strange. I've never been anywhere like this before.' I was moved by the true story in the 'Everybody Welcome' course of the lady who was moved to tears when someone shook her hand as she entered church. It turns out it was her first human touch in three years.

Customer service professionals say it takes anything from seven to twelve positive experiences to make up for one unresolved negative experience. A

positive church experience may be healing hurts from the past. We are all different, and all our senses need to be engaged.

Improvements enhance and equip in ways you may not expect

Some will say that a church needs to change internal attitudes before worrying about its external communication. I disagree. Change the appearance and you can begin to change the heart. There are few easier ways to make an immediate impact on a church than a physical makeover. It raises expectations, boosts morale and mobilises volunteers. As one pastor wrote, after a creative missions team significantly improved the church's visual communications in just a week: 'It has lifted a huge weight off my shoulders. It enables us to focus more.'⁶

When you improve communication and think about your visual identity, it requires thinking about who you are as a community, and joining the visual dots between who you are inside the building, outside, and online. The effect is all-encompassing.

This book suggests incremental changes that will have a disproportionate effect on a congregation,

equipping them for outreach and encouraging them to invite their friends. Recommendations from friends continually comes out in research as the most effective 'advertising'. Improved communications create a positive story of change. Make it a story worth talking about. The consequences of failure when we experiment are actually very low... but if they touch a nerve, spark an interest or use a new talent, the potential is enormous. Don't let perfectionism stifle creativity. Have a go.

The National Churches Trust found that nearly a third of UK Anglican churches don't have a toilet.⁷ As one BBC mockumentary commented, 'The people weren't in church because the Wi-Fi was better at Starbucks.' These are not peripheral barriers. They're also not insurmountable. Chapter 4 lists sources of help, many of them free. For those that aren't, consider including communications as part of the budget for outreach rather than administration. This is core to the church's mission! As the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, has said, the church budget is 'theology in figures'.⁸ If you can't create a fit-for-purpose church kitchen, you can still practise hospitality with some flasks or cafetières. Conversations are free. Thought is free. Articulating values, assessing what you're saying with the

perspective of an ‘outsider’, social media: these do not cost money. Where you find practical barriers you’ll also find a handy cliché to combat them: where there’s a will there’s a way.

The summary of why it matters

The National Churches Trust have found that 86% of the UK population have been in a church at some point in the last year.⁹ When we communicate as a church, in action, in truth, it is an act of love. The biblical phrase ‘hospitality without grumbling’ was mentioned earlier. Now consider that in the context of the scripture passage as a whole:

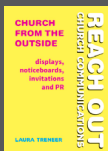
The end of all things is near. Therefore be alert and of sober mind so that you may pray. Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ.¹⁰

If God provides the strength, God provides the gifts and provides the words. If love indeed covers over a multitude of sins and the end is near, whatever that may look like, what excuse do we have for not moving beyond complacency and inertia to love in action?

An essential guide to effective church communications

Combining missional vision with practical advice, this resource helps you to ensure that people are warmly welcomed to your church with clear and meaningful communication. Ideal for church leaders and volunteers who are short on time and need relevant advice.

ALSO IN THIS SERIES



'An essential resource for all church leaders.'

Jo Swinney, editor of *Preach* magazine



Laura Treneer is Innovation Director for Christian Publishing and Outreach, who are passionate about church communication and the importance it holds for mission in the UK.



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