

Open Welcome

A Toolkit for Rural Churches



Arthur Rank
Centre

CONFIDENT RURAL CHRISTIANS

INTRODUCTION

Open Welcome: The Rural Church as a Sacred Space

A young woman had recently begun to attend her local Methodist church. Chatting with the minister she was asked what had made her join the congregation. Her answer: 'I was walking round a cathedral and God zapped me'.

That response has stayed with me. If church buildings have the capacity to move people in that way then we need to view them as more than just 'bricks and mortar'.

We all know that some places can feel particularly special. Churches, with their regular cycles of worship, prayer and sacrament, are sacred spaces, places of encounter in which individuals and the community can meet with God. For many of us our spiritual journey can be linked to particular places: perhaps the church we have always worshipped in, the place we came to faith or simply somewhere we go to find peace and quiet.

But the significance of church buildings isn't limited to the spiritual realm. Particularly in established rural congregations, churches often have a personal significance: the building will have hosted families gathered together for baptisms, weddings, and funerals across the generations; it might be a place of happy childhood memories, or have an association with a special person.

If a building is special to us, then it has the capacity to be special to others. The reason for writing this resource is to encourage churches to open their buildings so that others have the opportunity to meet with God.

How do you feel about the church building you worship in? Does it feel like a special place? Your church building can say something special to visitors, something about God and faith. Even if you live in a small community visitors and local residents may pop in if the building is open.

According to a 2016 survey by the National Churches Trust (NCT):

- More than four in five Britons (83%) agree that the UK's churches, chapels and meeting houses are an important part of the UK's heritage and history
- The majority of British adults (80%) agree that churches, chapels and meeting houses are important for society as they provide a space in which community activities, as well as worship, can take place
- 57% of British adults said they had visited a church, chapel or meeting house in the last year, equivalent to 33 million people, a figure consistent with the findings of a similar poll in 2015

These findings demonstrate that the public value church buildings and see their potential for community use. Our own rural church buildings will be among those visited by individuals who responded to the NCT survey so how do we go about using them as part of our mission?

Open Welcome has been written to help you open your church buildings and welcome in those who might visit. The toolkit is designed to be used in a group. As you work through the booklet use the Conversation Starters as an opportunity to think and discuss together; although it might be tempting to skip some of the questions we believe they're an important way of rooting the call to mission in both the Bible and the community in which you live and worship.

Our churches can be places where visitors receive hospitality and meet with the God we worship week by week; we hope this toolkit will support, encourage and enable you to extend an Open Welcome.

Revd Elizabeth Clark

National Rural Officer for the Methodist and
United Reformed Churches





SECTION ONE

Why open your building?

Let us begin by considering the question of why we should open our church in the first place. Why might our church be a special place?

In the Bible we read about many particular places in which people had a special encounter with God. Take a few minutes to read and talk about the following stories:

- Jacob at Bethel (Genesis 28:10-19)
- Moses and the burning bush (Exodus 3:1-6)
- Elijah on Mount Horeb (1 Kings 19:8-13)
- Paul meeting with Jesus on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-9)

Conversation Starters...

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In the Gospels we read that Jesus predominantly spent his time in the small rural towns and villages around Galilee. The encounters he had and the stories he told were transformative and became linked to places: the ‘Woman of Samaria’, for example, or the road from Jerusalem to Jericho in the story of the Good Samaritan.

The key events of Jesus own life are also firmly rooted in particular places including the Garden of Gethsemane and the Mount of Olives. Many places associated with the life of Jesus later have become sites of pilgrimage.

Although God is not confined to any one place, physical places of encounter can be special.

Why do you think these places are important?

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You may want to reflect on the history of the building, the previous generations who worshiped there and the atmosphere you feel in the building.

How do you feel about your church building?

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Such encounters, along with the regular worship and prayer offered in our buildings, can help the place to begin to feel special or holy.

Have you ever had a profound experience of God in your church building?

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SECTION TWO

Extending the welcome

People outside of the congregation may also encounter God by coming into your church building.

Let people know you are open and who you are:

- Keep the main door open as much as possible!
- Place a sign outside which says 'Church open: you are welcome!' along with a list of times when the building is open; we know this sounds obvious but people won't know if you don't tell them!
- Make sure your exterior notice board is well-presented, easy-to-read and up to date.
- Have an internal notice board with information for visitors and a picture of the congregation to show who uses the building. (Make sure photos and information comply with data protection and safeguarding guidelines.)
- If you have a church website, or your circuit, district synod or diocese does, then use that to let people know when you're open.

Show hospitality:

- Place a small welcome table with flowers a visitor's book and some information about the church near the entrance. If you are short of space use a folding table which can be moved on Sundays. Keep it tidy and up to date.
- Leave a kettle and the facility to make tea or coffee especially if there are no cafes in the village. Let people know where the nearest toilet is.

Practicalities:

- Let your insurance company know you are opening the church. Your premium is unlikely to go up but they may offer some advice on things to be aware of.
- Tell any neighbours that you are opening the building and tell them who to get in touch with if they see or hear anything that concerns them.
- Do you have enough key holders to lock and unlock every day, or would a time lock make life easier?
- Make sure someone checks the premises regularly to spot any potential problems.
- Ensure the church is clean and tidy inside and out. Does it need a coat of paint?
- Make sure the church is accessible. If there are steps do you have a portable ramp?
- Make sure your risk assessment is up to date. For useful information on this see the Methodist Insurance website (methodistinsurance.co.uk, search 'risk assessment').
- For further help on property matters consult denominational websites.

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Conversation Starter

How can you help visitors to your church to feel welcome?

Perhaps you can walk around the building together looking at it critically, why not get someone from outside the church to join you. Think about how you prepare your own home to receive visitors.

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Why not try...?

Littlebeck Methodist Church is in a small village situated on the Coast to Coast Walk. The church is open all the time to provide a place of refuge in bad weather. At the back of the church is a kettle and the means to make a hot drink. Next to the kettle is a white board and people are invited to write prayers on this which the congregation use in worship. There are many appreciative comments about the hospitality in their visitors book.



SECTION THREE

Telling the story

How can we help people to see beyond the building to the faith that built it?

Involving others

If your congregation isn't able to undertake such research itself, is there a group who is? Perhaps you could partner with, or commission, the local history society or a young person looking for a subject for a school project.

Communicating with others

Make sure that any literature that you produce is as professional as you can get it. A rudimentary understanding of Microsoft Word will be enough to enable you to produce clear, high quality material. It needn't be large or elaborate but does need to be clear and concise:

- Use the questions who, what, why, where, when and how to make sure you include plenty of useful information.
- Don't use long sentences.
- Use a consistent font and format.
- Make sure your copy is thoroughly proof-read by more than one person.
- Find some high quality, relevant pictures (and ensure that you use them in a way which complies with safeguarding guidelines).
- This might also be something that someone in the community could help with – ask around!

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Conversation Starter

What do you know about your church community?

What do you know of the wider history of your area? How does the founding of your church fit into it?

Can you do some research through old minute books and registers to try and find out who built the church and why?

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Telling the story: Low Smithy Chapel

Garsdale's Low Smithy Chapel was founded in 1830 by Jonathan Kershaw, the 'Apostle of the Dales'. He was an itinerant tea seller, taking the gospel message along with the tea. He and his wife Mary extended their cottage to include a chapel. Today the cottage area is furnished as it might have been in their day and functions as the entrance to the chapel itself. What a story of faith this building has to tell!



There are a number of organisations that exist to support churches to develop great promotional materials:

- CPO (cpo.org.uk) produce a wide range of printed materials that you can order online or through their catalogue and customise for your own use
- Church Edit (churchedit.co.uk) and CPO's Website Builder (cpo.church123.com) both enable churches to design and build their own simple and easy-to-use websites
- Parish Pump (parishpump.co.uk) is a great resource for church magazine editors, enabling you to create a publication that reflects both local concerns and bigger issues

Telling the story: St Mary's, Gisburn

In May 2015, the clergy team at St Mary's, Gisburn, discovered a rare 1611 version of the King James' Bible at the back of a store cupboard. Known as a 'She Bible' as the result of an error in the print setting of Ruth 3:15, the find is one of only five such editions still in existence; the others belong to Oxford and Cambridge Universities, and Salisbury, Exeter and Durham Cathedrals!

Using the building

If we've spent extended periods of time worshipping in one local church, or even one denomination, we can become immune to the messages our buildings communicate about what we believe. For example, non-conformist buildings tend to have prominent pulpits to show the importance of the Word, the Bible.

Telling the story: Epworth Rectory

Guides at Epworth Rectory, John Wesley's birthplace, explain to visitors that the furniture is not original as most of it was sold by his mother, Susanna, in order to feed the family. This insight often prompts conversations about life at that time for a large family on a vicar's stipend, as well as stories about the Wesley family.



TimE Photography © TMCP

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Conversation Starter

**What items in your building could you
could draw attention to?**

Once you have your list, briefly describe the purpose of each item and how you use it; you might want to include an appropriate Bible verse. If your item is of particular historical interest you could include a short explanation. Then write or print each description onto individual cards and place by the item in question.

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Conversation Starter

**What does your building say about
what you believe?**

**What parts of your building might help you
explain your faith to visitors?**

While we need to be careful not to fill the building with labels like a museum, short notes about items of particular interest can be a helpful way of communicating the story of our faith.

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SECTION FOUR

Practical Steps

A quiet space



- Set aside a prayer space – it doesn't need to be elaborate or to involve candles!
- Provide a prayer board of some kind so that people can leave their prayers and thoughts.
- Leave a Bible open and some prayer cards to take away (available from sgmlifewords.com).

As a congregation, take seriously any prayers that are left by visitors and use them in your services. Our commitment to being a Christian presence in our community includes praying for those who are part of it.

“Conversation Starter

What is it about this building that helps you find peace and quiet?

In an increasingly busy and noisy world sometimes people are simply looking for a place of peace and quiet, a holy place (even if they wouldn't use that term).

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Loving our Neighbour

Churches are, of course, places in which we worship the God we love and try to serve, but the Bible also commands us to love our neighbour.

Simple ways to show visitors that you love your neighbours:

- If you support a charity leave out some literature.
- If other groups use your premises make sure they are mentioned on the visitor notice board with information about their activities and contact details.
- Advertise any businesses in the community, such as a shop, pub, or B&B.

Linking with others

Are there other church buildings in the area that are open?

Can you join together as a church trail?

Together you could produce a leaflet or create a website about the trail and make it into a pilgrimage. Use other forms of social media to let people know you are open for visitors. Choose an overall theme – creation, for example – and place readings and prayers in each building around this theme.



Loving our neighbour: Tissington Pilgrimage

The village of Tissington has a long history of well-dressing. The Methodist Church is always open and now forms the beginning and end of a pilgrimage around the village using the various wells to help people think about faith. A booklet has been produced – visit lulu.com and search 'Tissington: A Village Pilgrimage'.

Please tell us about your experience of using Open Welcome and the impact it has had on the life of your church community. You can submit your stories at arthurrankcentre.org.uk/good-news-stories – we'd love to hear from you!

Useful information and resources

Insurance

Congregational Church Insurance: congregational.co.uk

Ecclesiastical Insurance: ecclesiastical.com

Methodist Insurance: methodistinsurance.co.uk

Visitors and tourism

Churches Visitor and Tourism Association: cvta.org.uk

Methodist Heritage: methodistheritage.org.uk

United Reformed Church: urc.org.uk/archives

Other resources

Free prayer resources: sgmlifewords.com

High quality promotional resources for churches: cpo.org.uk

Support with church websites: churchedit.co.uk

Support with church magazines: parishpump.co.uk

Books

Bond, P, **Open For You**, Canterbury Press, 2006.

Inge, J, **A Christian Theology of Place**, Ashgate, 2003.

North, P et al., **Sacred Space**, Continuum, 2007.

Walter, N, **The Gate of Heaven**, Grove Books, 2011.

Other Germinate: The Arthur Rank Centre resources you may find useful

Find more information by visiting arthurrankcentre.org.uk and searching for each item:

Country Way

Our magazine for those in rural churches is published three times a year

Rural Mission Sunday

Our annual celebration of the rural church takes place each July

Equipping for Rural Mission

A toolkit designed to help rural churches better understand their communities in order to engage in effective mission

Journey to Faith

A unique rural evangelism training programme which helps members of rural congregations share their faith with others

For information about other Germinate: The Arthur Rank Centre resource, search the website, email info@arthurrankcentre.org.uk or connect with us on social media.



Arthur Rank
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