Faith, Hope and Quality

Achieving Excellence in Visitor Welcome

Joanna Booth
It often necessitates a change of mindset for places of worship to consider themselves as tourist venues. More difficult still, often, is planning for meeting the needs of the visitor and putting those needs at the heart of the ‘visitor offer’.
A pre-requisite of a site that wishes to welcome visitors is that it should be **open**. Opening times will depend on the location of the site and the availability of a key-holder. Opening times and arrangements should be consistent. It is, however, acknowledged that the frequency of opening will often be proportional to the size and location of the site.

Where there may be security issues opening times will often be dictated by the availability of a steward. Risk of theft may be lessened by having a suitable alarm system, and valuables locked away. The majority of sites trust their potential visitors and open without anyone on duty, although these sites often have CCTV in operation.
It is often easy to assume that your visitors will be ‘just like you’, knowing they are welcome to come in, being interested in what you are interested in and knowing what you know.

This may be the case for some visitors, but many people in the UK have never visited a church before, don’t know what to expect and may therefore be a little daunted by the prospect. In addition to attracting visitors with either no faith background, or one that is limited, it is important for all faith sites to open their doors to visitors from other faith backgrounds, with all the implications that involves.
All Saints, Orton, Cumbria. Signage actually starts at the village boundary and continues in the centre of the village, enticing the visitor to walk up the hill and come into the church.
Examples of lifts, stair lifts and ramps constructed from mediaeval steps.

Faith sites need to be aware that they will attract a range of visitors, many of whom are older or retired people who may have a range of needs in terms of accessibility. The needs of the disabled visitor should also be taken into account and the site should be aware of their duties under the Disability Discrimination Act 2005.

It is not expected that there would be access to all areas of a site. Bell towers and galleries are often closed to the public on Health and Safety grounds and are only open at certain times of the year (e.g. Open Days) when visitors can access these areas under supervision.

Many sites that are listed buildings will not be in a position to make adjustments where doing so will compromise the integrity of the site, and strict regulations to protect the site are in place.

There may well be some accessibility issues that cannot physically be overcome. In this case it is good practice to have an accessibility statement outlining any limitations, and to have this displayed on a web-site.
First impressions count.

The language of flowers is more articulate than a thousand words! Fresh flowers that is. Nothing is more unwelcoming than forgotten vases of dead flowers. Remember – always ask yourself “Would this be good enough for an invited guest into my own home?”

The important point is that the site is seen to be expecting visitors and that it has put some thought into making them feel wanted and welcome. Good practice can include:

• ‘Open’ or ‘Welcome’ signs at the gate
• An open door
• ‘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
• 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
We style our homes – interior design is big business. Let's apply the same principles to our places of worship.

Visitors want to feel that they matter
They should have the feeling that you have been expecting them ...
... and that the site has been made to look its absolute best
Whenever you go somewhere new – it’s always nice to be greeted by a friendly face. Visitors are keen to know what goes on but make sure you tell them in a visually interesting way. No-one wants lots of text.

Feedback from our seminars indicates that when people go to visit a church they want to see a ‘living church’ rather than an ecclesiastical museum.

What do you know about the dedication / Patron Saint of your church? Not many people know about St Nicholas but here in Liverpool there is an interesting visual explanation of the real St Nick (Santa Claus).
Great if you can, but don’t worry if you can’t. The key word is ‘quality’. Respect the integrity of the space as much as your visitors’ needs.

The importance of providing hospitality to the stranger is a theme that cuts across most religions. However, in terms of offering hospitality on site, places of worship will differ according to what is possible or what is deemed to be appropriate. Catholic view their liturgical space in a very different light than in other Christian denominations.

Some larger sites will have a permanent café facility in a separate part of the building whilst some will have volunteers who serve basic refreshments to visitors within the main body of the building. Some sites provide the means of making a free cup of coffee and also offer free biscuits, whilst other faith groups would not deem eating and drinking as acceptable or appropriate activities to take place within their ‘sacred space’. Some sites offer bottled water for the refreshment of visitors.

If a site is located next to a pub or café there may be little point in competing, and visitors may instead be directed towards such places.
Where a site has toilet facilities, there should, ideally, also be a disabled toilet. It goes without saying that the toilets should be clean and having baby-changing facilities sends out a message of welcome to all visitors.

If the site has toilets but these are generally locked, the location of the key should be clearly indicated. It might not be possible to install toilets in certain sites that are listed buildings. Where this is the case it is useful to indicate to visitors the location of the nearest toilet facilities and how to get there.
Just joking!

Here at Silverdale Methodist Church (Lancashire) they have a separate refectory just to the right of this photograph.
In mediaeval times churches were designed to be read – they were full of rich symbolism and everything from the fixtures and fittings to the design and orientation of the building all contributed to the ‘story’.

Today the meaning of much of this symbolism is lost but unlocking the secrets of the building is of immense interest to the visitor.

For visitors from other faiths, sharing the meaning of the building contributes to a greater awareness and understanding of the faith that is practised there.
April 2009.

Lancaster Aawaz group visit Carlisle Cathedral. For many it was the first time they had been inside a church before. It was also the first time that Carlisle Cathedral had hosted such a large group of Muslim women.
A faith site 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 may have expectations that something of this kind will be available. Good Practice includes:

• 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
• Include a short prayer
• Larger sites may have guidebooks for sale, black-and-white or colour.
• Consider also having a simpler free leaflet or portable board to support an independent walk around the site.
• A folded A4 sheet can include a brief history and a plan of the building – but, do not overload with information – ‘white space’ makes for easy reading
• Explanatory signs and history boards
• Do not use church ‘jargon’ without explanation e.g. sacrament, liturgy ….
• Make the most of stories about special people or events connected with the site. Visitors like stories – they add humanity.
• Provide leaflets or boards which are not too technical – just ‘tell the tale’.
• Provide children’s guides that are short, interactive and informative – e.g., ‘where’s the font?’
A consistent, corporate style is very pleasing to the eye and subconsciously makes a big visual impact on the visitor.

People learn through their senses and visual displays can make a significant impact on understanding. However, the type of display that is possible will vary considerably depending on the nature of the site and the cost involved. The creative use of technology can make a significant difference to the visitor experience in those sites that attract significant numbers of visitors e.g. cathedrals and great churches, but it is expensive.

If your site is a church, a yardstick would be to place yourself in the shoes of the visitor who has never stepped inside a church before. When they leave will they understand:

What the worshipping community believe
How worship is carried out
What everything in the church is for and how it is used
Why the building is laid out the way it is
Changes that have taken place over the years
Good Practice
A simple prayer at the door, clearly displayed
Silent 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, placed in sand, or tea-lights 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.
Visitors provide an amazing opportunity for a faith site to explain its beliefs to those outside its membership. They do not need to go OUT to these people, they have voluntarily come IN.

In terms of churches, in a secular age it is a real challenge to present the tenets of the Christian faith using comprehensible, attractive and gentle language and imagery. Whilst it is right that we should seek to impress and inspire visitors with the fascinating history and beautiful architecture of our churches, it is also important that opportunities are presented to engage them in understanding more about the faith for which those churches were built.
Catering for visitors of all ages is important.

Treat small visitors with the same respect as you accord all visitors. Don’t go for scruffy ‘kiddies corners’ filled with cast off toys, half-completed colouring books, old bits of carpet, mismatched cushions etc
For most sites this is the $64,000 question!

The reality is that places of worship can be presented in the very best way possible without much money being spent.

What is required is creativity and imagination. People are the most valuable asset for any site.
Volunteers play an enormous role in keeping places of worship open. The National Churches Trust Survey, published in April 2011 showed that Church buildings are significant venues for volunteering.

1.4 million members of church congregations volunteer in any capacity in their church building along with an estimated further 200,000 people from the wider community. 20% of the UK’s church buildings have more than 50 people volunteering in the building, and in less populated rural areas over a third have more than 20 volunteers.

Most volunteers are older people.
For volunteers to make a difference they need to be valued, empowered and inspired.

Seminars to support the ‘professional development’ of volunteers are a crucial way of making this happen. Through meeting up with like-minded people, seminars can also lead to networks of sites supporting each other.
Small congregations face the most challenges. The writer of this email went on to produce a professional church leaflet and was also instrumental in the development of the Sacred Solway faith trail which resulted in nine churches working together.

some feedback …

“I really have enjoyed your presentations at the various seminars I’ve attended. They have been really interesting informative and useful.

There is so much that could be done to help our church and its future - just wish I had more spare time!

We are quite few in numbers here, but the small congregation does work hard, but at times its hard to convince that small changes can make big improvements.”
It’s not just in our lives that a small change can make a big difference – but in our churches too. At a recent seminar I was leading on Reviewing Your Visitor Welcome at St Michael’s, Burgh by Sands I noticed an isolated money box slot in the wall at about eye level, and a rather lonely Visitors Book at the back of a pew some distance away. I suggested putting the two together.

I returned to the church three months later to find a big change. Someone in the village had made a beautiful small oak table – exactly to fit the space available under the money slot. And on this table, neatly and strategically placed next to a vase of fresh flowers, were not only the Visitors Book but a note block and pens for writing personal Intercessions, and wooden bowl in which they could be placed with a note to say that they would be taken to a special service. A new plaque was mounted on the wall, drawing visitors’ attention to ‘the hole in the wall’ and how contributions to the church would be much appreciated.

Not only has the beauty of the church been enhanced – but donations in the box have tripled and are still rising!
A timeline created on a roll of wallpaper backing-paper. It tells the story of Methodism from 1700 and shows what was happening locally and nationally in the development of the faith, against a backdrop of national and world events.

By the time the reader has got to the end they have a real understanding of the whole. And all this cost was someone's time and imagination!
Every single thing inside a church is part of the ‘story’. Here at St Andrew’s, Slaidburn (Lancashire) the story is told using simple ‘clip frames’ placed at strategic points around the church. This way they can easily be removed if necessary.
For some sites the starting point is something as simple as a jolly good clean up by a group of volunteers!

Don’t be afraid to throw away all those broken bits and pieces, or tell someone their display is not up to the required standard. Be ruthless and treat the site to the biggest spring clean ever!
Once you have made your site the very best it can be, you may well be something of a ‘hidden gem’ but please don’t hide your light under a bushel! Let everyone know about you.
A site that wishes to welcome visitors will first and foremost need to let people know that it is there, what it has to offer and when it is open.

Websites are usually the visitors’ first point of reference when planning a trip so it is important that they include as much information as possible about the site, not just the service times. Many visits to sacred sites are not planned, so it is good practice to have an information leaflet available at the local Tourist Information Centre.

In smaller villages and more rural areas it is useful to have a leaflet available in the local shop, post office or pub.
Some are clearly private clubs … for members only

No comment …
And most don’t even bother to put even minimal details and information on here.
Many visits to sacred sites are not planned, so it is good practice to have an information leaflet available at the local Tourist Information Centre.

In smaller villages and more rural areas it is useful to have a leaflet available in the local shop, post office or pub.
Networking clusters of sites through the development of faith trails that tell a story is a powerful way of attracting visitors.

Trails can be multi-faith and multi-denominational like Discover Sacred Lancaster: A walk of 2000 years …
Or tell a story that links together a number of sites of the same denomination.
All Saints’, Orton, Cumbria.

On the second Saturday of the month there is a Farmers’ Market in the village, bringing visitors from across the northwest.

On this day the church holds the ‘bric-a-brac’ stall and also provides coffee, cakes and cream teas. Although its hard work for the volunteers who do this it brings in @ £800 per month for church funds.
And once a year the village turns out in force to mount a major exhibition in the church which, along with the village Scarecrow Festival, brings in hundreds of visitors over the Spring Bank Holiday weekend.

In 2010 the theme was ‘FILMS’.

How many have you seen?
All Saints FILMS exhibition 2010.
It IS amazing – but many visitors to the city (and a number of residents) don’t even know that Manchester has a Cathedral!
And how many people know how amazing Blackburn Cathedral is?
The Monastery, Manchester, built by the Franciscans as the ultimate ‘statement church’ sits just outside the city centre.

In 1872, the monastery church of St Francis of Assisi, West Gorton was described as ‘the largest parish church built in England since the Reformation’. Pugin’s architectural masterpiece towers above the flat landscape of East Manchester. Vacated by the Franciscans in 1989 it was left prey to significant vandalism and theft. However, following an extensive fundraising campaign in the 1990’s the building has been saved from ruin and the site restored.

Now a conference and events venue, it is still open to visitors.
But this isn’t just about churches

It’s about ALL places of Worship

It’s about welcoming ALL visitors

Faith Tourism matters as never before
community cohesion

‘There needs to be a continual and sustained emphasis on building awareness of different faiths – because knowledge rather than ignorance leads to trust, understanding, and recognition of shared beliefs and values.

Places of worship are often the most noticeable buildings in an area. Looking at religious buildings can help people understand an area’s distinctive local history and cultural diversity’
why multi faith tourism?

It brings an additional dimension to the tourism experience and contributes to the development of:

- Religious Literacy
- Inter-faith Understanding
- Bridge Building
- Community and Social Cohesion
- Tolerance and Open Mindedness

‘Having the opportunity to learn about different religions and beliefs and the relations between them is an important part of developing a sense of shared values.

It can also help to tackle myths and misconceptions which can fuel fear and mistrust, and enable people to develop an understanding of the distinctive elements of different religions and beliefs’
Bolton – a town sharing and celebrating its faith diversity with everyone