

A photograph of a church interior, showing a row of stone columns and a floor illuminated by colorful spotlights. The text is overlaid on the top left of the image.

# A guide to experiencing God's presence in your church building



**Across the Diocese there are hundreds of delightful churches which celebrate a Christian presence over the years. They remind us that God is to be encountered in places, as he seeks to enrich our lives through the saving work of Jesus Christ. In the Book of Genesis, Jacob declares, 'Surely the Lord is in this place... this is none other than the House of God, and the gate of heaven'.**

In a busy and distracted world churches have great potential to provide a space to withdraw from the values of today and to be put in touch with the timeless truths of the gospel. They can be places for reflection, stillness and prayer, where glimpses of the divine can be experienced.

This guide provides ideas and resources to help you create a visitor's guide to your church that speaks of our faith.

There are many reasons why people visit churches. While we cannot assume anything about people's reasons for visiting, we can aim to give them physical space in which they can take time away from the demands of the world, gain a new perspective on their lives, encounter our faith and meet God. A well written reflective guide can enhance people's experience of our churches.

Before attempting to write a reflective guide to your church, it is important to begin by doing an assessment of all its features, both internal and external.

By doing this you will discern areas for improvement and perform a 'stock-take' of what message you are trying to impart about God in this place.

It is good to start with the outside. We live in a highly visual age in which first impressions really do matter. What messages, both intended and unintended, might your church building in its setting be sending?

Use the online checklist\* to establish what is excellent, okay or needs to improve. This can be completed by one or more people in your congregation. You might like to include someone who does not usually attend your church services; they will bring a fresh perspective.

Having done this, consider the improvements you would like to make (see Preparing for visitors overleaf).

Finally, look at the sample reflective guide. Which aspects of this would be a useful basis for your church guide? Consider how to encourage visitors to explore your church.

\* See [oxford.anglican.org/encounterfaith](http://oxford.anglican.org/encounterfaith)



# Preparing for visitors

## The churchyard

Check that any seating is in good shape and positioned for people to enjoy the peacefulness of the churchyard and invite contemplation.

If your churchyard has been given over to wildlife, erect a notice saying this. If possible identify the different species of animal and plant life that you might see. You could invite the local wildlife group to conduct a survey. Bees, particularly solitary bees, are struggling for existence these days so bee hotels could be added. By making your churchyard attractive to wildlife you will also be making it more attractive to people who are interested in nature. This

in itself is a form of outreach and an invitation to savour God's creation, even at the humblest level.

The charity Caring for God's Acre, whose vision is to keep burial grounds beautiful, accessible and connected to communities, has a range of helpful resources:

**[caringforgodsacre.org.uk](http://caringforgodsacre.org.uk)**

## The external noticeboard

An up-to-date noticeboard in good condition will be much more inviting than a tatty one and tell the visitor that the church is alive and active.

If the church is open, a sign saying this near the entrance or on the

churchyard gate would be an encouragement for people to enter. (If you need to make changes to your noticeboard please contact the DAC as diocesan permission is required: [oxford.anglican.org/dac-church-buildings](http://oxford.anglican.org/dac-church-buildings))

## The porch

A quiet welcome is the desired aim, rather than a bombardment of rotas, insurance certificates, churchyard regulations, etc. Although such items are important they should not have pride of place over words of welcome and invitation to share in God's presence within. Pictures of people enjoying themselves are inviting.

Consider how accessible your church is to people with disabilities. Lighting may be an issue, both in the porch and inside the church. It is hard to read anything in poor light. Can automatic lighting be fitted which is motion activated? (A faculty will be required for this; please contact the DAC.)

## On entering the building

The atmosphere on entering a church will have a huge impact on the visitor so it is important that this is right. Although mustiness can speak of the centuries that have passed, it may also suggest decay, damp and rot.

Use all your senses to look around and see what can be improved to enhance the ambience and so



### ***A bee hotel can be made using bamboo.***

strengthen our response to God's presence in this place.

Are there welcome leaflets, easily visible when entering the church? This is where a guide to experiencing God's presence in the building should be placed. Literature for sale, historical guides, postcards and invitations to donate should not take priority over this. A contactless giving device is a good way for people to make a donation.

A children's guide to the church would also be well placed here, including something for visiting children to do, such as a word-

search. You might want to invite children and their carers to help you create this. Clive Fewins' book *Be A Church Detective: A Young Person's Guide to Old Churches* has some creative and helpful ideas for engaging with children.

Try to remove extraneous items that may impede a visitor's progress round the church.

Prayer stations, prayer trees, votive stands, etc. are popular with visitors. Are these available in your church and easy to access? Some sentences on what prayer is can be a useful aid. Here is an example:



*Prayer is offering people to God, who loves every part of his creation and everyone in it, and who values our prayers. Please write the name of someone who matters to you and what you are praying for. When you leave this place their name will remain before God in this holy place.*

Could you offer some simple prayer cards for people to take away with them? A prayerful walk might be one suggestion.

A quiet side chapel may appeal to those in need of time on their own or quiet contemplation.





Are there other ways in which people might be able to interact with your church building? These might include a pile of small stones that people could leave in a particular place to mark their visit, or even take away.

It can be helpful to provide information on the principle furnishings such as font, pulpit and altar. Richard Taylor's book *How to Read a Church: A Guide to Images, Symbols and Meanings in Churches and Cathedrals* might be useful.

Information on the origin of furnishings and their use today are worth including. For example, good examples of preaching include Peter in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost and Martin Luther King in Washington in 1963.

For further insights into church buildings in the Diocese you may like to visit the Historic Churches Trusts' websites:

**[berkschurchestrust.org.uk](http://berkschurchestrust.org.uk)**  
**[ohct.org.uk](http://ohct.org.uk) (Oxfordshire)**  
**[bucks-historic-churches.org](http://bucks-historic-churches.org)**



## Sample reflective guide

**The following headings and sentences are suggestions to help you get started on your own guide. There may well be other features that you wish to elaborate on.**

Do not assume anything about the level of knowledge of those who will read your guide. The average reading age in England is under 12. The best guides have fewer words and more pictures.

Involving people in thinking about their faith and how the building and its furnishings contribute to it can both deepen discipleship and provide material for your guide.



# Ways to look for or experience God in this church

## Stand at the door

Here, you are at the threshold of a sacred place where countless generations of people have passed before you. God invites us into his quiet presence, where we may bring our innermost thoughts, prayers, thanks, anxieties and fears. In the Book of Revelation in the Bible, we read of Jesus saying, 'I stand at the door and knock; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come and eat with you, and you with me'.

## Embrace the silence

Feel the silence enfold you, and sense the centuries-old atmosphere, steeped in the prayers of those gone before you. Try to set your cares aside for a moment and absorb the peace as it passes into you and restores your inner calm.

## Listen to the stones

Listen carefully. What can you hear? Do you hear footsteps, voices, traffic, music, the cooing of pigeons? These ancient stones have soaked up the prayers and music and everyday sounds from ordinary people for hundreds of years; they have witnessed sombre tragedies and great joys. Be glad to be part of an ancient tradition of faith which reaches back through time, and forwards into the future.

## Find the font

Here is the start of most people's Christian journey. The font represents new life in Christ, and heralds the start of our pathway in his light. Through the water of baptism we identify with Christ and the Kingdom of God. What or who do you most identify with?

## Talk to the people

Depending on when you visit, you may see all sorts of people in this place. You may see those seeking peace or solitude, those helping with refreshments or arranging flowers; others cleaning or tidying the dark corners, preparing the church for a special service or event. Remember that all of them are made in the image of God. Try to see God in them, in a look or a word or an action. See yourself, too, as one of them and remember that you also reflect the face of God.

## Examine the carvings

These may speak to you of creativity and history.

## Look at the windows

The richness of the stained glass is enhanced when the sun shines and may transport us beyond the ordinary. Gaze at them and try to feel the story they portray. Put other, mundane, thoughts from your mind and experience the love and dedication



that was poured into these works of art to the glory of God.

### **Offer a prayer**

Of course, we don't have to be in a church to pray. But now that you are here, find a quiet spot. Empty your mind so that you can feel God's presence with you, then talk to him. Try to listen, too; prayer is not a one-sided conversation. It's about a relationship that needs time and space. Or write a prayer and place it on the prayer tree.

### **Honour the dead**

As you walk about our church you will see tablets and memorials to those who have passed through this life. They have gone, but their memory is honoured. Think of all those who have died and are now at rest. We believe that they are now with God and we should feel

encouraged to strive for goodness in this life and look to the future without fear. It has been observed that where people's names are spoken in some way they live on. Is there someone you want to remember before God today?

You may see monuments and statues. These commemorate people who have contributed to local life and many who have served the country in the armed forces. They may make you ponder about the meaning of service today.

### **Stand in front of the altar**

The altar, from the Latin word *altare* or sacrifice, reminds us of Christ's sacrificial death on the cross. That is the focal point of his presence during Holy Communion. In the service which we hold on (*insert when these are across each month*) we follow his command to take bread and wine in the belief that through them he feeds us, transforms us and sends us out into the world. What do you consume that feeds you most in and for your daily life?

### **Look at the lectern**

It is not unusual for lecterns to be in the form of an eagle with a Bible resting on its wings. The eagle conveys the word of God being taken to all people in every corner of the earth. Might the living word of God, Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, have something to say to you today?





If you have any questions or comments, please contact  
**[mission@oxford.anglican.org](mailto:mission@oxford.anglican.org)**  
Additional resources can be downloaded at  
**[oxford.anglican.org/encounterfaith](https://www.oxford.anglican.org/encounterfaith)**

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# Checklist: your church and churchyard

## The churchyard

Your churchyard could be described as:

- Well-maintained, pleasant to linger in
- Attractive but untidy in places
- Tired, some neglect
- Overgrown and wild
- Neglected, littered and off-putting

Is it easy to find the functioning entrance to the church?

- Yes  No

Is there seating?

- Yes, in good order
- Yes, mostly in good order
- Yes but shabby/broken
- No

How accessible are the paths to wheelchairs, pushchairs, the disabled?

- Very accessible
- Accessible in most places
- Not easily accessible (awkward gates, uneven paths, etc.)
- Not at all accessible (narrow gates, steps, etc.)

If it is not possible for the church to be kept open, is there clear information about when the church is open/who has a key?

- Yes  No

## The external noticeboard

Is it in good order?

- Yes  No

Is it up to date?

- Yes  No

Can it be seen from the road?

- Yes  No

Is it easy to read, especially for the visually impaired or those with learning difficulties?

- Yes  No

Does it tell you where to find further information?

- Yes  No

## The porch

Is it clean and well lit?

- Yes  No

Can one easily discover what's on, who an event is aimed at, when and where?

- Yes  No

**Are the notices fresh and well laid out?**

- Yes, bright and clear and up to date
- No, curled up and out of date

**What impression of church life are you giving the visitor?**

- Vibrant, busy, lots going on

**On entering the building:**

**How easy is it to enter the building during the week if you are disabled, or use a wheelchair, pushchair, or pram?**

- Straightforward
- A bit tricky
- Demanding
- Almost impossible

**What will people see first when they come in?**

- A request for a donation
- Flowers
- Interesting literature

**Does it smell pleasant (clean, polished, flowers, incense, etc.)?**

- Yes  No

**How might the first experience of the church interior speak to visitors of the Christian faith and God's people in this place?**

- Order
- Warmth, hospitality, and welcome
- Lack of thought
- Untidiness
- Chaos

- Attentive, caring, thriving
- Rather tired, lacking energy
- Struggling

**Which of these describes how the interior feels?**

- Bright, clean, welcoming, warm
- Dimly lit, peaceful, welcoming, safe
- Chilly, unfriendly, insular
- Cold, dark, damp, uninviting

**Are all parts of the interior easily accessible for all?**

- Yes, including disabled
- Mostly, but not all
- Main areas only accessible to disabled
- Not easily accessible for the infirm, elderly or disabled

**Is there information on the life of God's people here, the Christian faith, prayer, and making a donation?**

- Yes, all of these
- Yes, some of these
- No

**Is it well ordered and tidy?**

- Yes, pleasing to the eye and areas of interest to explore
- No, it is cluttered in parts