



RURAL MISSION SOLUTIONS

Helping rural churches in their mission

Reputation and Image

When it comes to developing appropriate strategies for mission the issues of reputation and image cannot be overlooked. Many who are already faithful in their attendance at church wonder why most people in the community either never attend or only attend on special occasions. One of the main reasons is related to how people beyond the regular worshippers perceive who we are and what we do. Exploring this subject calls for brutal honesty but the pain will be worth it if it leads to better communication of our message with the wider communities in which our churches exist.

Most churches, like many organisations, fail to carry out any kind of audit or appraisal in this connection. We have become used to the way things are and fail to see the need for change. Sometimes people are also resistant to addressing this topic. By comparison good organisations periodically refresh their branding, refit shops and ensure that their communications are appropriately contemporary. They do this because it helps them get their message across to others who might be interested and in the case of commercial businesses because it increases sales significantly.

At this point some might be saying, "But we are not a business". Of course that is true but we are actually in the business of trying to communicate a message of God's redeeming love. When it comes to wanting to attract people into our churches where they might hear that message and grow in faith we are also competing in the leisure market. We are asking people to give up their free time to come to church. Take a moment to think of all the competing interests such as shopping, sport, visiting family, and more, with which we are competing. If we leave aside the work of the Holy Spirit who might mysteriously move someone to explore faith, what is there about our image and reputation that might possibly make us an attractive option.

An excellent starter to this task is to look at "Mr Bean Goes to Church". If you are able to see this, and better still to share it in a group, please do. I will do my best to explain the sketch here, but first I need to point out that the sketch, like many aspects of comedy, is based upon life as it really is.

Mr Bean arrives late to attend a rural Anglican Church. He has some difficulty parking and no one is available to help so he gets in trouble even before rushing into the service. As he enters there is no one to welcome him (he is a stranger) so he wanders rather aimlessly while the congregation is rather feebly singing a hymn. The church is mostly empty and he finds a place on the front row next to a man who looks important enough to be a Church Warden (we will call him Richard). Bean has no hymn book so he tries to share Richard's hymn book but Richard is rather reluctant. As Mr Bean gets ready to sing, the hymn comes to an end and everyone sits, leaving Mr Bean standing with his mouth open.

Mr Bean takes the hint and sits. A sermon starts. The tone is monotonous and does not engage his interest. His problem now is staying awake. He tries various ridiculous tactics, looking around and holding his eyes open. Eventually he thinks that sucking a sweet will help but his attempt to quietly open the packet and unwrap the sweet fail. He is glared at and now feeling guilty, he implies that someone else was doing it and emulates the same judgmental attitude to which he was made a victim. In his effort to get the sweet into his mouth without attracting attention he drops the sweet down the inside of his shirt.

When the sermon ends a hymn is announced and all rise to sing. Mr Bean is again faced with the problem of singing without a book, but he is partly saved as the hymn has lines of hallelujahs. He half recognises this and sings them heartily and sometimes wrong, attracting more judgmental stares. During the hymn he seeks to retrieve his sweet and his bizarre antics emulate both charismatic and catholic traditions of worship. I will spare you a couple of other aspects of the story.

I am left wondering where Rowan Atkinson (Mr Bean) attended a village church where the idea came to him. It is painfully true to life: a lack of proper welcome, unfriendly people, inflexible worship, boring sermons, strict rules, judgemental attitudes, leaving visitors feeling uncomfortable. It could have been almost any village and any denomination. And we wonder why people do not come to church in droves. Sadly what keeps others away is sometimes those of us who are there already!

Whenever I ask a church with which I am working to describe themselves they almost invariably start by saying, "We are very welcoming". While I am sure that this is the theory, the actual practise usually falls short. Imagine if you will how you might welcome me as a visitor into your home. I am sure that you will be polite, smile and give out all kinds of signals to make me feel welcome. If I have come any distance you might be kind enough to tell me where the bathroom or toilet is. Depending on weather conditions there might be concern about my footwear. Should I leave my shoes at the door whether or not they are muddy? If it is raining you would tell me where I could leave my dripping umbrella and take my coat from me. You would probably show me into the appropriate room, encourage me to sit in a comfortable chair and offer me some refreshment.

How does the average 'welcoming' church compare to that? Rather badly, I suspect. Sometimes several books are proffered without any kind of explanation. Visitors might get a handshake (or worse be offered an over-familiar hug from a stranger)¹. They are likely to be left trying to discern where they are allowed to sit and where they had better not sit. It is rare for visitors to be asked if they are familiar with the form of service, or might value some friendly guidance. It is also unlikely they will be told where the toilets are (if there are any). A good host welcoming visitors might also check whether large print versions of the books would help or whether they can cope with reading the projection screen if you use one.

Incidentally, on the topic of toilets (if you have one) is the paper good quality or do you buy the cheapest? Is there nice soap and warm water? On what will I be drying my hands? Is the towel as nice as those you have at home? One church I know purchased 100 white face towels and presented a few nicely rolled in a wicker basket, with a waste basket for collecting the used ones which then get laundered each week. It provides a feeling of luxury and saves money on paper towels or electric hand dryers. Great idea!

Mr Bean also portrayed the situation where a visitor does not know when to sit or stand in a service and how to follow the form of the service. Putting a visitor with a friendly regular, who can discreetly help them find the right page and know when to stand or sit is a wise move. Those leading services can help by announcing page and hymn numbers clearly and holding up the appropriate book. Avoiding churchy jargon is also a good idea. Frankly we sometimes sound quite alien and exclusive to those who are not familiar with terms we know and love. For example, 'Generosity' might be a more

¹ All churches should have someone responsible for safeguarding, especially if there are young children, teenagers or vulnerable adults present. If the safeguarding person is well trained they will be able to give helpful advice on responding to visitors as churches can be targeted by abusers. Anyone who has experienced abuse might find an effusive welcome discomfoting.

readily understood word than 'Grace', and 'Messing up' a more readily understood concept than 'Sinning'. It is not about watering down truth; it is about making truth more easily understood.

Anything such as a sermon should always be engaging. That is not just about attention span. There are many who can speak for well over 30 minutes and keep everyone gripped. Preachers should not blame the congregations if the sermon seems too long. A good maxim is, "If you haven't struck oil in five minutes you should stop boring!"

Also, what happens after the service? Does anyone offer to get visitors coffee or are they left to fend for themselves? What would happen to guests in your home? Think not so much about welcome and more about hospitality, and gain a reputation for being hospitable. What is the quality of coffee, tea, fruit juice, and biscuits? There is no need to go over the top; just do not be mean. Mugs are far nicer than plastic cups. Coffee after the service is an opportunity for your visitors to feel welcome. It is a time to get to know them and listen to them and their interests and needs. You can then tailor your response appropriately and pass on church contact details before they leave.

Please ensure that you have a hospitality team or, if you are too few, at least one person who is really good at hospitality to look after the welcoming. Far too often the task goes to someone who likes to be seen to be important rather than the person with the real gift for the job. Get it right and you can turn visitors into regulars.

It isn't just shops that have shop windows. All businesses (and all good churches) know that they need to project an appropriate and attractive image. For rural churches it is the noticeboard and the church or parish magazine that needs serious thought. It is both about contents and appearance.

If your noticeboard is older than five years you might consider either replacing it or giving it a make-over in some way. Do not leave old posters and information sheets on display. If you use a text poster or some kind of wayside pulpit please ensure that it is changed at least once a month. Try to make it topical and witty. On the topic of the information that you put out, both by main noticeboards and magazines start your thinking by writing a list of everything you might want to convey about yourself. This might be such concepts as friendly, welcoming, warm, caring, fun, interesting. Then make another list of what you would not like to convey such as boring, old fashioned, unfriendly, exclusive, or possibly even simply 'churchy'. Try to get several people generating the words for both lists. Then keep those lists handy as means by which you test everything you put in writing.

Is there a logical reason for church noticeboards being painted black with gold lettering using a Gothic font? This is a classic way of giving out all the wrong messages.

Take time to think through what messages you are giving out in the Parish or Church Magazine. For a start most magazines look like desperate attempts to raise money and this reinforces one of the common negative images. Using advertising to cover the cost of printing is sensible but many magazines are mostly packed with advertising to bring in funds. The consequence is that you have to hunt to find the editorial material. Please do not put advertising on the first few pages. Please also avoid using these pages to advertise your own range of services, especially if these are in any way complicated such as at various times and in various buildings. Keep it simple.

Advertising can be used intelligently to break up the layout of the magazine (make sure it matches the article) and place the remainder of the advertisements on the last few pages. There is a reason why newspapers and commercial magazines are laid out in that way.

Be extra careful about the Vicar's letter (or similar). Never use this as a sermon; it will immediately reinforce the negative image that we are always preaching at people. You can use it to introduce a topic which might lead to an article elsewhere, or as a taster for something happening at church. An example might be something about prayer as three times more people pray than attend church. Just avoid it reading like a sermon or containing churchy jargon or style. Rural Mission Solutions will be happy to critique your church magazine if you wish. If the 'feel' of the magazine does not come across as something produced to be helpful and entertaining to those beyond our churches we would do better to stop publishing them and giving out the wrong message.

Stained glass windows might look splendid from inside but at most times they look dull from outside. Together with heavy wooden doors the whole thing looks unwelcoming and rather daunting to enter if you are unfamiliar with the architecture. If external glazed doors are not possible, can there be internal glazed porch doors? How do you use lighting? Retail outlets know the importance of bright interiors and shop windows, even in summer. Does your interior reinforce the 'gloomy' image?

Similarly, are your hymnbooks and service sheets rather tired, dog eared, or torn? Time to replace them! How much of what you do is still in 17th Century English? It might be poetic and some might find it attractive but more will find it off-putting. Similarly, think about music in your church. About 5% of people who purchase recorded music will purchase classical music. And about 5% of those who purchase classical music will purchase recordings of organ music. It is one of the most prominent aspects in many churches but it seriously lacks wide appeal. This does not necessarily mean abandoning the organ and moving in a rock band. But it needs to be kept in balance. Apply the same thinking to any choir anthems. **We** might like what we do but it might just be what is keeping people away.

If planning restrictions leave you with pews (an unhelpful legacy mostly from Victorian times) then do your best to make the seats comfortable and avoid using varnish that sticks to dresses and shirts on hot summer days. You would not ask visitors to your home to sit so uncomfortably.

Using different voices is one of the ways in which radio and TV news programmes keep people interested. You can do this to break up Scripture readings, intercessions, sermons, and even the notices. All churches need financing but offerings are great at reinforcing negative image. Do you ask visitors to your home to give you money to cover the cost of the Council Tax? Instead, teach your regular attenders how to use standing orders through the bank or find some other more discreet means for offerings.

God wants his people to be givers rather than receivers, to be blessers of others. All too often the negative image people have is that we are trying to make people join our club, be like us and give us money.

By all means invite visitors to come again but always make sure that their first experience is an enjoyable one.

Remember image and reputation is not about what we think we have. We need to stop kidding ourselves. If people are not coming it is most likely because what *they* believe about whom we are, what we do and what we seek to communicate is seen as unattractive. Bringing people to church is not the same as bringing someone to faith and discipleship. But keeping them out could be hindering people from discovering a living relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

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