



The Church of Scotland

God's Own Country

A Practical Resource for Rural Churches

Mission Opportunities



MISSION OPPORTUNITIES

Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.

Hebrews 13:2

Welcome, Worship and Tourism

Mr Andrew Duff

There is an ancient spiritual heritage to the practice of hospitality:

The earliest recorded incidence (Genesis 18:1-8) conveys a strong sense of something God-ward about the act of welcoming strangers.

Following the shipwreck of St Paul, the kindness of the people of Malta who "kindled a fire, and received us every one," is recorded in scripture (Acts 28:2), and resonates to this day in the traditions of that island. Hotels and hospitals evolved from early Christian community practices.

Christian hospitality is not self-serving but focuses on the needs of the guest – whether for a place to stay, something to drink or eat, a listening ear, or simply for acceptance. Hospitality simply means making other people feel accepted and welcome. It can happen in inauspicious places and unlikely times. It can happen around a meal table, of course, but also when a visitor chances to step into an old village chapel to dodge a rain shower and gets chatting to a friendly local!

The Visitor Potential of Churches

It seems that fewer people today wish to attend formal church services, yet more than ever are choosing to visit churches as part of a day out or holiday visit. Why is this, and what might this mean in terms of the opportunity to show hospitality towards such visitors?

Some Reasons for Visits

Increasing numbers come as part of a family history quest. The Internet makes family research easier, but many people then want to come and see where their forebears came from. The village church and its graveyard is one of the few places to offer tangible continuity between past and present.

Of course many come for baptisms, weddings, funerals and other family events. A visitor-friendly church may be a small but helpful part of their own spiritual journey.

Some visitors come specifically for historical or architectural interest, guide book in hand. Others may be walkers or cyclists, for whom country churches can be welcome points of interest en route.

It seems that most visits to churches are 'un-premeditated': not coming intentionally to visit the church, but as a spur-of-the-moment decision when they happen to be in the vicinity or passing by.

Most tourists visit churches at some point in their trip – including people who would say they have no religious faith. Some estimates say more tourists visit churches than all other visitor attractions put together. However, most people have come to expect church doors to be firmly locked so will not attempt to visit unless there is an obvious sign of life and interest. It is not surprising, then, that the number of visitors generally increases significantly when there is a welcoming 'church open' sign outside!

This is not just about buildings: churches are story-boxes filled with tell-tale evidence of people and events that have shaped our land. Our churches are integral to the story of the places and communities within which they have evolved, and the parish church is often the oldest building in the locality. Churches are signposts of our heritage, points where you can touch history, as well as places of visual and spiritual significance.

Potential Benefits of Church Involvement in Visitor Hospitality

You may not (knowingly) entertain angels or a St Paul, but there may be other ways in which a visitor hospitality initiative might bring local benefits.

There is a natural tendency to associate tourism with economic benefits, and it is true that an important trend in rural areas has been the increase in spending and employment in tourism and leisure-related services. Tourism is now a major contributor to the economy in many rural areas, benefiting far more than just those directly involved in providing accommodation and food. Tourist boards reckon that every £1 spent by visitors generates another 23-33 pence of local 'knock on' benefit via local retailers, suppliers of services, wages and so on. This effect is greater where trading links between local firms are strong.

Jobs directly related to tourism are often seasonal, part-time and/or relatively low-paid. Whilst these may seem to be drawbacks, they can also benefit those seeking supplementary income to support family, semi-retired or other lifestyles, or to complement other part-time work.

Other potential benefits are also worth considering. A tourism initiative might help to:

- > Increase the local impact of visitor information, encouraging visitors to explore further.
- > Bring out local distinctiveness, culture and heritage – and mobilise more local people in support of these.
- > Promote local products and services, and increase networking between local businesses and community groups.
- > Encourage interest (amongst visitors and local people) in the local environment and conservation of buildings and landscapes.
- > Create opportunities for development of volunteer skills, confidence and community 'capacity building'.

- > For the church, an opportunity to engage with people in new ways, and to provide a demonstration of the Christian faith as something alive and relevant.

Whilst the contribution to any one of the above might be modest, the overall effect would be an incremental enriching of both the visitor experience and local quality of life.

Looking at Your Church

Don't be put off from developing a visitor hospitality initiative just because your church is not on some list of 'must-see' national heritage, or your community feels lacking in the resources to lay out a welcome for visitors.

Historic or architecturally notable churches have obvious potential for visitors, but even the simplest village church may have potential to welcome visitors in new and creative ways, especially if it is close to other amenities or shops or close to where visitors are likely to park or take a walk. These could include simple local history displays, or an introduction to the local environment, a local art exhibition, or a small tourist information display.

Also, don't forget to think about the scope for local schools visits – this can help to build relationships with young people who might otherwise have little contact with church life. Perhaps a parish map or trail could be researched and produced as a local school project then displayed in the church for visitors to enjoy?

Questions to Consider About your Church

- > Would visitors feel they are welcome, and that you are not simply after their money?
- > Would strangers sense that this is a well-loved place, of special significance in the community? Or is there an air of neglect about it?
- > Does it say something understandable about faith to someone largely ignorant of Christianity?

There are a number of ways in which a church can make visitors feel welcome – these need not cost a lot of money, but do need an effort of imagination and commitment. There are some good sources of practical advice available (see suggestions at the end), but here are a few points to start with:

- > Advertise consistent open times, and display a 'Church Open' notice outside when it is. An open door into a church looks welcoming and may intrigue passers-by to investigate.
- > Could you offer refreshments? Some churches have set up excellent church cafés, whilst others in quiet rural locations have simply provided basic tea and coffee making facilities and a little sign to invite visitors to make themselves a cuppa – a great way to say 'visitors welcome'. Some, in areas popular with walkers, have provided small bottles of water free or on a donation basis.
- > A friendly steward certainly helps, perhaps offering a leaflet guide then leaving the visitor to look around, and ready to answer queries if approached. This might be the only chance a passing visitor has to meet and talk to a local person!
- > Some country churches have timed light switches, others use light sensors which come on as the door is opened – both help to convey a sense of visitors being welcome.
- > Provide a specific prayer area. Some churches provide a board and sticky notes and invite visitors to leave prayer requests. Other creative ideas include prayer leaflets, flowers, candles or contemporary sculpture to encourage quiet reflection.

Enriching the Visitor Experience

Many visitors are interested in finding out about the church and its environs, and most people enjoy a good story. Here are some ideas for making the most of this:

- > Start with a simple free leaflet to welcome visitors to the church, summarising key points of interest and emphasising that this is a living Christian community.
- > Prepare a short inexpensive guide to the church and the stories associated with it. Make sure it is well presented and interesting to the uninitiated.
- > Stewards or other helpers should feel comfortable welcoming visitors and chatting to them about points of interest and stories about the church and local area. They don't need to be experts, but a friendly welcome and a little local knowledge can make a real difference. Some churches have used 'storytelling' workshops to prepare helpers for this. (Ask local tourism officials, community arts officers or other agencies if any help is possible with informal training.)
- > Provide some useful information on local facilities, including visitor attractions, nearest cash-point, toilets, local cafés, pubs, accommodation, shops, garage, etc. This could be a visitor information point helping to promote the local business community, and may in turn encourage them to support or advertise in your visitor trail, guide, etc.
- > Offer something to take away, such as a bookmark or prayer card to reflect on (inviting donations at this point would be acceptable, as visitors will feel they have received something in return).
- > Many churches provide a bookstall (with local interest as well as Christian literature), postcards, craft items and souvenirs for sale. In the right location, the combination of tearoom, bookstall and tourist information can be quite a draw for visitors!

Questions for Discussion

Look up the Bible passages quoted at the beginning.

What can we learn about the practice of hospitality?

The Bible suggests the possibility of entertaining angels without realising it, whilst St Paul brought gifts of healing. Can we think of possible blessings (or benefits) a hospitality initiative might bring to our community?

Does the church already have points of contact with local tourism service providers?

Is there scope to encourage stronger local relationships with – and between – local businesses, or to join forces with others to develop a local tourism initiative?

Is there scope to present and use the church more actively as a place of welcome for visitors?

Can you imagine doing something different to ‘kindle a fire’ for visitors?

Further Reading

‘Open For You – the Church, the Visitor and the Gospel’ by Paul Bond

‘Exploring Churches’, an educational resource by Virginia Johnston and others, published by the Churches Conservation Trust

‘Church Cafes – explored and celebrated’ by Robert Davies

The Scotland’s Churches Trust offers useful advice on welcoming visitors and publishes a guide to churches to visit in Scotland at www.scotlandschurchestrust.org.uk

The Churches Tourism Association provides information and advice on church tourism initiatives on its website: www.churchestourismassociation.info

MISSION OPPORTUNITIES

Partnership in Social Action

Rev Dr Dane Sherrard

Partnership is at the heart of rural ministry – fair enough, rural life is all about partnership. Few farmers believe that they can do everything themselves – they plant, irrigate and tend fully aware that they are engaging in a partnership with God’s forces of nature. So our very setting speaks to us of partnership.


Rural life is filled with challenges not presented to the urban dweller. Rural bus services make travel difficult. The distance to local shops, banks and petrol stations mean that people get into the habit of working with each other and helping each other, acting in partnership. Yet in the Church we often find partnership to be harder – not partnership between members of our congregation because that partnership is usually the greatest strength of what we are – minister and Kirk Session, Church and School, the caring partnerships between congregational members, and so on. There are however, so many other partnerships waiting to be discovered. If I sound like an expert, I’m not – but I am someone who has discovered the value of partnerships in recent years and, like any convert, I am sold on their value.

A Buildings Challenge

I came to minister to two small village communities eight years ago. One had a broken-down church with a presbytery-inspired demolition order. Rebuilding was not to be allowed: the little hall with room for a dozen or so was reckoned to be large enough for the congregation’s future. So instead of turning inwards and arguing with Presbytery, we turned outwards and invited the local farmers and business folk to help. They set up a Community Trust (a charitable company) and agreed to rent the church building for nineteen years at five pounds a year from the General Trustees. The immediate crisis was over. Next our Community Trust called all the trades folk from the area together and invited them to rebuild the church; all immediately agreed to provide their skills without charge if money was available for materials. A lady from the church went out with a collecting tin and, in no time at all, £20,000 had been raised from the parish; people wanted to help and their imagination had been caught by this partnership between Church and community. One of our local hotels contacted us and offered to pay the material cost of a new roof; another telephoned to offer new doors and carpets. Soon everyone was bringing their skills and a ‘cathedral’ was created. The re-opening day

was wonderful, but nothing to the occasion six weeks later when twenty-eight folk (almost all of whom had been involved in the rebuilding programme) ‘joined the Church’ by profession of faith. Something wonderful had begun.

Meanwhile my other village was also in turmoil because its church was closed for a year for urgent repairs. This too was partnership, but of a very different kind. Because of the historic nature of the church, 80% of the cost was met by Historic Scotland and the Heritage Lottery Fund, with significant additional funding from the local authority and Scottish Enterprise. Don’t be afraid to ask these bodies for help: churches are important to the fabric of rural life and people will want to offer assistance.



We gained enormously from the year out of our church – rather than using the village hall, we toured local churches together, held services in the open air and generally learned that we didn't always need to do things the way we had before. Rebuilding our churches made us realise that we also had to rebuild our mission strategy. Church Without Walls encouraged us to look at ourselves – our situation and our skills. We discovered that our story was of pilgrimage and of welcoming pilgrims and strangers in our midst. A Celtic saint had been martyred here and centuries ago, pilgrims came to pray. Our skills were of hospitality honed through bed-and-breakfast provision, and of building (through reconstructing our churches). As a resource we had a set of old broken-down outhouses. If our task was to transform the many visitors in our midst into pilgrims we needed a base, a welcoming centre.

A Pilgrim Mission Project

We turned to Scottish Enterprise. I telephoned, said who I was and what I wanted – a little money to help us create a Visitor Centre. The lady who spoke to me was doubtful, but I persevered. I told her why this was a good idea and why they should be helping us. She promised to consult and later that day returned to me with an offer of £20,000 'to get us started.'

At this stage we made the most important decision of our recent adventures: we decided to set up an independent steering-group to guide our project. Right at the start we agreed that there would be only two members of our congregation on the group: the rest would come from other organisations. Some of our folk needed a little persuading about this because it would mean that we were no longer 'in control', but if we were 'in control' it wouldn't be a real partnership – and partnership involves mutual trust. So we invited two members of the National Park in whose area we sat. Then we found out about the Rural Funding Programme which existed to disperse European monies to Scottish rural communities and invited them to take part, and Scottish Enterprise as well; everyone expressed themselves delighted to help. We knew technology would be important so we also invited a computer expert, and representatives of local business and industry and ended up with a steering-group of a dozen.

Together we worked out a strategy and it grew because so many of our partners were used to thinking in bigger terms than us. It didn't take long for our Centre to be constructed (by our labour-force which had rebuilt our other village church). Our Visitor Centre had grown to include a computer studio which also provided Broadband for everyone in our village, a pottery (maybe we could create a permanent job for someone) and a candle-making workshop for the children. Our Centre quickly became the heart of village activity with a cinema, a local heritage society, and as home to our Guild and Bible Study Group.

The Vision Grows

Our steering-group continued to dream. We cared for a twenty-five acre glebe on the banks of one of Scotland's most famous lochs, inaccessible for twelve years since its bridge had been washed away in a flood. If we could rebuild the bridge we could take the whole idea of pilgrimage forward by creating a pilgrimage pathway to which folk from all over the world could come and walk and think and be challenged by what they saw.

On our own we might have had the idea, but without partners we could as well have tried to fly as make it happen. Together, however, we could create something extraordinary. Who could build us a bridge? The obvious answer was the army, but we would need definite plans to show how we could make the 'Pilgrimage Pathway' a reality. The European funders told us that they could bring parties of young people from Europe to help us build the pathways, but how could we pay for everything involved? Our partners put us in touch with Scottish Natural Heritage who had funds just for that purpose, and with so many prestigious partners already they would take our application seriously.

It was at this stage that the Church of Scotland Parish Development Fund stepped in, awarding us funding to appoint development staff for three years. Our partners whooped with delight at the Church contributing substantially to what in their minds was something of real significance for the area. Our European funding partner immediately doubled the Church's money and staff were appointed.

Things began to happen at once – the Royal Engineers agreed to rebuild our bridge and through the building a new partner was brought into the team – a local government contractor to the Navy who procured all the materials, paid for much of them, and seconded a Clerk-of-Works. Meanwhile another government contractor volunteered to give us an accommodation block surplus to their requirements to house our visitors, while still another offered to pay the cost of transporting it. It is amazing what a few phone-calls can achieve and how many people are keen to help. At the same time, Europe produced parties of young folk from Finland, Italy and the Czech Republic who wanted to come to spend the summer working with us. Placed into our hands was not only the way to build the 'Pilgrimage Pathway' we had dreamed of, but a youth programme which would enable us to create a community based on the banks of our loch. Our aim was unmistakably a missionary one: 'to introduce young folk from Scotland to faith in a setting which brings together young folk from all around the world.' Thanks to our partners that is now happening.

Many Partners in a Good Wedding!

Meanwhile another partnership was also bearing fruit. When I first arrived I was contacted by one of our local hotels who were spending several million pounds to create a new facility in our village. They were employing local people but it was going to be a struggle for them to make it work – wedding receptions were helping them greatly: would I consider celebrating weddings on a Sunday? I thought about it and then agreed.

In time Scottish Enterprise came to discuss our weddings with us. As economic developers they were interested in the fact that the overseas weddings we conducted each brought between £40,000 and £44,000 directly into the local economy. Could they help us to bring more weddings into the area? Now that was their question reflecting their needs and interests: it wasn't ours. But we turned their question around: was there anything they could do for us which might enable us to improve the wedding experience? The downside of coming to be married from Canada, for example, was that your friends who would normally take a day off work to attend your wedding wouldn't be able to do so, and then there were the aged relatives unable to travel. With this in mind, we persuaded Scottish Enterprise and Europe to fund a sophisticated television system enabling those back home to watch weddings live through the internet. This was a great example of partnership: each of the three partners got something different out of the exercise but together created something special:

- Scottish Enterprise wished to encourage more people to come to our village to be married so that business in our area would develop and prosper.
- European funders wished to be involved in a high technology project which would provide training and employment for a young person in a rural community.
- The Church wished to make the wedding experience as good as we could.

If only we had known. We got more than we could possibly have imagined, as our TV system then enabled us to broadcast our services, sharing them with the hundreds of visitors to our Centre, with the youngsters who worked on our pathway, and with all those who come to be married. Finally and recently it has enabled us to prepare and broadcast a weekly TV programme through the internet to all those who consider themselves to be part of our church family no matter where they live. It has opened up for us a missionary opportunity such as we had never imagined.

We could never have done it alone. We have felt the presence of the Holy Spirit at work – but we have also experienced the joy and the blessing of working with partners whose insights and hard work have enriched our lives.

Lessons Learned

- 01** Partnership is not about recruiting people to help us – it is about sharing in work together.
- 02** Entering into Partnership means relinquishing control, or rather giving our partners equal ownership of what we are doing together.
- 03** Partners bring skills, visions and energy which are different from and complementary to our own.
- 04** Partner organisations have aims to achieve which may be different from ours and the skill of partnership working is to enable all parties to benefit from the relationship.
- 05** Partners make huge commitments to shared arrangements, and we have a responsibility to them once we have entered into such an arrangement.
- 06** There are so many people and organisations 'out there' just waiting to be invited to share in our adventure and to welcome us into theirs.

Suggested Bible Reading

Acts 10: 9-16

Questions for Discussion

In the reading, Cornelius, a centurion in the Italian Regiment, felt called to send to Joppa for Simon. Without his own vision, Simon Peter would have felt it inappropriate to share his work with people from such a different background, even though they were both devout and generous in their worship of God. Are you challenged by concerns about sharing your ministry with partners from out-with your congregation? Does this passage have anything to say to you? In particular, what preconceptions and prejudices do you have about accepting other people as partners? Are these similar to the preconceptions and prejudices of Peter?

Do we have a need to be in control? Notice that as the passage progresses, wonderful events unfold as Simon sets off for Caesarea. Is there something here for you? What will partners enable you to achieve that you cannot achieve alone? How might working with partners unlock doors similar to those unlocked by Peter at Caesarea and later at Jerusalem as he talks of all that this vision meant to him?

I remember the huge impact as our congregation came to accept that there was a place for everyone within it, and I wonder what God was teaching me through those he chose to be my partners. What might those who enter into partnership with you learn from you? Does it matter if your partners have different motivations or is it sufficient that you have shared aims and can work together?