



The
United
Reformed
Church



They've asked me to be a
**member of the
welcome team**



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Introduction

This booklet has been written for those who have been asked to consider joining their church's welcome team. Although it might seem like a small role, it's a crucial one: providing a genuine and appropriate welcome to everyone who walks through the doors of the church is really important!

Some of those people may never have been to any church before, some may be first time visitors to your church. Quite simply, whoever walks through the door, the role of the welcome team is to make them feel welcome.

This booklet focuses on the core responsibilities, skills and abilities of welcome team members, as well as providing general information on the importance of getting that welcome right. Because it's such an important part of church life, the section 'Beyond the welcome team: becoming a welcoming church' on page 8 would be useful reading for everyone in the church – and it could even form the basis for small group – or even whole church – discussion – on the importance of welcome.

In the church I grew up in the main steward/chief welcomer was a volunteer, let's call him Bob. Bob always made me feel oh-so-welcome – a huge smile when he saw me (or anyone else), a friendly explanation if any pieces of paper were given out that I might not be familiar with, a little joke or a pertinent enquiry relating to something we'd spoken about the week before.

Week-by-week he welcomed me, gave me the information I needed and managed to convey that I was welcome, wanted and part of the church

community. Looking back, I'm sure that one of the reasons I kept going along to church was because Bob made me feel so accepted. The Church needs more people like Bob – and the good news is we can all learn to be like him!

Getting it wrong!

I used to run workshops on learning how to be a welcoming church and the part where we touched on poor welcoming experiences was always particularly lively! Almost every churchgoer will have a story or two to share of the time they visited a church and were made to feel less than welcome. Here's a small selection.

“Having attended the same church for almost 20 years, in the past ten years, three house moves have meant that my husband and I have visited lots of churches as we attempted to find a church to settle in. In the dozen or so churches we've visited our most common experience has been of a perfunctory welcome; the passing of a hymn book, maybe a notice sheet, and a casual wave through into the church to find a place to sit. This was even our experience in one church where we worshipped for around four years. I loved that church – the teaching and music and fellowship were great and we grew to feel a part of it. But the lack of welcome was more than off-putting, and is still with me, but I was committed to finding a church and managed to see past the underwhelming welcome. I wonder how many others couldn't – and never returned.”

“I was at a URC earlier this year and I walked in and was told that as a member of the baptism party, I could sit anywhere I liked. I said that I was visiting for the first time and had no idea about the four baptisms taking place!”

As in the example above, these stories can be amusing – but it's never amusing to feel unwelcome in church; the repercussions of receiving a poor welcome include the possibility of someone being hurt and not

returning to church and/or even moving away from God. And sometimes the consequence of not being welcoming can be more far reaching, as the story below shows.

“A Methodist church was sharing its building with a Pentecostal church, and both held their services at the same time. Before the service started, a black family came into the church and were told by both the welcome team and then the minister, who was overheard on the microphone, that the church they wanted was at the back of the building. “But why?” asked a member of the family, “... we’re Methodists!”

“The family was so appalled that they reported it to the local newspaper – which ran the story. As well as issuing a formal apology, the church, minister and welcome team undertook training on welcoming everyone.”



How to get it right!

“After a fairly depressing trawl of several churches in our new home town, we decided to try a small church of a denomination new to us both. The welcome was genuine, and quite astonishing in its warmth – smiles and nods from almost every member of the congregation during the service and the same over coffee.”

"We felt that our presence was a blessing to them; that they were interested in us, wanted to get to know us, were delighted we were there. There is plenty about the church that we'd like to change – isn't there always! – but we've stayed and are completely settled there – and it's only because of that first amazing welcome that we returned for a second week ..."

Twelve top tips for giving a warm welcome

The best welcomers have a range of characteristics – innate or learnt – which ensure that everyone who comes through the church door receives a genuine and appropriate welcome.

- Smile and personally greet everyone – be interested in them.
- Don't get so caught up in a conversation with a friend that you ignore others entering the church.
- Learn names and use them.
- If you don't recognise someone ask if they're here for the first time. And respond appropriately – the needs of someone coming to church (any church) as a 'seeker' will be very different from those of an established Christian family recently moved into the area. Be sensitive to the needs of those who walk through the door – there's a fine line between being friendly and being intrusive. If in doubt err on the side of caution – no one likes to feel interrogated, but a warm smile is always appreciated.
- Hand everyone any worship books and any other papers needed for the service. If everything is on screens explain that to those you have already discovered are at the church for the first time.
- Never, ever, assume anything. Remember the story of the black family being redirected to the Pentecostal church? Don't let that be you. Be warm, welcoming and listen to everyone, especially to those whom you don't know.
- Remember that those *you* don't know might have been to your church before. You might not have been on duty or been away. So, don't assume that a new face is a first-time visitor.

- If you can't answer a question find someone who can. Make sure the enquirer has all their questions answered.
- If parents/carers with babies and/or very young children come to church for the first time, let them know where the crèche is, as well as the location of the toilets and nappy changing area. Make sure they feel their children are welcome in church too!
- Welcome latecomers – some people will be late, it's part of life. Reserve some seats towards the back of the church, so any latecomers don't have to walk down the length of the church to the only empty seats at the far side of a front pew. Minimise disruption to the service and embarrassment. Imagine if that were you. You'd feel so conscious of being late that you might never go back to that church. Consider displaying **this poster** both in the entrance area and just by the welcome desk.
- Ensure that the church has some reserved spaces for any wheelchair users and their companions. And, if your church has a hearing loop, then it's worth having a clear notice about this near the church entrance/welcome table, so anyone with a hearing aid knows where to sit.
- At the end of the service keep an eye out for anyone who is alone, and make sure that someone is available to chat with them – introducing them to someone if you are not free to chat yourself.



What's involved in the role?

While churches will differ in the detail of the role, in most churches the welcome team has distinct tasks to do before, immediately before/ during, and after the service. Have a chat with someone already on the welcome team to find out exactly what the role involves in your church – the tasks are likely to include most of the following:

- Before the service starts: arrive at church before the service starts (you'll be guided as to how early you need to be there), get the worship books/notice sheets etc ready; tidy up the 'welcome desk area', reserve a couple of pews at the back of the church for any latecomers, and perhaps check in with the minister/service leader to see if there is anything specific you need to know.
- As the congregation arrives: say a friendly and sincere hello to all those entering the church, give out the worship books, notice sheets and any other necessary papers etc; keep an eye out for anyone you haven't seen before (remembering not to assume they've never been before) and be ready to answer any questions (like 'is there a creche?' or 'what time does the service finish?')
- After the service: as people leave/make their way to the refreshments area you'll be saying goodbye and collecting up the worship books and returning them to the bookshelf. Be aware that it's at this time that any newcomers might be feeling particularly self-conscious and alone – so, it's really helpful if there is at least one member of the welcome team who is available to follow up newcomers, chatting with them over coffee and/or introducing them to one or two other people who can answer any questions and perhaps tell them about midweek church activities.

'... say a friendly and sincere hello to all those entering the church'

Beyond the welcome team: becoming a welcoming church

The art and practice of being a welcoming and inclusive church is at the very heart of Christianity. Being a welcoming and inclusive church is the responsibility of the whole church – it's not use the welcome team giving an amazing welcome as soon as a visitor steps through the front door if everyone else ignores newcomers because 'it's not their job!' If no one talks to a first-time visitor they're unlikely to come back. Would you?

'A Bishop and his wife were returning from holiday and, on their Sunday morning drive from the airport decided to attend a service at a church in their Diocese that was not their regular place of worship. They were a little late and were quickly ushered into the church; they slid into a pew towards the back of the church only to have the person in front of them turn around to them and tell that they couldn't sit there as it was the seat where Mrs Such and Such always sat. Before the Bishop had a chance to say anything, the speaker raised their eyes and then, recognising the visitors, gasped in horror "Oh my God, it's the Bishop!"¹

'An elderly lady, observing me and my husband laughing and chatting over coffee (because no one else was talking to us!) came over and asked if she could have a word with me ... and then, when we were out of earshot of my husband, told me to "stop flirting with that man; hadn't I noticed his wedding ring?" I replied that I was indeed aware he was married – mainly because he was married to me!

'I'd been attending this church for about six months. It was pretty small – maybe about 35 people attending its Sunday morning service – and I was settling in well. One Sunday a man I'd spoken to

¹ This story is paraphrased from one I read years ago – perhaps from *Everybody Welcome* – Church House Publishing



several times, asked me if I was new. It was such a small thing but I remember feeling really hurt – as if I was invisible – a person of no consequence.”

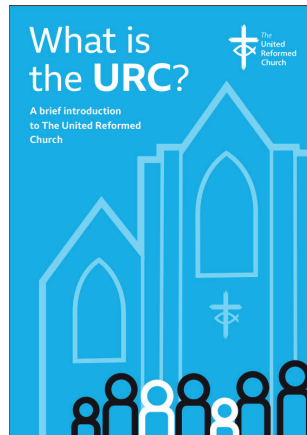
If anything similar has happened in your church (and it almost certainly has!) then you might like to consider running some type of ‘Offering a genuine welcome’ workshop or discussion at Church Meeting/Elders Meeting. It’s helpful for the church to take the time to think through what it’s doing and to consider if there are changes it could make to improve the welcome it gives.

Going further

Once a church starts to really look at its welcome, it can be hard to know when to stop – it touches on so many areas of what the Church is and does. If you do decide to embark upon a wider discussion we’d recommend covering/considering the following:

- Welcome packs – it can be as simple as a leaflet outlining basic information about the church including service times, children’s and youth groups, midweek activities, how to get involved and a few words on the church’s vision and values. If your church

has voted to host marriages of same-sex couples mention it in the welcome pack and on the notice board. The **What is the URC** leaflet, available as a free download from the URC website, or from the **URC shop** is a useful addition to the welcome table.



- As is information on Christianity – it's worth checking out what's available in the **Church Resources** section of the URC website.
- A notice board – really useful for visitors and members alike. Just make sure it's kept up-to date and says what the church offers, not just Karate lessons or slimming clubs!
- Prepare to welcome everyone – Church is a place where everyone should feel welcome. **Coventry Cathedral's welcome** is beautiful; if it is true for your church (and we really hope it is!) you may like to display it on your website, notice board, notice sheet or poster (being sure to attribute its source).
- You may like to further explore how you could best offer a welcome to **children and young people**. For example, if your church has a lively children and youth contingent you should consider having some younger people on the welcome team. You should also consider those with physical disabilities as well as those with mental health problems. The **Liveability website** has good information on both of the latter.
- Having information available, not only about church activities but about meeting with Jesus. All church members, but perhaps particularly those on welcome teams, should be confident in explaining the basics of the Christian faith to anyone who asks. The short 'What we believe' section on page three of **What is the URC** leaflet is a great starting place – if all URC welcomers could clearly paraphrase this they'd be doing really well! Anyone can order printed leaflets for free from the URC Bookshop, www.urchop.co.uk.

- Asking ‘what does your building communicate?’ Is it clean and tidy? Is up-to-date and relevant information easily available? What about the outside areas? Scruffy overgrown entrances are both off-putting and easy to improve. Take a look at the outside of your church and ask yourself, ‘Does it say “Welcome?”’
- Thinking about how newcomers will follow the service. For those new to church, navigating a service can be tricky – with new unfamiliar customs and vocabulary. Ensure the minister/leader explains what’s going on, when to join in, and where/how to look up Bible passages.

And finally

Don’t forget you’ve been approached about the role because someone has seen characteristics in you that make you suited for the role. Enjoy it! **It’s a great way to serve the church** and, unlike many roles, is open to everyone, whatever their age, or background.

Further reading

In the past ten or so, years the Church seems to have woken up to the importance of welcome – and the stark realisation that not all churches are as welcoming as they could be. As a result, there are a good selection of books and courses available.

Recommendations include:

- **Everybody Welcome** – from the Church of England. As well as the book, a DVD, and leaders manual are also available.
- **6 do’s and don’ts for welcoming church guests** – there is plenty of food for thought in this article from the American magazine *Christianity Today*.
- **First Impressions Count** – is a free downloadable workshop from the Methodist Church. Designed to help churches reflect on the welcome that a visitor experiences when they first walk into a church, this 2½ hour workshop is divided into three sessions.

This is one in a series of booklets designed to give information to those who have been asked to consider taking on a role in the United Reformed Church.

The booklets can be read and downloaded at www.urc.org.uk/ask



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