

TORONTO UNITED CHURCH COUNCIL

Connecting Resources with Ministry

Church Development Discussion Papers

TITLE: Clarity or Clutter?

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PAPER: 2011-30

REVIEW DATE: February 2011

We may say many things about our church buildings. But have we ever asked what our church buildings say about us to a visitor? What would happen if we put ourselves in the shoes of a visitor to our church and began to look around? What would we notice as a visitor that we overlook week after week as a member? What would we imagine about the people who gather here, how would we interpret what we see? Would it be evidence of love or lack of care?

We say: This church welcomes you!

Our site says: "This congregation does not necessarily welcome you!" The peeling paint and the missing "e" on the "Visitors Welcome" sign put a question mark at the end of the sign. Uncut grass, unshoveled snow, trash collecting in the corners, locked doors with no direction to an open entrance, these things say, "This place may have closed down a few months ago or may not even have an active congregation."

Imagine: A site that says to a visitor or stranger who happens by, "This is a place of life and care. It is a pleasant place and we hope you will recognize that preparations have been made to welcome you: the grounds are raked, the winter grime has been removed from our welcome sign, the parking lot is swept, the entry is clearly marked and well lighted, the flower beds are planted. There are people here who care – come in!"

We say: Let the doors of this place be open to all people.

Our entrance area (narthex) says: We don't really expect people to come through here. This is where we keep the old bulletins, broken umbrellas, unmatched gloves, "no parking" signs for funerals, brooms, and snow shovels.

Imagine: A clean, open, cheerful entrance (narthex) that makes a good first impression. It contains practical things like a coat rack, directional signs, and provision for security *without shutting people out*. It also has displays that positively present the congregation to visitors, like an exhibit of enlarged colour photos from a recent congregational event. It reinforces the hospitable message which the site has given, "We have been expecting you!"

We say: Fellowship forms us into community.

Our Church Hall says: Those tables stacked in the corner will be used next month. The boxes scattered along the wall are full of left over items from last summer's bazaar. Someone must have forgotten to put the mop and bucket away. The dirty coffee cups are from last Sunday. Just pretend this is an attractive room.

Imagine: An area spacious enough to accommodate the coffee crowd from the Sunday service and intimate enough to encourage a meaningful conversation among a few. The room and the serving tables have been arranged with the same care one would take when entertaining at home. There is good lighting and ventilation. There are signs of congregational life, such as a bulletin board that displays current information.

We say: We are a church that takes education seriously.

Our classrooms say: Children learn best in small, rigid, cluttered rooms that do not allow for any activity other than sitting in a chair at a table with five other people. The resources required are: manila paper, magic markers, crayons, and for smaller children a few broken toys. A small group of adults learns best when meeting in a vacuous Church Hall.

Imagine: Flexible rooms that can adjust to the number of people using them and that can adapt to the various styles of teaching and group work which have been proven to be helpful in developing faith. Rooms equipped with up-to-date educational resources and adequate storage.

We say: In our church we "behold the order and beauty of things heavenly".

Our worship space says: If it has a religious symbol on it, bring it in here, find a place for it, and leave it forever. We can always squeeze another memorial into an already crowded space. You just can't have too many holy things. If it's appropriate one Sunday a year, leave it there all year round.

Imagine: A space that is carefully arranged to allow for openness, freedom of movement, and accessibility to all. A space where less important objects do not overshadow the basic symbols, but sit quietly and functionally in place, and yet occasionally are removed to make *room for other things which are brought in temporarily because of a special season or feast.*

One long term result from this kind of imagining could be that we get our thinking as straightened out as our sites and buildings. We might discover just what we're trying to make happen in these spaces and clean up our mixed messages.

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