

## **Improving the Signs in and Around Your Church**

### **Introduction**

The day I arrived to interview at the church where I currently am the priest, I was armed with a handy software program that pinpointed exactly where the church would be. As I turned left at an intersection, I knew the church would be on my right hand side. I turned, and the church wasn't there! I doubled back, tried again and once again could not locate the church. On the third try, I just managed to catch a small, black sign with letters about one inch high. As priest, one of the first things I did was to get the parish to re-think the signs they had out front. Given the size of the physical plant, which was large, and the speed of the traffic passing the church, we chose a large, highly visible sign to replace the old one.

Here are some things to consider.

### **Pretend That You Have Just Arrived in Town**

It may be helpful to take a group in your parish and physically walk around the outside of the building. How fast is the traffic moving? The original sign my church had would have worked well on a city street where people walked or drove slowly. However, if cars are traveling 40-50 m.p.h., the letters on the sign need to be big enough to be seen at that rate of speed. Look at your current signs. Are the signs hidden by branches of trees? How are the sight angles as people approach the church? Are your current signs in good condition or are they in need of maintenance, conveying a subtle negative message to newcomers? Many churches have main entrances in one place and parking lots that are in a different place altogether, such as in the back of the building or across the street. Do the signs get people where you want them to go? Once inside the building can visitors easily locate bathrooms, the sanctuary and Sunday School classrooms? Episcopal churches may want to consider posting "The Episcopal Church Welcomes You" signs, as well as new signs that state, "Member of the Worldwide Anglican Communion"

### **Think About What You Want to Achieve**

There are a wide variety of options in choosing signs. Think carefully about the experience people will have as they view your signs. For outside signs, it is beneficial to test out the best location. You might even bring out a "dummy" sign for experiments.

Be certain the signs will be *visible* and *legible*. One church I pass going home is very good about creating attractive signs that advertise their activities, but I can never read the signs from my car because the lettering is so small! Andy Weeks, in his book, Welcome, recommends letters that are three inches high. If traffic passes at a high rate of speed, you might have even bigger letters. Also, consider what information you want on your signs. Service times and the church phone number are important. If you have a website with a good domain name, including that might direct people to find you on the web. Your web page can contain much more information. Another issue is whether or not you would like single-sided or double-sided signs. If you have a series of signs, you might choose a logo or color scheme to increase visibility. You may want to light your signs at night. Be aware of proportion as well. Bigger churches should have big signs, but a small church with a huge sign might not fit.

### **Signs That Change**

Churches that do not demonstrate to the community that they are alive soon become perceived as being “dead”. One way to show change is with signs that change. Moveable letters are one way to advertise important events or convey a message to the community. You could experiment with banners or temporary signs. Our church invented a sign that allowed for cheap, banner-like signs to be placed upon it. As you drive around your town or city, look for the good signs that catch your eye. You will get ideas from the good signs you observe.

### **Inside the Church**

Keep in mind that many people experience some degree of anxiety in their first visit to a church. Don't make it worse by forcing them to search for the bathrooms or the nursery! Posting clear, visible signs will give them more confidence and allow them to feel at home in your church. Again it is valuable to walk into the church with a group, seeking the perspective of brand new visitors to your church. You know your church building well, but you may be surprised at how confusing it is to newcomers.

### **Trust the Professionals**

Are professionally done, quality signs expensive? Absolutely not, if you look at the big picture. If your church spends, for example, \$3,000 on a sign, and it reaches just two or three families that become members of your church, the sign pays for itself in one

year. My experience is that quality signs are very cost effective. Would you go to a store that had a sign that consisted of spray paint on plywood? In the same way, quality signs attract people to visit your church. Once you have a good idea of what you would like to convey, let the professionals do their work. In my experience, allowing the sign maker to provide input and advice has been highly beneficial. Often, the "pros" will have good ideas based upon their much wider range of experience. Let them help you to make your signs the best they can be.

The Rev. David Keill