

HELPING PEOPLE TO STEP OVER THE THRESHOLD

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For many people it takes real guts to enter a Christian church – just like it would take real guts on my part to enter a betting shop. Just as the latter is an alien place for me, so too the former for others. So, how do we help people to step over the threshold of our churches? By developing our facilities in such a way that our churches become warm, inviting places. Some three or four years ago we radically redeveloped our dark somewhat forbidding Edwardian building and now have a wonderful suite of premises which are a delight to visit. Sadly they didn't please one former member who had left the church in protest over our decision to redevelop: "This isn't a church", she said, on entering our carpeted Friendship Centre, "this is more like a hotel!" What, however, she took for criticism, we took as a compliment, because we now see ourselves as being in the hospitality business. We want to be a place where people are made to feel welcome. We have sought to make every part of our building accessible – and by this I don't mean that it is disability-friendly (although it is), but that it is visitor-friendly. We deliberately do not call the space where we worship 'the sanctuary' – for such a term creates unnecessary barriers. Instead we have deliberately adopted a neutral term for the space in which we can seat up to 450 people. We call it 'the meeting place' – yes, on a Sunday it is the place where we meet with God, but it is also the place where we meet with one another. In turn it is also the place which the community love to use for their purposes – for concerts and exhibitions, lectures and presentations, book evenings and university exams. However, although the term may be neutral, the space itself is not totally neutral – along with a large wooden cross, there are two massive 'jewelled' tapestries made by the firm which created the enthronement robes for the former Archbishop of Canterbury which proclaim the words of Jesus: "I am the resurrection and the life". In addition to hiring out our meeting place, as also our halls and seminar rooms, we run a small café, four days a week. As a result on average in any given week over 1000 non-church people go through our premises – and often many more. And of course what is happening is that over the course of the year 1000s upon 1000s of people in our community are stepping over the threshold of our church. They may not actually be coming to 'church', and yet they are becoming familiar with our church buildings. Church in this sense is no longer an alien place. Needless to say, it took a good deal of sacrificial giving to make all this possible. But more important, it took a change of mind-set on the part of church members. This new mind-set involves the recognition that first and foremost we don't exist for ourselves – we exist for others.