



How to ...

Establish a 'Ministry of Absence'

A 'ministry of absence' is a way of referring to the different ways your church can minister to its community, and to visitors, when no people from the church are present. This may be particularly relevant in a more rural context, especially one where the church is normally left unlocked and open for people to visit when they would like to, however all churches might find it helpful to consider the opportunities a 'Ministry of Absence' presents.

Getting it right

The key to many of the following ideas and suggestions is clear, attractive signage, leaflets and communication. A good website which invites people to come and participate in the opportunities you are providing can also be important.

(If you need suggestions for suppliers you could start by trying: [Saxoprint](#), [Digital Printing](#), [SignFirm](#), [CPO](#) or [ChurchPages](#))

Please be aware of the potential need for faculty permission in order to implement some of these ideas. See our guide: [How to...work out if you need a faculty](#).

Some repair and maintenance works can be done without a faculty or consultation, and others simply require the Archdeacon to confirm in writing that a faculty is not needed. These works are defined in the Faculty Jurisdiction Rules: List A covers works that may be undertaken without the need for consultation, and List B covers works that may be undertaken without a faculty subject to consultation (i.e. an Archdeacon's written permission).

It may also be wise for the PCC to review the security and monitoring arrangements if you are more actively encouraging people to come to the church when no-one is present.

Some Ideas to get you thinking...

Providing refreshment

Is your church on a walking route? If so, refreshments can be provided to weary travellers as a hospitality outreach.

You could provide a tap for the refill of water bottles. (Fit it with a push tap if you are worried about a screw tap being left on). Register your refill station with www.refill.org.uk so people can find it online.

To take things further you could provide a kettle, tea bags, coffee, sugar sachets, UHT milk portions and individually wrapped biscuits. (Kettles can be hard wired into the electrics and attached via a simple chain if you are concerned about it being removed.)

Signage is key to ensure people use and don't abuse the offer and leave the facilities clean and tidy after use, ready for the next visitors.

Pilgrimage Walks

Provide a downloadable walking guide on your website which begins and ends at the church. Different distance walking routes could be suggested taking walkers to some local landmarks.

Take this idea further by suggesting that people stop at various designated points on the route and provide them with an activity, reflection or prayer to consider at each stop. For shorter walks you could provide a list of things for children to find during the walk, or a set of questions to answer.

The story of the church

The history of your church and the community that has worshipped there will speak volumes to visitors about the worshipping life of the church, the faithfulness of the congregation and the impact the church has had and is having in the parish and beyond.

The 'story' could be told using display boards, leaflets or a guide book. Remember to include stories of real people who have and do worship at the church as well as information about points of interest within the church.

Think about the 'story' you want to tell, the impact you want it to have and what lasting impression you want to leave people with, selecting content accordingly.

Children's Trail

A Children's trail is a leaflet that families can pick up on entering the church which involves activities for children to do, or things for them to find whilst visiting the church. This could be a set of things to find and tick off (the font, a choir stall, the organ, the altar...) or a set of questions to answer (how many angels are in the stained glass window, how many pews are there, who was the first vicar of the church...)

The best way to research the production of one of these is to visit a local National Trust property with children and see how well produced their activities for children are.

Prayer Stations

Using resources from 24-7 Prayer, or Thy Kingdom Come, a single, or multiple prayer stations could be created in the church. These could be changed each month, or with the seasons and provide people with something to read and something to interact with as a stimulus to prayer.

Exhibitions

Could the work of a local photographer or artist be displayed in the church, perhaps produced to a theme linked to a season of the church. A display of pictures on a theme such as 'Hope' created by the local school with which you are linked could also be displayed and parents invited to come and view them.

Take this idea further by including a question, quote or reflection for people to think about as they look at each piece.

Churchyards

Churchyards are used by many different people, from mourners remembering loved ones, to those enjoying a peaceful few moments. Could your churchyard provide people with different places to sit, with different moments to reflect and with different experiences to enjoy and participate in?

Boards with prayers on could be featured in different spaces within your churchyard, or a board with a prayer which changes for the season could be used.

A labyrinth could be created which guides people on a spiritual reflection journey. This could be produced for a short period of time and people invited to come and experience it for that week/month/season. <http://www.pilgrimpaths.co.uk/page19.html>

Leaflets which inform people about what can be found in your churchyard, and what opportunities for peaceful reflection exist could be made available in a clear prospect 'menu' leaflet holder at the entrance to the churchyard, always available and protected from the weather conditions.

Audio Listening Station

Short pieces of audio about your church or stories from worshippers could be recorded, similar

to the [Radio4 Listening Project](#). Alternatively, you could record a simple reflection or set of prayers.

These could then be loaded onto listening station (as you might find in a museum), and people can be invited to sit and listen using the attached headphones. Solar powered versions are also available and could be used in a churchyard.

Remote 3D tours

Using new technology Wyvern 3D (<http://wyvern3d.co.uk>) can come and create a 3D digital map of your church. Visitors to your website can then 'enter' virtually into your church and have a look around. You can add information 'pop-ups' to this providing additional information about places within your church, or use this feature to display prayers or reflections to those who are exploring your church in this way.

This same digital map will also enable people to visit your church using a virtual reality headset!

Get Digital

The TableTalk app from the [Ugly Ducking Company](#) contains a whole set of question cards to encourage enquirers to think about things of faith. This app could be loaded onto a tablet, secured in a tablet holder and available for people to interact with.

Tablets secured to a work surface or wall could also be used to display information, show videos or provide audio or video resources enabling people to explore the church or the Christian faith.

Website: Pre-Visit

Make sure your website contains an information page for those who may be considering visiting the church. Provide information about parking, open hours and teaser information about what to expect that will draw people in to coming and exploring the church and the worshipping community that exists there.

Website: During Visit

You can also develop a webpage or series of webpages that are aimed at those who are visiting the church. A sign on entry that directs people to visit www.xyzchurch.com/visitingnow would encourage people to use their smartphone to access that page whilst they are in the church.

This webpage could display additional information about the church, enable people to 'check-in' to Facebook or share their visit on Twitter, and provide details about the Christians that worship in the church.

If installing information display board is not appropriate for your context, then all the information you *would* have put on a board, can be put on a webpage for people to view on their smartphones as they move around the church.

Links to the webpage(s) could also be provided around the church using QR codes to be scanned by a smartphone, or by passive NFC tags which can be detected by more modern smartphones.

Opportunities to donate

Visitors may be open to making a donation when visiting your church, especially if they have enjoyed the hospitality or opportunities you have provided them with during their visit. Don't be afraid to invite people to give, but make sure you do so in a way and with language which is positive, inviting and optional, not demanding, desperate or pushy.

A simple, locked donation box can be provided, or you can use <https://thyngs.net/> for cashless donations – people simply scan a QR code with their smartphone and make a secure donation in just three taps.

Know the impact

If you're interested in knowing the impact of this ministry, then you could explore a few options:

- 1) If you make 100 leaflets available and you count how many are left at the end of each month, then you can know approximately how many people have used them.
- 2) You could choose to install an in/out counter as some shops do, to automatically count how many people have come through the door. These are relatively inexpensive and give you good information about peak times of day and days of the week for visitors visiting your church.
Armed with this information you could choose to have welcomers available at those popular times of the day/week if people were available.
- 3) You could invite feedback from visitors, this could be done through; comments cards and a box, a visitor's book, asking people to fill in a form on your website, inviting people to tweet their feedback or suggesting people could leave TripAdvisor, Google or Facebook Place feedback.

Support

Diocese of Bristol

If you would like to explore ideas for developing a 'ministry of absence' in your church, then please contact Chris Priddy; Head of Parish and External Relations, who would be happy to visit your church and guide you through different options relevant to your context.

chris.priddy@bristoldiocese.org

Germinate: Arthur Rank Centre help rural communities flourish by working alongside local churches across the UK. Their guide for Rural Church Buildings: How to utilise and look after them is excellent and available on their website: <https://germinate.net/church-life/rural-church-buildings-resource-2018/7-getting-the-most-out-of-your-church-building-s/>

The Churches Visitor & Tourism Association is a membership organisation that exists to promote best practice in welcoming visitors to places of worship. Their website contains many resources and points of advice for supporting churches to develop tourism potential and visitor experiences. <http://cvta.org.uk/>

The Churches Conservation Trust Regeneration Task Force has developed several major 'new use' projects for churches. Based on this experience, they have also developed a business approach to structure and guide project development. They have identified 5 key stages which aim to simplify the process and help take projects forward in a logical way.
www.visitchurches.org.uk/what-we-do/regeneration-and-communities.html