

## Article for The Church Times

**By Martin Palmer, author of “Sacred Land” published by Piatkus from which much of this information has been taken.**

### Writing a guide to the outside of your Church

Twenty years ago it was a common pleasure in Britain to find a little church in the countryside, or between urban buildings, and push open the door and step inside. Today, however, more and more churches are staying locked, except during service times, for fear of theft or vandalism.

Many people still share a love of visiting churches but finding a church closed – often without information on where a key can be obtained – can be frustrating and disappointing. Yet even if you cannot go in, there are some extraordinary stories, insights into Christian faith, and knowledge about the natural world that our buildings tell you if you know how to read the clues.

This article suggests how to produce a guide to the outside of the church – perhaps this can be printed and available in the open porch, or perhaps mounted on display boards, or perhaps also available as QR coded information and on a website for people with smartphones – which mean visitors goes away having learnt something, having had an adventure and perhaps wanting to return when the next service is on.

#### **1. The name of the church**

The old names of our churches had much more significance than just remembering a nice saint. For example, if you are a St. Michael church you are probably on a hill and possibly to the north of some major town, city or old religious site, like a monastery. In Christian legend St. Michael is the archangel who threw Satan out of Heaven and who will fight Satan again in the Last Battle at the end of Time. North is the Christian direction of evil and danger because in the Bible invasions always came from the north. So it made sense for a St. Michael’s church to be to the north, protecting the people below. Sometimes it is not just the church.

If your church is named after a local saint – perhaps Cuthbert, David, Swithin or Petroc – then start the guide by outlining the basic story and if there is a particular relationship of the saint to the church or its setting, tell people what to look for – a holy well, a river used for baptism and so forth.

If you are named after St. Mary, or St. Peter find out why. Often St. Mary is linked to markets, as she was seen as a protector against corruption and falsehood. St. Peter opens the door to Paradise in Christian legend and therefore is often associated with death. In Christian tradition, the East is the direction of both Eden and Paradise, and St Peter’s churches are often to the

East. Tell the story so that right from the beginning people have a sense of “Oh I see.”

2. Look at the physical setting of the church. Usually it is on a prominent piece of land. Why? Is it on a hill? (often St Michael or St Catherine). Was it near water for baptism (St John the Baptist, perhaps). Was it beside the castle and part of the feudal worldview? Was it built by a long gone monastery to be the people’s church, standing close to the monks’ church? Was it built by a 19<sup>th</sup> century industrialist or philanthropist as part of town planning?
3. Now point out the significance of the directions. Any church older than the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century will almost certainly be orientated to the East, so the church runs from the West Door to the East window. Some churches are oriented to the rising sun at the equinoxes, and others are orientated to sunrise on the saint’s day.

Point out that the north side was the side of devil. Hence all the oldest burials will be on the south side – the holy side. Only in the past 150 years or so have we buried on the north. See if people can see the two porches or doorways into the church. The usual entrance is the south porch. But all medieval churches had a north door so that when a child was baptised the devil could flee to his own side. Many such doors still exist or their outline can be spotted on the north wall.

The Eastern end of the churchyard was where the clergy were traditionally buried and still to this day few burials will be there.

4. What shape is the churchyard? If it is more circular than square then it probably predates the Norman invasion and may have a Celtic or early Anglo-Saxon link, as this was their design style and symbolised the Circle of God’s love and protection.
5. Does the church itself make the shape of the cross on the ground? Is there the remains of a preaching cross? Is there a clearly visible cross anywhere (don’t include tombstones)? If so say why the cross is so important in Christian faith. It will be news to many.
6. Point out that the church will probably look a little like a ship. It will have the tower or spire as the mast and the church narrowing down to the East end like a prow. Churches were designed to remind you of a ship, and to represent the ship of faith which will carry you through the troubles of this world to the joys of the next. That is why the central aisle of a church was called the nave: from the same word as “navy”.
7. Is the churchyard a Living Churchyard? Is it maintained in such a way as to encourage wildlife and flowers? Or is it treated like a suburban garden and

- kept so tidy with gravestones stacked that it has become a desert for wildflowers and wild animals? A Living Churchyard can tell so many stories of how we relate to the rest of nature, in what has always been called God's Acre. You could include pictures of the butterflies and stories of the bats and bees which are pollinators for so many flowers and fruits in the neighbourhood.
8. Is there an ancient yew tree? Yews are the oldest living things in Britain, and at the Millennium over 10,000 saplings, grown from the 200 or so yew trees alive when Christ was born were distributed to churches throughout the country. Ancient yews tell us this was probably a sacred place before the coming of Christianity.
  9. Gargoyles are a key feature on the outside of many churches. They were part of the drainage system making sure water didn't run down the walls. Many are of ferocious and hideous design. Why? Because the Church was saying these disturbing elements have no power over us any longer. The story that these extraordinary carvings tell is that even these strange beasts have been tamed by Christ and therefore should not be feared. Perhaps point to how often the phrase "fear not" appears in the Nativity story.
  10. When you walk around the church go with the sun, and explain why. Clockwise has been the sacred direction around holy places for millennia in the West. We walk the pattern of birth to death and then resurrection as the sun reminds us with the sunrise and sunset every day.
  11. Start with the tower. Often there will be empty saints' niches. Beautifully carved places where before the Reformation a saint's statue would have stood. Use this as a way to discuss the impact of the Reformation and perhaps speculate which saint would have been where – the patron saint for example, or Mary or Christ.
  12. Look for where windows once were, or doors, or even whole side chapels. A simple technique for dating is if the window or door is narrow and has a small arch over it, it is Saxon or Norman because glass was so rare so the windows were small. A larger arch with a point at the top will be from the 13<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. An arch which sharply arches up to a point will be from the 14<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. A squared top will be Tudor and on into the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Thereafter the builders take one of these styles and reinvent them.
  13. Look for odds and ends such as an old sundial carved into the south side usually with a hole for the stick and then a circle or semi-circle with lines marking the set prayers of the Medieval Church. Look for pilgrim crosses showing that this was on a pilgrimage route. Perhaps these were even carved with daggers with small roundels at the ends of each line of the cross. Look

for 18<sup>th</sup> century graffiti – perhaps from bored servants waiting for their masters and mistresses to come out.

14. Going clockwise from beside the tower you will come to the south side and the porch. Explain that porch comes from the same Latin root as port. That this is where we go to set off on the adventure of faith, the journey through life and beyond. Make this an invitation to the reader visitor to consider coming in when the church is open or as a place to reflect on how faith can help us to make sense and survive the storms and also the wonders and joys of our lives.
15. Create somewhere where prayers can be left – a notice board, a post box – so that people feel they can ask for prayers or just say things that trouble them or celebrate joyful events. Then bring these to your service when you next open the doors.
16. The inside of the church. Can you tell people what the inside looks like? Show pictures?
17. The neighbourhood: Perhaps there is something that visitors can see nearby that will continue their journey – another fascinating church, an ancient pilgrimage pub, a historical site, an alley-way where monks once walked.
18. A place to pray. Some people have come to learn about the history of your church, others to have a solitary moment and to pray. Is there anywhere that could be a little prayer garden with a bench and a sense of stillness? Or is there another church, a short while away, which is still open, to which you can direct them with a map.
19. **The notice board.**  
So many church notice boards make you feel the church is not just shut but dead. Old notices of events long gone; peeling paint; the name of the last vicar painted out but nothing new put in its place. These all tell a story of failure and irrelevance. So finish by looking at what your notice board says about who you are; what you do and why. Make it bright and attractive – perhaps work with your local church school to design it. Make sure you say the name of the church; when it was built; what you are most proud of in terms of its history or contemporary role and where more information can be found – a website for example.