

Many schools like pupils to visit a local church as part of their curriculum (often religious education), and to forge positive relationships with communities in the neighbourhood. No assumptions can be made about the visitors' faith commitments – although you may discover that pupils and staff may come from families following faith traditions. When school groups visit churches, it is appreciated if church members talk about the life of the church and Jesus' message, in a manner that respects the visitors' integrity, allowing them to make responses in ways that are appropriate to them. This means being thoughtful about the kind of language that you use, and the activities in which pupils are invited to participate, as well as statements made about different faiths.

Hosting a school event in your church is a wonderful opportunity for developing a new, or already established, relationship with a nearby school. It is a chance to show a warm welcome and loving hospitality to staff, pupils, and even parent helpers. It is possible that your visitors may never have been inside a church before or have met people who follow Jesus. The impression that they gain, whilst visiting your church, of church and Christians, as well as of Jesus and his followers may have a lasting effect – either positively or negatively. You are part of this. You have a very important part to play in enabling your guests to feel welcome and at ease in the church, by the way, that you receive them and the way that you direct them. When the church is a special place to us, and we have expectations about how people act when inside it, we can become uncomfortable when others do not behave in the way we expect, but guests in our church will only discover what we expect if we tell them.

So, what does it look like to offer hospitality to school groups, particularly when many of these guests are people previously unknown to us? Here are a few pointers.

- Ensure that there is nothing that younger guests may trip over.
- Be ready to greet the guests as they arrive.
- Smile, and look pleased to see them.
- Show the guests where to put their coats/bags.
- Direct guests to where you would like them to assemble at the start.
- Explain briefly that your church is a special place for the people who come to worship here and that, when moving around the building, people normally walk and, when talking, they use normal speaking level voices.
- Point out to your guests that they will be specifically invited to touch/hold some items, but not everything in the church.
- If it is practical, offer your guests, at some point, some refreshment. Bearing in mind that this can be a tricky area in the light of allergies and healthy eating stipulations etc, is it possible to provide squash (or water) and biscuits (or fruit)? Hosts often check out dietary requirements in advance of guests visiting their homes. If you have the capacity to do so, you might want to contact the school ahead of time to see if there is anything of which you might need to be aware. The school could advise about whether there pupils who might not wish to eat, for example, Muslim pupils who are choosing to fast during the month of Ramadan.

OTHER THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

Could you...

- Pray for the pupils and the teachers before they come – and after they leave?
- Thank the guests from school for coming?
- Give them something to take away as a thank you for visiting?
- Follow up the visit with a letter to the school thanking them for visiting – and pointing out any particular highlights of their visit for you?
- Invite this group to any future events?

USE OF LANGUAGE

Enabling the guests to feel comfortable with the language used means, for the most part, avoiding using the pronoun 'we', and statements assuming that people in the school group believe and do the same things as the hosts. It is far easier to depersonalise statements and talk about what 'Christians believe' or 'people in this/our church'. Eg 'Christians believe that Jesus lived amongst people on earth and taught them how to worship God'; (rather than 'we believe') 'People in our church give money to support a school in Africa' (rather than 'we give') At first, to check that you are alert to this, it would be valuable to jot down what you are planning to say and see what phrases you are using. It can take a bit of practice, but it gets easier once you have done it a few times!

Do any of the activities planned for the pupils require a response of faith and, therefore, only suitable for committed Christians, such as joining in with a prayer, or partaking of bread and wine, or are they activities with which anyone could easily engage?

If referring to faiths other than Christianity, please remember only to speak positively.

SAFEGUARDING

There are legal requirements that should be taken into account, too. Concerning DBS checks, if this is a one-off visit from a class group, where it is unlikely that the helpers on the church team will see each other again frequently, there is no need for adult helpers to have a DBS check solely for this event. Advance communication between the host (church) and the organisation with responsibility for the guests (school) should make it clear that the teaching staff/assistants are responsible for the pupils at all times – even if the class is split into smaller groups.

Where it is not possible for an adult from the school to be constantly present with each small group, the small groups should be situated in view of each other and the adults from the school must check on each small group at frequent intervals throughout the visit.

If you, as hosts, want to take photos or film the event, as a memento of the occasion, specific permission needs to be sought from the school before the visit – even if you only take ‘back-of-head’ shots. Schools keep records of which pupils should never appear in photos – but these are usually kept in school. Adult guests might not know which children, in the group visiting on the day, are affected.

AND FINALLY

Remember the words of Jesus

“Whoever welcomes one of these little children in My name welcomes Me, and whoever welcomes Me welcomes not only Me but the One who sent Me.”