

Give me a

Sign



By Annette Bender
Editor, 'The Call'

Your church sign is a primary link to the visitors you're trying to attract.

“This is the parable of the sign,” began a recent Washington Post article. One day a young woman, recently widowed with two small children, was driving through a congested intersection in Silver Spring, Md.

Among the jumble of fast-food restaurants and gas stations, the woman spotted a simple, block-letter sign. It read: “An Oasis of Faith at a Busy Crossroads.”

The message hung in front of Marvin Memorial United Methodist Church, and for some reason, it moved the woman. She drove over to the church, talked with the people there, and eventually enrolled her children in Sunday school classes. “All because of a sign,” the Post observed.

“She said she was going through a very difficult time, and when she saw the sign it spoke to her and drew her in,” said the Rev. Diana Ley, the church’s pastor. “You never know.”



“Your sign may be the initial identifying element a potential visitor sees,” an Igniting Ministry brochure states. “A sign in poor condition, containing dated information, suggests neglect.” Signs with message boards, the brochure adds, should be “changed frequently, to show yours is a dynamic and active congregation.”

How well do Holston churches utilize their signs? A Discipleship Team survey of 300 Annual Conference members recently showed that all but six participants attended churches with identifying signs. Of those, 253 members attended churches with worship times displayed on their signs; 57 participants attended churches that did not display worship times on their signs.

Poor signage has long been a source of frustration for the Rev. Jack Edwards, senior pastor at First Broad Street UMC in Kingsport and former Morristown District superintendent. Last year he wrote an article for his district newsletter, later appearing in *The Call*, that listed “10 User-Friendly Questions” to alert parishioners to

potential visitor turn-offs. A chief beef for Edwards is circuit churches that meet at different times of the month – but fail to post worship times for potential visitors.

“One Sunday they’re there at nine. The next Sunday they meet at 11. It’s impossible to keep up with it,” he said.

Until recently, churches did not view their signs as potential advertising tools, according to the president of Chattanooga-based Bill Ortwein Signs Inc. “They just looked at their signs as a way of letting people know where they are,” said Butch Ortwein, who also is a member of East Ridge UMC. “More churches are beginning to recognize that signs are beneficial in attracting visitors and are willing to invest in them.”

Here’s some basic information to help church leaders evaluate what changes might be necessary.

Image is everything.

Is your sign kept free of weeds or shrubbery? Freshly painted? In good repair? Does it look like a throwback to the 50s? A shabby or antiquated sign is nothing but a setback for your church, according to *Church Business* magazine at www.churchbusiness.com.

Shed light on the subject.

It doesn’t make sense to limit your advertising potential to daylight hours. Timers or sunlight driven photoelectric cells can ensure that energy is not wasted on daytime illumination. In the winter months be sure to have the sign lighted during the busy drive times of dawn and dusk, suggests *Net Results* magazine.

Can you see me?

Concerned that its current sign isn’t visible from the highway, Apison UMC recently invested in a new one that will stand out to drivers on East Brainerd Road and the post office across the street. “We’ve got a lot of new subdivisions coming in and we want people to know there’s a United Methodist church here,” said the Rev. Jason Gattis, pastor of the Cleveland District church. While it’s important to check your property’s zoning and local ordinances before making any decisions, the optimum sign situation is to place a double-sided model at right angles to the street. That way, you reach people driving in both directions.

Get the message out.

Entire books and websites have been devoted to the power of thoughtful messages on changeable signboards. While the possibilities are endless, remember that judgmental or controversial messages probably alienate more people than they attract.



The *Washington Post* reported that a Knoxville congregation drew wrath after putting up a sign reading, “Ms. is an abbreviation for miserable.” For message ideas, search the Internet or check out a new book just published in August, “Forbidden Fruit Causes Many Jams,” by Mary Katherine and David Compton.

Simplicity sells.

Don’t try to cram too much information on your sign, says Ortwein. Remember, the target market is streaming past at about a mile a minute. Also, when promoting church events on a sign, choose those that will attract non-attenders (hint: not a Sunday School teacher appreciation dinner or service of baptism). Use in-house tools such as bulletins, newsletters, or email to communicate with members.

Which way do I go?

Especially for churches that are off major highways, road signs pointing the way to your facility are essential. For decades, United Methodist churches have been ordering blue, shield-shaped directional signs from Cokesbury. The signs are available for \$112 plus about \$10 for shipping. Call (800) 672-1789.

Call in the experts.

Sign companies are prepared to lead you through the process of selecting a new sign while considering your budget, congregational image



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and local codes. Start by looking for churches with new signs in your area, then call the church and ask if they had a good experience with the sign company. Working with churches requires more TLC than working with businesses, Ortwein says, because entire committees are involved in the decision-making process. Most church members probably have never bought signs before. “It’s important to get someone who will take the time to do it right,” he said.

In the Holston market, a typical lighted church sign may cost \$3,000 to \$5,000 (Apison’s new sign costs \$3,400), but they’ve been known to go as high as \$40,000 for grander models in other parts of the country. J.M. Steward Corp., the nation’s largest church-sign company and a Cokesbury supplier, will provide a free planning guide. Call (800) 237-7511. ■



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