I was travelling this week. In visiting a different church, I appreciated the clarity on their website that helped me prepare to do so. I appreciated the bulletin that we were handed, which gave us so much information, and all the responses to all the prayers and readings.

Sunday's lectionary readings included 1 Corinthians 14:1-12. I sat with it over breakfast yesterday morning, reading about speaking in tongues.

I remember the first time I heard someone speaking in tongues. I was utterly thrown, and baffled, distinctly uncomfortable, and felt entirely out of place. I was distracted from the rest of the service, to be honest.

Although Paul does not dismiss speaking in tongues at all, he doesn't hesitate to stress how much more important it is, in church, to be understood. So he discourages it in favour of prophecy (which, it's important to understand, in his time, was less about predicting the future than about critiquing the present).

The Presbyterian faith is not best known for people speaking in tongues during our services. So instead of dwelling on that specifically, I found myself reflecting on other things we do, say, and sing that could baffle a visitor or newcomer.

"Church speak" - the acronyms that we throw around without thinking - and if ever a denomination loved its acronyms, it's the PCC, talking about PWS&D, VBS, M&D, FCA, and more. Or the terminology - "you'll find the signup sheets posted in the narthex," and "Session is meeting the last Tuesday of the month."

Our hymns tell the story of our Bible which newcomers may not recognise. In an effort to modernise, we sing "Days of Elijah" — rousing though it is, it is packed with Bible stories and imagery that the congregation may not even be familiar with.

We have to strike a balance at church - we are largely made up of people who attend regularly (all with varying degrees of familiarity with the Bible). We have to teach, but it can't always be introductory material. We have to welcome visitors so that they feel included and welcome, not excluded by our "church speak."

We have to remember to interpret ourselves, just as speaking in tongues in church calls for interpretation, for the edification of all. We have to make an effort to remember that the newcomer, the visitor, wants to feel welcome. We must remember, when greeting, to point out the washrooms, to explain what the narthex and the parlour are when directing people to find things. When we say, "See Joanne for tickets" to an event, it's helpful if we have Joanne stand up, or tell them how and where to find her after the service.

In the same way, when teaching the Scriptures, it's important to give some back story, some context. Not everyone comes with a full knowledge of the Bible stories across the entire arc. Biblical literacy is on the decline in our culture.

I'm genuinely curious - what are some of the ways you've been left confused at church? What are some things you wish someone would explain, spell out, lend context to? How can we be better at inclusivity and welcoming, at teaching at the right level? What questions do you bring on a Sunday morning, that you leave, still hiding in your heart?

In our logo, we express our central purpose - "connecting, inclusive, transforming life with God." We want that to be true - and so we want to make sure that we ARE connecting. This is one of those first important factors to consider - please help hold us accountable to that. If we're failing to be clear, it's unintentional - but we want to be more deliberate about getting it right. Not perfect - no church is perfect. But right.

At the church I visited, there were some acronyms. We didn't know every single thing they were expressing. But several people stopped to say hi. We were warmly greeted, people asked us about ourselves, shared information about the church. The minister came over and greeted us by name, and sat with us at the coffee hour afterwards to make us feel welcome. They really got it right. And here at Paulin, we want to do that, too.

Because you are so very, very welcome here at Paulin. We want to make sure that you know it.

Connecting, Inclusive, Transforming Life with God

Paulin Memorial
Presbyterian Church