

Signs vs. sidewalk

By [Ruth Everhart](#)

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I was walking through an unfamiliar residential neighborhood to get some exercise, going at a good clip when I was brought to a sudden halt because the sidewalk disappeared. A certain establishment had not installed sidewalks along its considerable property line. The name of the establishment? Health Network. I could not continue my healthy walk past the Health Network, but had to turn around.

Sometimes I think this is what the church must seem like to people outside the church—an establishment that says one thing on its sign, and another thing by its behavior.

I know churches that say “Welcome” on their sign, but good luck finding a door that will open. Some churches unlock only a few of their many doors, even on a Sunday morning.

I know churches that proclaim “All Are Welcome” on their sign, but heaven help the young lesbian couple that walks in, hand in hand.

I know churches with the word “Community” in their name, but if you attend a potluck, you will sit at a table alone while the church folk visit with their friends.

The language on a church sign is often a sort of code that takes expertise to crack. In my world, for example, churches can have the word *Presbyterian* in their name and be in different denominations, differing in significant ways.

I remember a church member who visited a Presbyterian church on vacation and was puzzled to hear a sermon saying that women and men have different, complementary roles, and need to stay each within their own sphere, which does not include church leadership for women. The next Sunday she asked me, “Is that kind of thinking Presbyterian?”

“Was the church PCUSA or PCA?” I said. As the words came out of my mouth I immediately realized what an inane response that was. For one thing, alphabet soup

means very little. I must at minimum translate what the letters represent. For another thing, I can't simply shove a complicated problem into a labeled box, as if that addresses the questions that are potentially being raised.

Better to say: "Do you have time to sit down for a bit? Because I can tell you about the various flavors of Presbyterians and how they came to be, if that's what you're asking. Or we can talk about the scriptures dealing with sex/gender and power/authority in the church, if that's your question. I can suggest some books you might like to read on either subject. But I wonder if you'd like to start by telling me about your experience in that church. What things did you think about and feel as you worshiped there?"

Saying "Welcome" is easy. Being welcoming takes work and effort. It's almost like pouring a sidewalk.

*Originally posted at [Love the Work \(do the work\)](#)*