

ship_{of}fools.com

The Ship of Fools and the Mystery Worshipper

Some readers and visitors may already be familiar with the intriguing title of this organisation and in particular with its practice of sending undercover worshippers to visit and report on churches worldwide.

Until recently, St Faith's had escaped their attention - but on the Sunday before Lent, we received an incognito visit which resulted in a report which, much to our delight and relief, was entirely positive and complimentary. You can read the report by following the link at the end of this page, but by way of introduction, the editor has gathered together some information and explanation. The logos and some of the wording have been lifted from their site; other bits are editorial comment and assorted online gleanings.

What exactly is the Ship of Fools?

It describes itself as 'the online magazine of Christian unrest.' "We're here for people who prefer their religion disorganized," says the Ship's editor and designer, Simon Jenkins. "Our aim is to help Christians be self-critical and honest about the failings of Christianity, as we believe honesty can only strengthen faith."

Ship of Fools' co-editor, Stephen Goddard, met Simon Jenkins at theological college in London in the late 70s. "As committed Christians ourselves, we can't help laughing at the crazy things that go wrong with the church, and we're also drawn to those questions which take us beyond easy believing. In the end, we want to make sense of the Christian faith in today's complex world."

Fully independent, Ship of Fools currently attracts more than 150,000 unique visitors a month accessing more than 2.5 million pages. Iconoclastic and debunking but also committed to the ultimate value of faith, Ship of Fools attracts readers more interested in searching questions than simplistic answers.

(extracts from the information page on the Ship of Fools site: <http://www.ship-of-fools.com/shipstuff/index.html>)

What is the significance of the title?

The Ship of Fools is an allegory, originating from Plato, that has long been a fixture in Western literature and art. The allegory depicts a vessel populated by human inhabitants who are deranged, frivolous, or oblivious passengers aboard a ship without a pilot, and seemingly ignorant of their own direction. This concept makes up the framework of the 15th century book 'Ship of Fools' (1494) by Sebastian Brant, which served as the inspiration for Hieronymus Bosch's famous painting of that name: a ship—an entire fleet at first—sets off from Basel to the paradise of fools. In literary and artistic compositions of the 15th and 16th centuries, the cultural motif of the ship of fools also served to parody the 'ark of salvation' as the Roman Catholic Church was styled.

Renaissance men developed a delightful, yet horrible way of dealing with their mad denizens: they were put on a ship and entrusted to mariners because folly, water, and sea, as everyone then 'knew', had an affinity for each other. Thus, 'Ship of Fools' crisscrossed the sea and canals of Europe with their comic and pathetic cargo of souls. Some of them found pleasure and even a cure in the changing surroundings, in the isolation of being cast off, while others withdrew further, became worse, or died alone and away from their families. The cities and villages which had thus rid themselves of their crazed and crazy, could now take pleasure in watching the exciting sideshow when a ship full of foreign lunatics would dock at their harbours.

(extracts from the Wikipedia entry on the phrase in general, rather than its use by the Christian satirical website, which doesn't seem to explain why it chose the title.)



How do the Mystery Worshippers do their mysterious work?

The Mystery Worshipper, which produced this report, is run by shipoffools.com, the online magazine of Christian unrest. Mystery Worshippers are volunteers who visit churches of all denominations worldwide, leaving a calling card in the collection plate and posting a first-timer's impression of services on Ship of Fools. For further reports, visit the Mystery Worshipper at: shipoffools.com/mystery/uk.html.

(this paragraph reproduced from their website as a condition of reproducing our report. See the next section.)

What about other reports on churches we may know...?

For an absorbing hour or more, click on the link below, which is an archive of every report made on UK churches. Churches familiar to our readers include Grace Family Church, Aigburth (they scored 0/10!), St Peter and Paul's R.C., Crosby, St Paul's, Croxteth, our Cathedral, the Metropolitan Cathedral (guess which scored higher of the two), St Luke's, Southport and many more. The reports make fascinating reading...

<http://shipoffools.com/mystery/uk.html>

What else does the organisation do?

The site says: Regular features include the **Mystery Worshipper**, the **Caption Competition**, and **Gadgets for God**. Ship of Fools has also run a number of projects, including **The Ark**, an online gameshow, and **Church of Fools**, an early experiment in online 3D church. **The Laugh Judgment**, our investigation into funny and offensive religious jokes, prompted journalist Julie Burchill to say of us: "If one must choose a modern symbol of what is so good about Britain, I would choose Ship of Fools."

Alongside these is a thriving **online community**, including the famed **Heaven**, **Hell** and **Purgatory** bulletin boards, where shipmates debate everything from "Religion and Buffy the Vampire Slayer" and "The status of Mormonism" to "Hitchcock and Catholic Guilt". Over 13,500 people joined the boards in its first ten years online.

(click on any of the links above and enjoy what you access!)

What about the report on St Faith's?

When you read it, you will be happy with 'Gregory the Grate's' comments. From what she (yes, despite calling herself 'Gregory the Grate', it was a lady who came to us) wrote, two or three of us who met her (and whose welcome she clearly appreciated) were able to identify her, although of course we had no idea what she was doing, but merely extended our traditional hospitality to a clearly interested stranger.

Now read the full report as published on their website

... and be filled with proper, modest pride...!

<http://www.ship-of-fools.com/mystery/2015/2824.html>

