Being a Sidesperson at St Mary the Virgin, Linton

It is easy to underestimate the role of Sidesperson. Many documents written about it concentrate on the minutiae and ignore the single most important fact. The welcome you give people arriving at church on any given Sunday is perceived as the welcome that God gives them to His house and we, His people, give to His Church. Get this right and anything else can be forgiven!

This demands sensitivity - and eye contact! There will be some people, ‘regulars’, who need a smile and to be offered a book and service sheet. There will be others who need more, a word, or even a brief conversation, trust your instinct on this but be aware of others coming in too. There will be other ‘regulars’, who have been away for a time and need more; at such times try to hand them on to someone else, another member of the congregation who might sit with them, or even the Churchwarden and assistant who will be hovering at the back. There will be still others, ‘occasionals’ and new people who will require more of your time. You may need to remind them or tell them that ‘the service will be on the screen but if you want to, you can follow it in the hymn book and service sheet.’ Again, handing them on to someone else is important; if you can point out someone they know and remind them of coffee afterwards that will help ease them in. With new people please make sure that they know about coffee, and let the Churchwarden, assistant or clergy know about them so we can make sure that they are invited at the end of the service.

This requires organisation. Check that you have the correct service booklets out, (the colour will match the church’s colour and the season will be written in the header.) If you are not sure ask. Then prepare a stack of hymn books with the service books tucked inside. Sometimes, particularly when the music group is playing, there will be song sheets to hand out too. Check with the musicians who are always in church practising from about 9.15am. You may need to move the table so that these are to hand as you can see people coming in. Some Sundays (not All - Age services) the children collect bags with craft activities and puzzles to do that are related to the theme of the service. These may need the week’s pages to be put in. Please make sure that any children are then offered them as they come in with parents. They may also want a hymn book like their parents so be prepared. Please be conscious that we try to encourage a quieter atmosphere for the five minutes before the service begins so softer voices need to be used.

Make sure that people can get in! The inner doors and outer doors should be open and pegged back. Once the service starts the outer ones maybe closed depending on the weather. We hope in time to have a welcome sign to put out for when we do close these doors.

This requires time. You need to be at church about twenty-five minutes before the service time to set up. If you are set up and ready to receive people it puts them at ease, unlike if you are flustered and still trying to get things done. There may be more that you want to do personally before coming to church, like reading the lectionary for the day, using the collect for the day, spending time quiet in prayer thinking about the people coming in. Ask others and find out how they prepare.

Once the service begins, leave a few books set up at the back (five is plenty) and take your seats. When it comes to the offertory during the hymn, please make your way to the back and collect one of the offertory bags. The elements are taken up to the altar first and then, during the hymn the collection is taken. We start at the front, the congregation pass the bag to one another, passing it back at the end of the row away from you, to be passed down the line back to you. You then pass it to the next row back to repeat the process. When you and the bags get to the back, just check that there is no-one in the side aisles who has been left out. (The choir and musicians can be ignored, they will have put their collection in the bags before the start of the service.) If one side is fuller than the other it might help to start at the back on that side to assist your colleague. Once all is gathered in the Sidespersons meet at the back and await the signal from the front to go forward. (The signal is the bringing of the collection plate to the front of the stage.) Having taken the collection up return to your seats.

It may be that the Churchwarden or assistant may ask you to help with something else in the service. It will not be something that you have not seen before but if you are not comfortable doing it you should feel free to say no.

At the end of the service please return to the book desk and collect in hymn books, service sheets and any song sheets which will need to be separated out before putting away. At the same time it is important to enforce the message of God’s welcome and ensure that people know that there is coffee and others will be there. If they don’t know where to go, find someone to take them. Introduce them, for example ‘this is Nanette, she’s going to coffee, Nanette this is... Oh I’m sorry I didn’t catch your name,’ let them give it and then repeat the sentence, ‘Nanette this is Alice, she’s new this morning and wants to go to coffee, can you take her?’ This may seem false but think how you would feel if you were Alice in this situation; you know someone’s name and you are known.

Once all is tidy escape to a well-earned coffee and maybe that conversation that you put on hold earlier in the morning so that you could help others. Whether the Churchwarden or the assistant get around to thanking you over coffee or not (and I do try to) be assured that they are grateful for your support in this important role.

You may feel that you are not up to this. It’s a lot to do and to remember, however it does become second nature after a while. Look at those who do it well, think who gave you a good welcome and watch them one morning.

Being a Sidesperson is a commitment. You are asked to let the Churchwardens know of any ‘planned absence’ before the rota is drawn up for the next month. Once it is published by email make a note of the dates in your diary and check that they are still okay. You are likely to be on duty once a month. If you find that you cannot then do it, please try to arrange a swap with someone else on the rota and let the Churchwardens know that you are doing this. If and when you have arranged the swap confirm this with them, either way.

Having emphasised the importance of the role it would be wrong for you to feel unworthy of it. As a child of God you have been chosen by Him. As a Sidesperson you have been chosen by your congregation at the APCM to do this. We think you’ll be great at it and are willing you on to succeed.

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