

TO WELCOME OR TO PRAY?

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One of my abiding memories of church as a child was to see the deacons parade into the church with the minister just before the service. Yes, parade was the term. They marched in with heads held high, a fixed smile on their faces and big Bibles under their arms. It seemed to me that now that they, the 'important people', had arrived, we could begin.

What had those deacons and the minister been up to before marching in? They had, of course, been praying. And that is the way it is in most churches, where the deacons normally pray with their preacher for ten minutes or so before the service. As a minister, I have always appreciated that final 'round' of prayer before starting the service. It's a bit like warming up at the gym – once I have been well and truly prayed for I am ready to go in and give my all.

However, in our church we no longer meet for prayer just before the service. Instead, the deacons meet with me 20 minutes beforehand to pray. The result is not that we now have more time to pray – we still only pray together for 10 minutes. The difference is that we now have a clear 10 minutes to welcome people to service.

In the past we used to delegate the welcoming to non-deacons, who almost vied for the privilege of standing in the porch and giving a hand-shake to all and sundry. But the fact is that welcoming is so important that it should not be delegated just to people who enjoy the experience of greeting others. This is a key task for the minister and for other leaders responsible for the pastoral care of the church.

For visitors first impressions are what count. All the more important, therefore, that we are seen to pull out all the stops when we welcome them – and one way of doing that is for the minister to be there and in this way to show that visitors really do count.

Of course, ministers are not only there for visitors – they are also there for the members of our own congregation. Although the majority of the congregation tend to turn up in the last 5 minutes before the service (if not 3 minutes after the service's beginning!), nonetheless by my being present at the door those who wish have an opportunity to touch base with me and update me with whatever may be on their heart. To retreat to pray with my deacons at that point is tantamount to saying that I'm more interested in being with my deacons than with them. I need to be available to them – and if this means praying at an earlier time with my deacons, so be it.

There are drawbacks to welcoming people at the door as they come in to service. It means that one can't leave looking over the sermon to the last minute. Instead, I have to be down at the church a good hour before the service to ensure that I am indeed fully prepared. It also means that one can't bank on all the deacons being present for prayer. It isn't, for example, always easy for deacons with young families to arrive early – while other deacons who have commitments to transport elderly members to church may feel that they cannot bring their passengers to church so early. However, at the end of the day the convenience of deacons is not the issue – what counts is the welcome.

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