



# Courtesy in church

**TN96** Training Notes series: Planning

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**Somehow words such as 'Etiquette', 'Manners', 'Politeness' and 'Courtesy' sound dated in today's world. They come from a time when people were taught to put others first, when there were standards of behaviour that everyone was expected to adhere to.**

**The culture today is more self-centred. We are no longer taught to see things from the other person's perspective. We seek to prove our own capabilities and to prove how marvellous we are.**

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This behaviour is endemic in our UK society and so has permeated our churches. These notes seek to identify some aspects of this issue, question whether we have the right balance in the way we live our church life, and suggest some practical ways in which we could get back to something more appropriate for Jesus' disciples.

These notes are about **planning for a set of church values** that will then impact personal behaviour. They are designed for this corporate setting and the illustrations come from our life together in God's Church.

I write well aware of the risks of being thought out-of-touch with contemporary society. My point, though, is that today's culture is out of touch with the values of the Kingdom. When worldly assumptions infiltrate our churches, we need a wake-up call to put things right.

These notes complement Training Notes TN86, *Customer care for churches?* Those focused on our attitude to all kinds of visitors; these more on our own church members.

I would value feedback through email to me and will amend these notes in the light of your contributions.

## 1 The biblical standard

It is clearly important to start by determining what the Kingdom value might be.

- The key principle must be Jesus' summing up of the Law as, 'love your neighbour as yourself' (Matthew 19:19 citing Leviticus 19:18 – see also Luke 10:27-28 and Galatians 5:14).
- Paul teaches us to 'in humility value others above yourselves' (Philippians 2:3), to 'please our neighbours for their good, to build them up' (Romans 15:1-5) and to 'strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else' (1 Thessalonians 5:15). He states, 'No one should seek their own good, but the good of others' (1 Corinthians 10:24). And so on.
- The whole of Romans 12 is worth reading as a commentary on this theme, as is the picture given by the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22,23.

C S Lewis called courtesy "one of the Christian virtues" (*Mere Christianity*) and G K Chesterton defined it as "the wedding of humility with dignity" (*The well and the shadows*). But the word is out of fashion.

It is right that this idea should be one of a church's values because it relates to a way of living, an enduring attitude, a realisation that each person is created in the image of God and precious in his sight.

This is not an issue of a one-off apology forced out of someone by a legal ruling or crowd opinion. It is not so much heaping praise on someone for the benefit it will produce as living as though the other person is worthy of our respect. It is not so much saying sorry as demonstrating real sorrow.

If the culture today has left this concept behind, this gives the Church a magnificent opportunity to let it shine in its own members as a witness to the transforming power of Christ. If however we let the world's values shape ours, we are little different and the witness is lost.

## 2 Application: Being thankful

If courtesy is an enduring attitude, then it will be more than just saying thank-you. But a thankful heart will spill over in giving thanks to people for what they contribute. It needs to become a feature of church culture so that everyone offers thanks to anyone in creative ways at any appropriate time.

### The service leader

How about making a point of saying a personal thank-you to each person who has contributed to the leadership of the service in some way and seeing this as a natural responsibility of the role of service leader. Over coffee you could search out the musicians, the lesson readers, the intercession leaders, the techies on sound desk and visuals, the senior steward or other people who have contributed their time, gifts and energy to enable that church service to function well. It will make them feel respected for their service and help you sense the value of the team.

### **The volunteer team**

If you are responsible for a team (stewards, young people's leaders, Messy Church) might the church help finance an evening out together once a year as a way of expressing thanks for service? In addition team leaders might look out for opportunities to say thank you on a regular basis.

### **The Minister representing the church**

There are many tasks for which people are rarely thanked in church life: flower arrangers, cleaners, coffee makers, leaflet folders. Give honour to the behind-the-scenes workers by making a point of thanking them and showing you notice their quiet service. This can be done both in public (thank the team not the person on duty that week or you will be in trouble!) or one-to-one in private on a regular basis.

### **Everyone for every act of kindness**

This needs to become part of everyone's attitude so that every church member is thanking people. You drop into the church office and, as you leave, thank the Administrator for all they do. You put a cheque in an envelope for the Treasurer and add in a personal note of thank you for all their expertise and service. You thank the preacher for their sermon if God spoke to you through it. You thank the Minister (perhaps one person easily ignored) at an appropriate moment for their leadership.

These illustrations need to come from a thankful heart, not a 'To Do' list. Saying it personally is powerful, but so is a hand-written card on special occasions. Emails or texts are worthwhile but do not have the same value.

## **3 Application: Saying sorry**

An apology wrung out of a reluctant person has little power. But in a culture where saying sorry is often viewed as being weak, Christian disciples might like to check out whenever they have caused someone else inconvenience.

### **Letting others down**

You miss a deadline for a newsletter item submission, or spell someone's name incorrectly in a leaflet, or fail to respond on time to an email sent to you. All these could at best be inconvenient and perhaps hurt other people. An appropriate apology would do much to heal the damage.

### **Failing to keep a commitment**

You forget to pray for someone's job interview on Tuesday having said you would do so, you fail to turn up for your turn on the crèche rota, you double-book a meeting, you forget the actions in your name following a committee. We all do these from time to time, but a recognition of the difficulties caused as a result and an appropriate apology would be in order.

### **Inappropriate words**

You have been too hasty in your criticism of someone else's output, you were rude to someone because you had had a bad day, your behaviour at the Council meeting was not consistent with Christian character. To do nothing leaves a sore. To apologise and, where necessary, make amends shows proper humility.

### **Late for church**

This will be controversial! You arrive late for a church service and cause some interruption by walking in during proceedings. This is a practice that has become common in recent years, probably because people view church services as falling in leisure time when standards are lax. They would not get away with that at their workplace or for a medical appointment. I wonder if churches might get to the point where regulars who are late without good reason then apologise to the leader or the Minister.

## **4 Application: Generous behaviour**

This is a wide area and you will be able to think of many more examples than are cited here. So often we fail to respect the other person in the way we should. You could take all the examples in section 3 above, for a start.

### **Hospitality**

The inviting of people into homes for meals or just for company is an area that is covered in Training Notes TN107, *A church policy on hospitality*. It should be a normal courtesy to show generosity by opening up your homes to others, and especially to those who cannot easily repay you.

### **Looking after Sunday visitors**

A proper courtesy would mean you take the welcome of visitors and newcomers particularly seriously. This applies to how you promote yourselves on web and in print, how helpful you are to answer their questions rather than the ones you think they ought to be asking, how you minimise their confusion and embarrassment when they come to one of your services, and how you give them special attention without making them feel awkward. See Training Notes TN109, *A test for your church's welcome*.

### **Visiting speakers**

Sometimes churches are wonderful in considering the speaker's needs and offering hospitality. Sometimes the speaker is expected to turn up for a 7.30 pm. meeting after a two-hour journey with no offer of a meal or accommodation. The answer (to both meal and accommodation) might be 'No – but thank you so much for asking'. Sometimes people think a visiting mission speaker will be so grateful for the £20 note 'towards petrol' thrust into their hand and the offering of £54.26 taken that evening towards the cost of their visit which (with salaries, back-up, preparation time, etc.) may have cost them or their society several hundred pounds.

### **Getting communication right**

You change the rota so make sure everyone gets the message; you cancel the second service in August so go out of your way to ensure occasional visitors know; you try never to give people notice of events at the last minute. You show respect and courtesy in each of these examples.

### **Use of mobiles**

Many people behave as though an incoming call or text message is more important than whoever they are speaking to and think nothing of checking social media during services or immediately afterwards. Why not make it the rule for regulars that church premises are mobile-free zones on Sunday so we learn to relate in person to others? You might teach younger (or all) members principles of courteous mobile use. Don't accept the world's norms.

You will now be able to think of many more illustrations of putting other people before yourselves and what this might mean in your actions great and trivial: in the way you dress, in giving up your seat in crowded meetings, in letting other people precede you, in quietly doing the washing-up when no one is looking, in offering lifts to those who need them, in giving a small gift for a service provided.

Old fashioned? Perhaps. What Jesus would have us do? You decide.

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN96. See also Article A27, *Reliability in ministry*, and Training Notes TN31, *Affirming volunteers*, TN86, *Customer care for churches?*, TN107, *A church policy on hospitality*, and TN109, *A test for your church's welcome*.

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN96 under Planning.

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