



An Englishman was explaining the game of cricket to an American at Lord's

'It's quite simple. You have two sides, one out in the field and one in. Each man on the side that's in goes out, and when he's out he comes in and the next man goes in till he's out. When they're all out, the side that's out in the field comes in and the side that's been in goes out and tries to get out those coming in. Sometimes you get men still in and not out. Then when both sides have been in and out including 'not outs' that's the end of the game. Now do you see?

Confused?! Sometimes the rules and scoring in sport are quite confusing, especially if you are watching it for the first time. Once you know the rules everything becomes clearer.

In church we also have unwritten 'rules', especially concerning our worship. I often wonder what someone new coming into our churches on a Sunday morning must think. Firstly, it can be quite challenging just to walk through the door of some churches. In fact it might even be hard to find the way in!

Once inside a church what are you going to find? Someone once compared a church to a betting office. The windows of betting offices are blacked out, you can't see in. You have no idea what the inside is like or who might be in there. The only way to find out is to go in! Similarly, there are few churches where you can see in from outside. For the average passer-by what goes on inside or what the interior is like remains a mystery.

For those daring enough to enter, once inside everyone seems to know what they are doing. Often a service proceeds with very few announcements and if you don't know 'the rules' you're left looking around and trying to work out what's what,

when to sit and when to stand.

During the summer, away on holiday, can be an opportunity to visit another church one Sunday. Even if you are an active member of a church it can be quite daunting to visit a different place of worship. Yet it does enable us to catch a glimpse of how it feels for someone new coming into our church. When I visit a new church all sorts of questions come into my mind. Will someone speak to me when I go in? Will I find myself being glared at for sitting in someone else's 'set place' in church? Will the music be familiar? Will I know what to do when? Will someone stare at me if my child makes a noise in church? Will anyone speak to me afterwards?

How welcoming are our churches to strangers? Through the years I have visited a number of churches, and there are certainly some I would never want to go back to again! In a sense the Sunday morning service is our 'shop window'. People will judge the kind of community we are by their experience that day. It's a frightening thought that many people may never come to church again through a bad experience.

We all have a responsibility to ensure our churches are warm, welcoming and accepting, not just the official welcomers. In the Bible we are told to 'practise hospitality' (Romans 12:13). I think it is a gift we should all be able to exercise. Of course, we can overdo it and a newcomer might feel they have had to run the gauntlet before even sitting down! We need to be sensitive to each individual.

Perhaps this summer you might take the opportunity to visit another church and experience yourself being the newcomer. Just be careful where you sit!

Alison Newman

COMMON
GROUND

In this edition Alison Newman writes our leading article. It also appears in the magazines of Bromley Methodist Church & Bromley URC