

How to choose where to sit.

I've had the privilege of visiting some truly awe inspiring and beautiful places of worship. From St Peter's Basilica in the Vatican City to a small Swiss chapel, high in the Alps watched over by the Jungfrau and the Eiger. I have caught the first ferry of the day, and half run, to be on time for a service on the remote but stunning Island of Iona in the Inner Hebrides and sat in a beautiful Ugandan Church, filled with vibrant worshipers, chickens and goats, all praising God. Alongside this I have clung on to my seat in wind swept marquees that were rattling in worryingly unstable ways, worshipped in an old MFI store (fortunately converted with slightly harder wearing furniture) and been outside, in the open air, as we have sung to the glory of God.

The fact is you don't need a grand building or an old building to worship God. That said you also don't need staging, with a comfortable 2-person sofa, and surround sound for the band. You can worship God anywhere. After all, when in the wilderness, the Israelites didn't build great buildings. They had a tent – and not a self-inflating, four seasons, deluxe Berghaus affair with built in porch and internal ground sheet. This one was far more rustic.

This brings us to our next problem. Every church looks different because every church is. Not only on the outside but also within. This is no more evident than when it comes to seating arrangements. A church may be set up with comfortable chairs, benches, pews, space for sitting on the floor, fold-up plastic seats, even school chairs which are used day in day out and designed to stop students tipping backwards. This isn't a problem until you have to decide where to sit.

Seating is very much like getting a new job. You see a job available, you decide you want it but it's not automatically yours. You have to go and secure it, which let's be honest isn't always easy. Then again neither is finding a good seat, claiming it and managing to hold on to it as we are about to find out.

Don't make the mistake in thinking that the nice end of the row seat, centre left of the stage but near the screen will still be there in three minutes time. You will need to run as fast as you are able and put your beach towel (or at least your Bible) on it NOW! Don't worry if you have to knock a few older parishioners over on the way (mere collateral damage), as long as you get there before that family of seven, who are also eyeing it up.

My first piece of advice is that you need to find the most comfortable seat that you can. This can be a challenge. When medieval carpenters were crafting some of our most beautifully ornate pews, they certainly didn't have the wellbeing of your backside in mind. Even with the later addition of cushions, it can be a long, hard, service. However, at least with a pew you tend to get ample leg room, plus you can shuffle down if the occupant next to you invades your personal space.

In fact, as a child, whenever I was in a pew filled church, I liked to play a version of bumper cars with my brothers. Shuffle down and hit each other in the hope of knocking them off. It didn't go down too well with either of my parents. I can't think why.

Venues which try to cram as many chairs as possible into a modest size room to fit everyone in so that they don't have to repeat the same service multiple times, often forget that a considerable percentage of the population are above 5ft 6in and therefore do need some leg room. It can feel like a trip to the theatre sometimes or being crammed into a no-frills airline flight to Magaluf, though without the party atmosphere, the swearing and the copious amount of alcohol consumed. However as we will find out, churches are not afraid of a little tittle. Therefore, finding a comfortable place to sit and stretch those legs, is frankly essential. However, where should you choose?

Tip number 1. Do not sit at the front. This may be obvious, especially if you are British, as we very rarely go to the front. In fact, the front two rows are often empty in a church. This isn't due to some religious significance. We aren't saving the twelve seats for Jesus and his disciples (minus Judas of

course) or leaving them to honour Jacob and his sons, plus wives, plus the other mothers of his children, plus presumably the daughters he had but we never learn about for some reason.

No, it's because there is something uncomfortable about sitting too close to the preacher. What if they make eye contact with you? What if they ask you a question? Even worse, what if they ask for a volunteer? Unlike at a pop concert, in church the closer you are to the front the more nervous you will be in the service. Though on the plus side, you can be pretty certain the preacher won't launch themselves at you and expect to crowd surf all the way to the pulpit.

It's like going to a magic show. You want to be close to the action, to see what is going on but not too close. You don't want to catch the magician's eye, or you might be the one chosen to be sawn in half or put headfirst into what is 'hopefully' a fake guillotine but looks worryingly real as it easily slices the poor unsuspecting melon in half. I mean what did the melon do wrong anyway? Probably a lot less than you or I.

The same applies to church. What if they need someone to give their testimony or find a passage in the book of Habakkuk (it might sound more like a middle eastern couscous dish than a book – trust me it is in the Bible... somewhere). Or, as I once saw, they may need a volunteer to help them prepare and cook pancakes at the front, whilst doing the talk. It didn't end well, for the church cleaners (the carpet was stained with eggs, flour and milk), the pancakes themselves (they were more like scrambled eggs by the end of things), the speaker (he struggled to get his message across as the pancakes inevitably went wrong), or the volunteer who had to eat what looked like truly inedible mush.

Unlike Ainsley Harriet, our speaker clearly hadn't mastered the art of cooking and talking at the same time... actually, I'm not sure he'd mastered the ability to cook full stop. He invited me round for Sunday lunch a few weeks later. I politely declined even though it was 49 weeks until the next Shrove Tuesday because you can never be too careful.

However, you don't always have the choice where to sit. For example, if you arrive late, you will often find that the front rows are the only seats available, especially if there are more than three of you in your party. In this case, you may have no choice but please bear in mind the etiquette of sitting at the front. You must nod and smile during the talk. Any failure to do this and the speaker may start to lose their confidence. As a 'keen' at the front, your job is to look just that, 'keen'. You may need to use the words 'Hallelujah', 'Amen' and 'praise God'*, at various points in the service as words of encouragement.

(*Please note that shouting out such terms is commonplace in some churches but not all. It is worth testing the water first before going all out, in case your church of choice is a more reserved institution. I recommend starting with a more subdued 'mmmm' and a quiet 'yes', showing agreement without too much exuberance. Then if you receive startled looks at these comments you can slip back into an internal monologue or an occasional nod of the head if absolutely necessary. If on the other hand, others join in with you, I would try moving to an 'amen' or even a 'Yes God'. This will eventually lead you to the all-out 'Hallelujah', 'Praise God' or a combination of the above, 'Amen Lord, Praise God, Yes Lord Hallelujah'. Just bear in mind that although you may be filled with enthusiasm, try not to interrupt the service by standing up and shouting out too loudly. This isn't a competition. You aren't trying to hit new records on the church's decibel reader. Preventing the speaker from finishing their talk and making them repeat pages because no-one could hear the first time, is not likely to endear you to your fellow church goer.)

Your proximity to the leader of the service means you are being watched, not in the sense of a Government conspiracy, or where the computers are taking over, or where aliens regularly visit random strangers in Wisconsin. You are there to encourage the speaker, to role model to the rest of the church how to behave. Also, you can't dash off at the end of the service, instead you will have a gauntlet to run to get to the door. More on this later in the book.

Tip number 2. Do not sit on the back row. We all know what the back row symbolises. Well, anybody that has ever been on a school bus does. The back row is where the troublemakers sit, as far away as possible from the driver, hidden behind rows of others, trying to avoid being seen. The back row may seem an obvious place to park yourself. This is especially true if you are new to the church. After all it is within striking distance of the exit should you need it, but in truth it too should be avoided.

Firstly, you will raise suspicion. Why are you there? What do you want? Why have you positioned yourself as close to the door as possible? Are you going to throw popcorn at the vicar during the talk or snigger loudly every time they mention the word virgin, which is quite a lot come Christmas. Secondly, everybody will come and talk to you. Why? Well access for one, they won't have to wade through the hordes of excited worshippers to get to you. You will stand out and be marked for a 'welcoming conversation'.

I once attended a place of worship, many years ago with my wife. We had just moved into our first house and were looking for a local church to attend regularly. It was an exciting time for us, everything was new. New house, new job, new town, new church. We had spent the preceding week happily buying new things to decorate our new house with, cleaning our new home with such rigour, the likes of which it would never see again and meeting our new neighbours, their noisy children, and their pesky cats.

However nothing could put a dampener on our new life together and so, on the Sunday morning we strolled down the new street (for the record the street wasn't new and judging by the potholes it wasn't aging too well, it was just new to us), past the new playground (this was new but seeing as we didn't have children, wasn't of much interest to us, other than it being another new view to take in) to the new church (built in 1860, so quite new for the Church of England).

Once inside we took residence on the back row, by the door. As we were sat there, flicking through our copy of Mission Praise to check out what songs we would be singing, we were greeted by a fully robed vicar and the conversation when thus:

Vicar: "Good morning."

Us: "Morning."

Vicar: "Are you wanting to have your child baptised?"

This seemed like a strange question. As she asked, she peered along the row, as if expecting to see a small child in need of being doused in 'holy' water. It was a little premature. Our son wouldn't be born for another five years.

Me: "No, we've just moved into the area."

Pause, during which her face dropped from welcoming smile to disappointed sigh.

Vicar: "Are you wanting to get married?"

This was more likely, but this time a few months too late.

Me: "No thank you".

Vicar: "A funeral?"

Me: "No."

At this point the vicar looked extremely confused. She was clearly running out of reasons for a young couple to be present in her church on a Sunday morning.

Vicar: "Do you want a reference to apply to the local church school?" I just looked at her. Did she think we had an imaginary child? Or was she expecting my wife to unpack one from her handbag, Mary Poppins style?

Me: "We don't have a child." I pointed to the obvious gap next to us where any offspring would've been sat.

Another lengthy pause.

Vicar: "Are you sure?"

AM I SURE? DO I KNOW WHETHER I AM CURRENTLY A PARENT TO AN 11 YEAR OLD CHILD? I looked straight at her whilst the following thoughts echoed round my head. 'Let me check, do I have one

hidden under my chair? In my coat pocket? Buried under my copy of Mission Praise?’ However instead of voicing them I just nodded uncertainly.

Vicar: “OK, if you’re sure.” She replied in a dubious tone as if we’d arrived at a soft play party with my grandma in tow, instead of a child.

With that she turned to talk to someone else. That was it. That was the welcome. I presume that she was a new vicar, fresh into her role, recently ordained and very keen to carry out her first Baptism or Wedding. Alternatively, perhaps the church had just installed a new font, with instant hot water taps and a lovely drainage system and she was desperate to give it a go. We tried again the next week. We were the youngest people in the building by some margin. This time no-one spoke to us at all. We never went back and found a different place to dedicate our Sunday mornings to.

Now it isn’t always the vicar or leader who is waiting to tackle unsuspecting visitors. In fact, most churches have someone who takes it upon themselves to find out as much as they can about anyone new, by whatever means necessary. If you attend church regularly, I know you are picturing them right now. No matter where they are in the building, the moment a new pair of shoes walks through the door (polished or not), they sense it and immediately leap into action, knocking over the odd juice carrying child and tea sipping octogenarian in the process. They have to be, and will be, the first to greet newcomers and it usually goes something like this.

Welcomer: “Hi, is this your first time?”

The guest looks around a little unsure, clearly trying to work out where to sit.

Guest: “Er Yes.”

Welcomer: “Excellent, do you know what you are doing?”

Guest: “Not really.”

Welcomer: “Do you like coffee?”

Guest: “No, not really.”

Welcomer: “Probably a good thing, how about a tea?”

Guest: “Yes.”

Welcomer: “Well that’s good, we serve tea but not until after the service so you can’t have one now, but at least it’s something to look forward to.” PAUSE “What do you do for a living?”

Guest: “Pardon.” (Still a little dazed by the whirlwind conversation).

Welcomer: “I was wondering if you were a professional musician or international speaker. We are always in need of them, as you’ll find out if you stay for the service.”

Guest: “No, I work in a Supermarket.”

Welcomer: “Oohh, which one?”

Guest: “Sainsbury’s.”

Welcomer: “Oh dear, I don’t shop with them. I go to Asda. I like the colour of the staff uniforms. Never been a fan of orange you see. Do you like orange?”

Guest: “It’s ok, but I work in the office, so I don’t have to wear the uniform.”

Welcomer: “Well never mind, maybe you will get to be on the checkout if you keep working at it.

Would you like a newsletter, we usually email them out but as you are new you can have a printed copy. Also, there is a welcome pack, and a copy of the song words in large print, in case you struggle to see the screens. Plus, you can have a Bible, but we will need it back at the end, NIV or CEV, your choice? Also, there is a little library here of inspiring books. You could take 3 or 4 to browse through and maybe...”

Guest: “I’m fine thanks.”

Welcomer: “Well maybe just these ones then.” With that the welcomer hands a huge wad of paper and books to the visitor who starts to glance back towards the door.

Welcomer: “Are you married?”

Guest: “Sorry!”

Welcomer: “Married? Have a partner? Living in sin?”

Guest: "What?"

Welcomer: "Well we have a group of young single people that meets on a Thursday. Do you have children?"

Guest: "No."

Welcomer: "Probably for the best if you aren't married, as the church tends to frown on such things. How about knitting. We have a lovely knitting club on a Tuesday morning."

Guest: "I just want..."

Welcomer: "Oh and if you leave your name, address, phone number and social media accounts with me I will sign you up to the invite list. Then you will get details about our up and coming services and an invite to a welcome meal on a Sunday after church with one of our welcome families."

Guest: "I really am fine."

Welcomer: "Then we can invite you to Alpha as well. You will love Alpha. It starts next week. We can definitely sign you up, as we have seven spaces. Do you want to bring a friend?"

Guest: "I'm not sure..."

Welcomer: "Good, good, just fill the form in then."

Guest: "Why do you need my social media accounts?"

Welcomer: "Well you can never be too careful can you. You might be catfishing me." (Giggles at own joke).

Guest: "I think I'll just find a seat."

Welcomer: "Excellent idea. Why don't you come and sit with me." With that the welcomer puts an arm round the guest and half pulls them towards a seat right in the middle of the church.

Let's be honest, we have all been a recipient of this kind of greeting. My favourite welcome story however didn't happen to me but to a relative of mine. He was training to be a priest and was visiting the church where he would be based for a few months. Armed only with a Bible, a notebook and a copy of Sunderland's most recent matchday programme (the last of these may not be true), he was welcomed at the door.

"Morning," (pause), the gentleman looked at the Bible, tucked under his left arm and smiled. "You won't be needing that in here." He stated emphatically, pointing at the Holy Book. What a way to welcome someone into God's house! Now I assume he was referring to the fact that the church had recently bought brand new Bibles to place on each of the chairs, for use by the congregants. Therefore, meaning he wouldn't need his own Bible but could borrow one of theirs. At least I hope that was what he meant. Unfortunately, that wasn't what he said. He gave the clear message that the Bible was not a book that would be needed in his church. I do wonder what book would have been welcome.

An Agatha Christie?

The complete works of Shakespeare?

The latest Wisden guide to everything cricket?

The entire Topsy and Tim collection?

How to survive being eaten by a bear in the Canadian wilderness? (I think that should have been avoid not survive... once eaten there isn't a lot you can do about it).

Even if you managed to avoid a conversation as you enter, any sitting near the back will immediately draw the attention of the church and you may be singled out for a good deed or to be asked what book you have brought to church that week. You also need to be careful of the old 'switcheroo'. I once went to a service in a church I didn't know well and sat at the back. This was fine, there was a baptism that week and I was trying to blend in. Unfortunately, I hadn't noticed that the font, a beautifully ornate stone affair, was stationed at the back of the Church and therefore when it came to the Baptism, everyone turned round, meaning I was now on the front row, staring at the Parents and Godparents who I didn't know in the slightest. My plan had backfired.

Tip number 3. Do not sit in the middle. I know what you are thinking, having ruled out the front and the back, I am now ruling out the middle. Am I suggesting that you should stand in the service or suspend yourself from the ceiling with the Mission Impossible music sounding in the background? No, although that would be pretty cool. Perhaps you should climb the pillar and attempt to replicate Zacchaeus and his tree (Luke Ch 19) in the hope that someone will see you and invite you round for tea. It's that or you try making lasagne yourself again and remember last time with the burnt cheese, burnt sauce and burnt pasta.

What I'm saying is don't sit right in the middle, at least not in the middle of a row anyway. Churches are not like sporting events. It isn't socially acceptable during the service to stand up, walk along a row, disturbing everyone else whilst trying desperately not to trip over their bags or pour hot beverages on them. Therefore, if you sit in the middle of a row, you are stuck there. You can't move later if you find your view is restricted. You can't nip out for a caffeine top up when the talk has been going on for half an hour already and shows no sign of dissipating. You are stuck. Therefore, if you think you will need a quick comfort break during proceedings, sit on the end of a row.

Tip number 4. Do not sit in someone else's seat. This may seem obvious. If someone is sat in a seat it is not common etiquette to park yourself on top of them. This wouldn't be allowed in any setting. However, sometimes the seat's occupant may have drifted off to talk to the vicar about why there are chrysanthemums in the floral displays when they are out of season, or what possible reason there could be for singing hymn number 88 again for the third week running.

If this is the case, they may not respond too warmly when they return to find you in their seat. But how do you know? Well, the key is to look for the small tell-tale signs. Have they left their coat on the back of it? Is there a well-worn Bible surreptitiously stuffed under the chair? Is it currently looking after a lost handbag or a half-drunk cup of tea. Trust me, however old these seats are, they are unlikely to be drinking the tea themselves.

You may however, have a bigger problem. You see, in any congregation you will get a handful of people who have been sitting in the same seat week in week out for more than a decade, maybe even three, four or at a push five decades. There is no sign to tell you this, it is just one of the unwritten rules of church life. That seat is theirs, even if they haven't yet arrived or are spending the week in Fuerteventura, taking in the sea and sand. So just because the seat looks available, it may not be. After all this is where Mrs Wentbridge, the centurion and all-round amazing Mother Teresa-esque old lady, has sat for the last 70 of those years and you've just stolen it!

This is where it gets a little complicated, you see. We all like routine, well most of us do anyway and because of that we like to sit in the same place. Why? Who knows, but we do. I sit in school leadership meetings at a table with 9 chairs round it. There are 9 of us, which makes sense.

However, every week I have to make sure I get there early, or someone will take my chair. It isn't that my chair is special, or different, or has the best view, or will give you a massage halfway through the meeting. I didn't pay for it. It wasn't bequeathed to me by the previous Headteacher as a thank you gift and it doesn't have my name anywhere on it (though I am frequently tempted to graffiti the underneath to make a point).

It is just where I sit. I always sit there; it is my designated seat. Unfortunately however, there are one or two members of the team who seem to find it funny to try and arrive even earlier and take my seat. Not because they need to, but because they want to. Why would they do this? I have even considered getting a plaque made and screwing it into the wooden back of the chair, to remind them whose it is. Though, I don't think this will help me as I don't believe they forget in the first place. They just like to see the inevitable look on my face as I walk through the door and find someone else is currently manoeuvring themselves into my designated parking spot.

Church seats are sometimes the same. We are creatures of habit and therefore naturally migrate to the same place each week, like the swallows returning for summer or a frog going back to the pond it was born in, just without the thousands of miles or the dangers of crossing roads etc. Having said that, some churches are next to busy highways and don't have any parking, so perhaps they have

more in common with a travelling frog than you would think. As a newbie it is sometimes very hard to know which chair, or space on a pew, is set aside for someone else and which are fully available. After all, the last thing you want to do on your first visit is to upset Mrs Wentbridge, especially as, at her age, you never know when her last service might be.

Tip number 5. Choose one and stick with it. As you aren't in a DFS showroom, you can't go round trying out the different seating options before making your decision. Well, I suppose you could, but you would look very odd and draw a lot of attention to yourself. Especially if you lounge on them with your feet on the chair in front as I like to do when in any sofa shop. So, before you commit, I would suggest rating the various options. I prefer to use a 5 star rating system, but other systems are available. Chair three rows back from the front, two seats in from the aisle, with comfortable padding and no sign of prior occupant – 4 stars. Seat in the row in front, closer to the preacher, leg room restricted and chance view will be blocked by Goliath in row two – 2 stars. You get the idea. If you are someone who likes to be prepared you could even print out a score pad before you start. In the end, where you sit is more a reflection on the sort of person you are. If you are a confident, enthusiastic individual, then feel free to sit at the front. If you are quiet, shy, retiring, then go somewhere towards the back. If you are a sociable animal who has somehow cracked the ability to make small talk, then sit in the middle and enjoy being surrounded by others. Whatever you do, whichever of the options you choose, make sure you can see the screen because the service is about to start and you are going to need to know what is happening.