

"WILL THE USHERS PLEASE COME FORWARD?"

A stranger who had arrived early for the church service turned to a young man near by and asked, "What is the most important job here?" To which the gentleman replied, "Ushering, Sir; I am an usher." This is the spirit that makes the difference between the best ushers and the more common variety.

What do pastors think of ushers? Declared one pastor in Oklahoma, "If I had to lose the ushers or the choir, I'd rather lose the choir." If this appears to be an overstatement, at least it highlights a much-neglected department of the church.

This must be said of the ushers in any church: "They also serve," and their ministry does have a scriptural foundation: "I had rather be a door-keeper in the house of my God, than to dwell in the tents of wickedness," said the Psalmist; and surely, some impromptu ushering was called for at the feeding of the five thousand!

It is at least as difficult to find a really qualified usher as to locate an equally capable elder. There is little use for the pastor to plan the service carefully, for the organist to practice for hours, and the choir to sing with inspiration; if the ushering is slovenly, the service is already spoiled for some. The usher is the first person a stranger meets as he enters and, indeed, may be the only individual he will personally contact in the service. Many a congregation has been judged by one lone usher.

No doubt good ushers are made, not born, but if the pastor is planning to train some men, he should be careful of his raw material. What kind of man does the head usher and the pastor look for, here?

They are not looking for the sacharine or the starchy brother, nor the enthusiastic one who wallops the newcomer and knocks him breathless — neither the rough-and-ready type, nor the highly perfumed brother with the home-set wave in his hair, are quite the type, and no onions, please! The four "S's" will guide one very nicely: Shaved, showered, shampooed and shined.

What shall we say of the head usher? He is just that, and his counsel should be sought if confusion develops. He need not usher, himself, but should observe the entire situation carefully and regularly.

What are an usher's duties? While each church will have its own approach to this (and we might even say, "is traveling in its own rut"), perhaps a thoughtful survey will stimulate a study of the local situation.

Obviously the first duty of the usher is to escort worshipers to their seats; but sometimes, I have wondered if anybody has informed them of this. Too many persons have come in and gone on to their seats without having been noticed by the usher. However, the purpose of this article is to point out further responsibilities that make ushering a ministry, and not a job.

Dare we say that the main reason for the usher is to take responsibility from the pastor for all but the actual conduct of the service? Any minister can testify that when capable ushers are on the job, he feels a deep sense of relief.

The duties are manifold, but essential. One may quickly answer the jangling phone, bring the young people in from the front steps before the service starts; he may even be called upon to quiet the young folk occasionally (and one is tempted at times to quiet those no longer young).

Should we not ask the ushers to record the attendance at every service? This would add a certain authenticity to the reports which pastors sometimes give as to how many "we had last Sunday."

The problem of proper ventilation and heat should be the concern of either the head usher or the sexton

(and both should know which one). Poor air has put more saints to sleep on Sunday morning than poor preaching, and is much easier to correct.

A working knowledge of human nature will stand in good stead, for the usher must be prepared to deal with both the temperamental and the petulant. The writer observed a couple get up and walk out of the service when the usher, quite properly invited them to move from a reserved section. A pastoral call that afternoon brought the response that they had had serious difficulty before leaving home that morning, and this just seemed too much. (They were back to church the following Sunday.)

The usher is not to be a "pointer" nor a weather-vane, sweeping his arm over the auditorium. This pastor well remembers the evening when he noted from the platform an elderly usher holding somebody's baby in an unfamiliar fashion, and at the same time sweeping a finger over the church, directing strangers to seats. That came very close to arousing clerical choler. The brethren must also remember they are not "pushers," or "rushers," but "ushers."

The staff of ushers should be instructed as to the procedure in any possible emergency. For instance, the evening when a lady fainted — the manly ushers were ready for the occasion, and promptly dragged her out, each usher firmly grasping a shoulder as her heels dug twin furrows in the aisle-runner! After discussion, we developed a more discreet way of handling this situation if it occurred again.

Usually, the ushers recognize a visiting dignitary, and will be happy to take a note to the pastor.

If these duties are so evident, we must conclude there are good, better and best ways of performing them. Certainly there is needed an unerring discernment as to what should and what should not be done. For example, many a pastor could envy the attention an usher may gain by unwisely opening or closing a window during the service — a congregation is ready to look at anything but the preacher. Again, we are always intrigued by the way seven young people will crowd into a pew built for six, while the pews in front and behind are empty. The trained usher will keep an eye cocked for unusual situations in the congregation, for he knows that the building and in a sense the congregation are in his hands. The service itself is in the hands of the pastor. If an imbibing knight of the road wanders in, this is the problem of the ushers, not of the pastor. Sometimes these "assistant pastors" can help, merely by sitting near the stranger. If ushering is so vital, then it is certainly courteous to notify your head usher (not the pastor) when you must be absent. It is expected that the staff will be on hand early (in fact, if they are not, they are not "on time") and give each arrival a friendly greeting. Be at ease with all, both friend and newcomer. Smile — smile easily, naturally, readily.

The sweetest word in any language is one's own name, and if the usher greets those he meets at the door not only with a cheery "Good morning" and a happy smile, but calls them by name, they are sure to be back.

How shall the usher take the worshiper to the pew? To walk too fast increases the temptation to glide into a nearby seat. He may take a glance to be sure they are not "following afar off." However, what is the good-natured usher to do when someone does slip into a convenient seat? It is sure to happen. When this occurs, it is well simply to take an appraising glance over the auditorium in his section as though he were there to find vacant seats. This will not take long, particularly near the front.

Since ushering does not involve jujitsu, the usher

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