

The balance of 'warmth' and 'process'

A friend of mine was telling me about a public speaking seminar she went to recently.

The tutor of the seminar was explaining about two different modes of addressing people in speech, one she called 'dog mode' and the other 'cat mode'. She went on to explain that it's not as if one is right and one is wrong, but it's how we use them together that really makes a difference.

'Dog mode', it was explained, describes someone coming across as being on the front foot. Think of a Labrador puppy bounding up to you excitedly saying, 'play with me, notice me, make a fuss of me!'

When people are in 'cat mode' meanwhile, think of someone that's quite formal, as if they're saying, 'in my own time, if I want to, when I'm ready, I might invite you to join me'.

Unfortunately, vicars are often stereotyped as being in 'cat mode'; slightly formal and a bit remote. And yet, when we engage with people with smiles and warmth, we open up the possibility of building a positive relationship. Recent research undertaken by our colleagues with the Life Events Team in the Church of England specifically focused on the importance of meeting people at life's big moments with warmth and smiles.

When people contact the Church at one of life's big moments, invariably they come with big feelings, big thoughts and big questions, so it's really important that we acknowledge those and address them appropriately. But equally, often we need to find out some important information from people too, but it's how we go about that which is key. It's about getting the balance right.

Think of it in terms of being on an axis. On the one hand there is emotional warmth, and on the other there is process and information. If we only offer people emotional warmth, they may well have a nice time, but the possibility of the event being well-run and achieving all it needs to diminishes. There again, if people are met by someone only interested with processes and information, then the possibility of a meaningful relationship is diminished.

From the moment someone looks at a website, or looks at a church notice board, or calls in to enquire about a wedding, christening or funeral, the potential for relationship has begun. We have that moment to greet them with words such as "I'm sorry to hear your news" or "congratulations on your engagement" or

“congratulations on the arrival of your child”. If we meet them with warmth and engagement it shows that we’re interested in them and interested in where that relationship will take us.

Remember, often when couples or families get in touch with us, they can feel really anxious. Research has shown that people are worried that we’re going to judge them, or won’t take into account their hopes and fears. These Life Events are key moments in people’s lives, and people worry because potentially we as ministers, and the Church more generally, has the potential to make or break their big day.

So, it’s so important that we begin to build a relationship with that sense of welcome and warmth and that that continues on into the future. Of course, it’s not just all about the vicar. It’s the responsibility of the whole people of God; it’s the administrator; it’s the verger; it’s the person who meets them at the church door. We all have responsibility and opportunity to welcome people with warmth and a genuine welcome.

Because relationships are at the very heart of our Christian faith: our relationships with God and with those we are called to serve in His name.