

Vicars told to relax and make wedding guests more welcome in church

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Ruth Gledhill, Religion Correspondent Reprinted with permission

The Church of England is telling clergy that they must learn to love their wedding congregations — for better or for worse. Stuffy church weddings, where the vicar throws a wobbly if a guest so much as clicks a camera, are to become a thing of the past. In a reversal of traditional doctrine that will verge on heresy for some, vicars are being ordered to let children stand on the pews so that they can see the groom kiss the bride. They must also learn to “smile” when they meet the happy couple. Wedding parties are to be offered a “paparazzi moment” with as much flashing of cameras and mobile phones and videos in church as the guests desire, while clergy are also being urged to find a polite way of telling those who attend to turn off their phones. As part of the reform, wedding guests will be given a personalised card at the service to remind them to pray for the couple after the vows are over.



To get the message home, vicars are being sent on wedding workshops where they are shown a video of a US wedding — in which guests dance down the aisle to the altar. Members of the English Church are then told: “Copy that.” Further innovations include an online messaging service, so that vicars are reminded when to send anniversary cards to couples they have married.



In turn, the happy couples and their guests are being offered a new online “feedback” service where they can tell the vicar — anonymously — exactly what they thought of his or her sermon and smile during the service. Clergy, especially in pretty churches, can resent the annual stream of wedding bookings through the summer. Unless blessed with a top church school in the parish, they might not see the newlyweds or their guests again until their funerals. However, marriages in the Church of England have slumped from 110,000 in 1982 to 54,000 in 2006 — less than a quarter of all marriages. To encourage couples to return, the Church has taken a number of measures, including running stands at wedding shows, and promoting itself as a cost-effective but spiritual venue. It is too soon to judge if the moves are having any effect on church wedding statistics.

In *Seven Heavenly Ways to Welcome Wedding Guests*, the new guidelines published by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, Dr Rowan Williams and Dr John Sentamu, clergy are told to give guests guidance on how to behave in a “permissive” fashion. This could include saying: “Make sure you turn your mobile back on after the service.” Worshippers, who might rarely, if ever, have been in a church before, must be encouraged to “make themselves at home”, say the guidelines. “Let people know where they are free to move about, let children come forward or stand on a pew for a good view.”

The Bishop of Bradford, the Right Rev David James (pictured), said: “In my experience, guests are sometimes nervous at a church wedding, and don’t know the drill. Yet they are an essential part of every wedding, and need to be made comfortable so they really enjoy themselves and remember it for the rest of their lives. “They, especially, should be looked after properly as our research tells us that when guests have a great day, the couples have a happier wedding.”

