

ARE THE CHURCHWARDENS DOING THEIR DUTY?

A Handbook of 1734 entitled "The Compleat Parish Officer" sets out the duties of the Churchwardens. Amongst the scores of obligations put on them are the following:

1. To see that parishioners come to Church every Sunday and to present the names of such who are absent.
2. Not to permit any to stand idle, walk or talk in the Church or Churchyard; to take care that no persons sit in the Church with their hats on, or in any other indecent manner, but that they behave themselves orderly, soberly and reverently, kneeling at the prayers and standing at the belief etc.; to see that none contend about places and to chastise disorderly boys.
3. To suffer no man to preach in the Church without producing his licence; to keep out all persons who have been excommunicated and to see that peace be duly kept in the congregation.
4. To prohibit all quarrelling either in the Church or Churchyard and if any offend in such case he may be suspended from entering the Church. Where one is assaulted and beaten in Church, it is not lawful to return blows in his own defence; for striking or laying hands on another there the offender shall be excommunicated.
5. To apprehend those who interrupt or disturb the Minister and bring them before a Justice of the Peace.
6. To see that the Lord's Day be duly observed, search ale-houses on Sundays and if they find any person therein during Divine Service they are to make them pay 3s.4d. and also 1s.0d. for being absent from Church, and the master of the house shall forfeit 10s.0d.
7. To execute warrants against such who profane the Lord's Day and levy the forfeiture of 1s.0d. on those who curse or swear. Persons doing any worldly labour on a Sunday forfeit 5s.0d.
8. To keep the keys of the belfry and take care that the bells be not rung without good cause.
9. To make presentment upon oath (usually twice a year), especially at the Visitation of the Bishop, of the several articles following, viz:

Whether there be a box for alms in the Church; the bells and bellropes are in repair; there be a Bible, Common Prayer Book and Book of Canons; a desk for the reader, cushion for the pulpit and a surplice; a communion table, table-cloth, cups and covers for bread, flaggons and font; a carpet, a register book and chest with three locks; King's Arms set up, grave-stones and monuments well kept; Lord's Prayer, Creed and Commandments in fair letters; the Churchyard well fenced, Church and chancel and parsonage house in repair etc.

Whether the Parson reads the thirty-nine Articles twice a year and the Canons once a year, preaches every Sunday good doctrine, reads the Common Prayer, celebrates the Sacrament, reads the Homilies, observes the 30th January, the 29th May and the 5th November; do preach in his gown, wear a surplice, visit the sick, bury the dead, catechise children, baptise with godfathers, marry according to law and lead a sober life. If any of the parishioners are adulterers, fornicators, drunkards, swearers, blasphemers, resort to ale-houses etc. in time of Divine Service, work on Sundays, not repair to Church, almshouses or schools abused, legacies given to pious uses, baptism neglected, women not coming to be churched, marrying in prohibited degrees, marrying without banns, licence or at unlawful hours, if sacraments received three times a year of all above sixteen; seats, if parishioners are placed in them without contention etc.

These duties were just for starters - the list goes on and on!

One must have sympathy for the omnipresent Churchwardens, who were apparently expected to be chastising unruly boys in Church and checking the vicar's licence, whilst simultaneously searching ale-houses for non-attenders.

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