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Sit down and write a letter

THERE should be, in all our filing systems, a place for those cards and letters sent by friends and strangers who have managed to express something precious, however small. These words can take many shapes — encouragement, thoughtfulness, or simple thanks.

We may be challenged, or even admonished, because the writer wants to support us. The picture or words may serve as a reminder of happy times, or just share something funny. The care shown can make a huge difference at various times in our lives.

After nearly 20 years in the Midlands, I moved recently to a new ministry. I have been overwhelmed by the many people who have taken the time to write. There have been surprises. I have letters from some people whom (to my shame) I hardly remember, but who remember a moment that made a difference. There are carefully chosen cards from people who, knowing the upheavals of house and community, struggle to find the right words of support.

In the envelope I find a photo of a person I baptised or prepared for confirmation. Wedding couples, whom I suspected had paid little attention to the spiritual dimension of the day, send news of a growing family and occasional visits to church. Many aspects of ministry remain hidden, unexpected, and beyond any attempt to evaluate.

Surprises take the shape of various expressions of love. The man, keen not to claim too much, tells me that he has been associated with my place of work for nearly 60 years — and that I definitely rate among the top four vicars he has known. History always takes the longer view. An older woman shares only her disappointment that I have not been able to fill the vicarage with children. Living up to expectations is a full-time and rather perilous occupation.

Or there are the people whom I expected to hear from, and the post yielded nothing. Excuses abound — for all of us — busyness; assuming that you matter, when you are only one among many. But I am left asking about the quality of our communication, and whether we should all take responsibility for nurturing a more generous and graceful approach.

Letter writing has been almost eclipsed by the advent of modern communications technologies. I continue to believe in the power of letters. In the midst of a culture addicted to the ephemeral and the superficial, letters continue to make a deep and lasting impression. I do not think that an email or phone call from St Paul would have had quite the same influence on the early Christians as the letters he sent.

Letters take time. Finding the right words needs space and a sensitivity that is often lacking in our task-driven lives. Letters reveal a commitment to people and the fabric of their lives. The movement of pen on paper can be an expression of our desire for

a more relational living that attends to an individual with all his or her preoccupations, hopes, and fears. Grace is to be worked out in the everyday. Attention to the detail of lives is an expression of love.

So find yourself some writing paper and envelopes. Let us never assume that people know that we are grateful or concerned or bothered about them. Attention to finding the right message will slow us all into a more graceful, generous, and relational life.

All of us have at least half a dozen such letters to be written. Write on, and see what emerges for yourself and those who receive these expressions of commitment to building up the good.