

Hospitality

A ministry description for local church leaders

Introduction

The most valuable earthly possession a person can have is a warm, supportive friendship. People without relationships are miserable people, but relationships cannot be purchased. They arise from our innermost needs, grounded in our God-given ability to love and care for others. A growing, healthy church nurtures healthy relationships.

In all cultures, friendships are developed through hospitality. True hospitality is a spiritual ministry. In today's busy world, a counterfeit hospitality often undermines our desire to meet this basic human need. People think, "I'd really like to have someone over, but . . ." Fear of being inadequate in time, skills, or a suitably furnished home creates in many Christians a reluctance to undertake hospitality.

Adventist congregations face some real challenges in becoming caring churches. These include a reluctance to get too friendly with secular people which results in few friendships with non-Christians. Adventist standards for leisure activity may pose a problem. And many homemakers work outside the home, resulting in very little time to prepare for "entertaining." In order for the gospel commission to be realized, the Adventist church needs a renewed spirit of Christian hospitality.

The Bible suggests several attributes found in a ministry of hospitality. A focus on the needs of others rather than on one's own is exemplified in the stories of Abraham and the three visitors (Genesis 18), the Shunammite woman (II Kings 4:8-37), and the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). A willingness to share whatever one has, even if it is meager, is demonstrated in the widow of Zarephath (I Kings 17), the little boy with a lunch (John 6:9), and the disciples from Emmaus (Luke 24:13-32).

A loving heart seeking relationship is exemplified by Mary (Luke 10:38) and in Simon's home (Luke 7:36-50). Courage to risk developing relationships is seen in Abigail (I Samuel 25) and in Rahab (Joshua 2).

Strikingly little is said about skills of cooking, the possession of a beautiful home, or ability in conversation. In fact, the only reference to this is Christ's gentle remonstrance with Martha not to "fret and fuss" about the details of preparing a meal for Him. He pointed her instead to the priority of being with Him. Thus, simplicity and service characterize the type of hospitality found in the scriptures.

A counterfeit form of hospitality is often confused with true Christian hospitality. This "entertaining" is ego-centered and based on materialistic concepts sold in advertisements and the media which suggest that being a "good" host or hostess demands gourmet cooking ability, a spotless and sparkling home, witty and charming conversations, etc. This form of entertaining can result in bondage, excessive labor, preoccupation with one's own needs, and reluctance to be spontaneously generous.

Duties of the Hospitality Team

The ministry to which a person is called when he or she becomes a member of the hospitality team will include the following duties:

1. Study and preparation. Development of a deeper understanding of Christian hospitality and the supporting skills requires study in a small support group. The hospitality team should meet once a month or once a quarter. It is important to spend time in caring for one another and in spiritual nurture through Bible study and prayer in order to be able to really love and care for others.

2. Taking care of visitors. Organize a system for visitor hospitality which will provide follow-up for their needs as appropriate. This usually includes providing a Sabbath meal. In smaller churches, this function may include the greeter activities on Sabbaths. It also means contacting each visitor, listening to each man and woman, and doing the things they need and expect in order to feel cared for by your congregation. The tradition of a festive Sabbath dinner, with animated conversation and rich fellowship is key to this, but no group activity can replace individual ministry.

3. Caring for new members. There is a special need for a system of hospitality for prospective and new members, as well as members with special needs, which will integrate them into the fellowship of the church. This may take many forms and may overlap to some extent with other activities in your congregation. It could include a pastor's Bible class, a new member class, home Bible study groups, a special fellowship dinner for new members once or twice a year, visitation and personal ministry, or the assignment of a special friend or "spiritual helper."

4. Coordination. You must promote and cooperate with efforts to encourage social fellowship among church members as a whole. What is the relationship between your hospitality ministry and the social committee of the church or the small group ministry? You need to settle these questions in discussions with the other leaders involved and work together with them in building the total program of your congregation. In this meeting there will be time for group study and discussion of a Bible passage about hospitality, sharing of experiences and blessings, and scheduling teams.

Resource Materials

The following resources are recommended for your ministry. You can purchase these by calling AdventSource (800-328-0525), the Adventist Book Center (800-765-6955) or your local Christian bookstore.

Christian Hospitality Made Easy by Patricia B. Mutch is a self-instructional kit including lecture notes and directions for each seminar session. Available from Patricia Mutch, Marsh Hall, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI 49104.

Creative Hospitality is a book by Nancy Van Pelt. Provides excellent ideas for practicing Christian hospitality.

Open Heart, Open Home, a matching study guide, and six hours of audio cassette tapes. Available from Seminars Unlimited. Call 1-800-982-3344.

Visit AdventSource On-Line at www.adventsource.org for a complete list of the latest resources available for local church leaders. You can place an order or request a catalog by calling 1-800-328-0525.

For information about additional resources and answers to your questions call the Adventist Plusline at 1-800-732-7587 or visit them on-line at www.plusline.org.