



Be hospitable!

TN146 Training Notes series: Management

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How can a church show hospitality?

I approach this topic not with any personal, spiritual gift for hospitality, nor as a specially hospitable person (which I make no claim to be), but as someone who longs to see churches organising themselves to demonstrate hospitality to our world as a witness to a generous, welcoming, hospitable God.

As much of the Bible was written in a culture where hospitality was seen as a vital feature of life, we clearly need to take a keen interest in this subject.

But what do we mean by this word 'hospitality'? It has its own 'industry' but when applied to individuals it means, according to my dictionary which expresses it neatly in three pairs of words:

'the friendly and generous reception and entertainment of guests or strangers'.

We probably think of it in terms of providing meals and accommodation – but the definition goes wider than just that.

But what might it mean for a *church* to show hospitality? That is a question that needs to be asked and I will attempt to provide some ideas to provoke thought in what follows.

These Training Notes complement TN86, *Customer care for churches?* and TN107, *A church policy on hospitality*, both of which you will find on this website. These Notes offer both a biblical background to this topic and then give 15 practical ideas,

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1 The biblical culture

You don't get volunteers in church (or in any charity for that matter), by pleading with a group of people to offer. Many churches are learning that lesson in this post-Covid world we now inhabit.

Nor do you encourage people to provide hospitality by inducing feelings of guilt and begging for offers of help. We need a change of culture from the individualism so prevalent in our world and so ingrained in most of us, to one that shows generous hospitality in all its forms. And to change a culture we need, among other things, to show what Scripture has to say about this subject.

Preachers need to feel a responsibility for bringing this subject out into the open rather than by-passing it. It is embedded in much of Scripture. We need to be ready to spot this and highlight it.

It keeps cropping up in daily life: consider Jesus' parables (from wedding feasts to disturbing a friend when his family are in bed!), or what he expected when sending out the twelve and the 72, or feeding needy crowds in more ways than one, and in stories like the Emmaus Road in Luke 24 and the widows' distribution in Acts 6.

Jesus and his disciples were often on the road. Online Holiday Inn bookings were not the norm then so what did happen?

Martha (one of my favourite Bible characters!) had to cook not for one but for thirteen visitors. This hospitality theme fills the pages of the Gospels from beginning to end: Jesus was born while his human parents were staying away from home, and on the cross he ensures his mother is cared for before his body is laid in a tomb that did not belong to him.

So I am talking at this point not about taking a concordance and checking out 'hospitality' but noticing that the idea is embedded within the biblical culture and preachers should be bringing that to light at every opportunity.

2 The command to be hospitable

But Scripture does also call for disciples to be hospitable. It is a central theme in the Old Testament law. We are to love our neighbour as ourselves (Leviticus 19:18) with Jesus' own underlining of this in Matthew 22:39, Mark 12:31 and Luke 10:27 – also cited in Romans, Galatians and James. This is then applied to foreigners who should come high on our priority list (Leviticus 19:33,34),

In the epistles we are told to practise hospitality (Romans 12:13, Hebrews 13:2, 1 Peter 4:9) and in the Pastoral Epistles the overseers/elders appointed are to demonstrate hospitality (1 Timothy 3:2, Titus 1:8). If it needed all those prompts in a hospitable culture, how much more do we need to hear that today to counter the deeply individualistic society we live in.

The world puts self at the centre of attention and groups other ideas around that. At the purely human level the Bible challenges us to view the stranger, the foreigner, the refugee, the disadvantaged, the one in need, as we would ourselves. This is love in action.

We might check out our preaching to see how often we bring in concepts such as strangers, neighbours, welcome and generosity as part of our response to the gospel message. We will never change a culture by pleading with people, but we can pray that

God will work through his word to show our congregations how we are to relate to others, outsiders in particular. Memo to self: action required on my own part.

But that gives us ideas for individual hospitality. What about church hospitality?

Let's go back to that basic idea of friendship and generosity to visitors and strangers. Here are 15 ideas of what such behaviour might look like on a church canvas. The list is far from exhaustive and I would love it to be a springboard for your own church's practical action. Rather than express it in statement form I will use questions. But no one is expecting the answer 'Yes' to all of them. If one of them gives you an idea for your church, that would be great.

3 **15 ideas for a hospitable church**

So here are my 15 ideas for starters, covering a wide range of possible applications. You will be able to add others. These come in no particular order of priority so here I list them alphabetically.

Accommodation

Is there a listing in which members of your church make known that they can offer short-term accommodation for any in need: those moving to the area with a house purchase pending, a new member of staff looking for somewhere to rent, a guest speaker or a refugee?

Church meals

So much can be achieved over a meal in building relationships. Do you have a catering team prepared to cook for outreach courses or lunches for the elderly and church awaydays? Or might you lay on a weekly supper open to anyone?

Community event

Would you be prepared to lay on a fun day for your local community, especially if within an area of special need, with no charge for entry, activities or barbecue meals? Publicise it well and see what happens.

Disability care

Has your church taken steps to ensure there is excellent disability-awareness in terms of building facilities and design, large print materials, sound reinforcement, ramps, and much more? Have you conducted a disability audit and taken action on necessary points? See Training Notes TN135, *How to conduct a disability audit*, for advice.

Food banks

Might you run a food bank as a living demonstration of a generous spirit for those in need? This can involve church members stocking up the bank with their own purchases week by week.

Gift identification

Does your church seek people with a gift of hospitality? Some people have a special ability to put strangers at ease, to have those from other cultures round for a meal at short notice, to welcome the outcast. Do you know who can be approached at a point of sudden need? Be careful though that by so listing a few in this way, others feel it is no longer their responsibility. See Article A43, *Every member on active service*, for detailed advice.

Global need

As a church do you respond to global needs as you are able? Have you headlined the possibility of members responding to these needs? Recent or current issues include those arriving from Hong Kong and refugees from Ukraine and elsewhere.

Home meals

Are members of the congregation offering Sunday meals to others, especially those who will not be able to invite them back? Consider students too within this. Or could someone organise a church lunch for all who are on their own at Christmas – or do this on a monthly basis?

Hospitality champions

Do you have a group who champion the topic of hospitality to ensure it remains high on your church agenda?

Mid-week welcome

Does your Church Administrator (or someone else) have a reception role and is this properly recognised in the skills needed, the training given, and the time and interruption allowed for? Or do you have volunteers on duty to welcome and chat to groups that have booked your premises?

Quality

Are you providing something better than instant coffee and plain biscuits in any refreshment time at church? Are your loos hospitable, ie. clean, tidy and stocked with necessities? Does your take-home literature look good?

Sunday services

In planning the liturgy and sermon do you always include the visitor in your thinking for assumptions made, or explaining who people up-front are? For both in person services and livestream? Do you ever review the recording of a service for in-language or church terms?

Visiting speakers

Are meals and accommodation offered plus a realistic fee to cover time in preparation and on the day (I estimate this to be up to £500 for a salaried mission speaker for a

full day event) and all expenses. How about a present for the speaker and, if relevant, for their family back home.

Website

Is your church website visitor-friendly? For your services, is there helpful information about lack of dress code, children's groups, facilities for babies, length of service, loos, etc.? See Article A14, *Create a quality website*, for more on this.

Welcome

Are newcomers on a Sunday put at ease by a congregation who all see themselves as the welcome team? Do you also have a specialised team to ensure no one is missed? Do you have a system that leads on from initial welcome to proper care and integration? See Training Notes TN109, *A test for your church's welcome*, for ways of checking out your welcome.

You will think of many more examples but these may give ideas of what it might mean to be a hospitable church, taking Scriptural teaching to heart.

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN146. See also Training Notes TN83, *The service isn't over yet*, TN86, *Customer care for churches?*, TN107, *A church policy on hospitality*, and TN109, *A test for your church's welcome*, which should be read alongside these Notes.

These Notes are based on the author's article for the Winter 2022 issue of *Transforming ministry*, the magazine of the CoFE Central Readers' Council. Contact John if you would like to enquire about the possibility of advice or training on welcome and integration.

Cartoons are by Micki Hounslow for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN146 under Management.

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