



A church policy on hospitality

TN107 Training Notes series: Management

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Two of the best known UK local church mission initiatives of recent years, Alpha and Messy Church, are based on the concept of hospitality. The spread of the gospel in Acts depended upon it. Church history over the centuries shows a rich thread of welcoming those who travel.

Americans use the term, quite correctly, to cover *every* aspect of welcoming visitors, especially at Sunday services. These notes take a more restrictive application and focus on looking after invited 'guests' or 'visitors' at times other than main church services or outreach courses. That means:

- caring for visiting speakers and mission workers;
- offering meals and care for various groups;
- encouraging personal hospitality among the congregation.

The recommendation is to have a church policy on hospitality to highlight this ministry.

So these notes do not seek to cover a newcomers' ministry including both welcome and refreshments at church services, nor a 'hospitality package' as part of a hiring out of church rooms, nor church catering with meals for Alpha-style courses or Messy Church.

Hospitality has the idea of offering practical welcome and care to strangers or visitors, often when no payment is involved. It is all about generosity, service and helping other people to feel truly appreciated, of being great hosts to all guests. See also Training Notes TN86, *Customer care for churches?* on a related theme.

The idea of hospitality to strangers is embedded in the Old Testament law (see, for example Leviticus 19:33,34). In the New Testament the idea appears in Romans 12:13 where we are commanded to 'practise hospitality', Hebrews 13:2 (showing practical love to strangers), 1 Timothy 3:2 / Titus 1:8 (elders and deacons being hospitable), 1 Peter 4:8,9 / 3 John 8 (showing hospitality to each other), etc.

Entertaining guest speakers/visitors

Here are some examples of how a church can offer generous hospitality to those who come to serve it as speakers or who visit when on mission work or for interview. Without a church policy no one feels the responsibility for caring for the speaker or visitor, or it is assumed that the Minister will sort it all out.

- **Arranging meals and accommodation**

If you expect a speaker to travel some distance for an evening event, or for a morning service, do you offer appropriate meals and, if necessary, accommodation? Some people are happy to travel early in the day, but others might prefer to come the previous evening and stay overnight. If the speaker at an evening event needs to be there by 7.00 pm. and has 90 minutes of travel time, do you offer a meal (even if they then say they prefer a sandwich in the car)? What matters is being asked.

Most speakers staying overnight do not expect a five star hotel but might prefer a carefully chosen, local B&B to having to make polite conversation with a family. Others would love to integrate with church members.

It is so encouraging when a church says good-bye to a speaker at 6.30 pm. after a hard day's work with them, knowing they have two or three hours of travel ahead of them, and provides them with a beautiful and generous packed supper! Better still to offer a meal before they leave, without putting them under pressure to accept.

This also applies to people coming for a job interview at your church where simple hotel accommodation may be more appropriate than in someone's home and other meals might need to be provided.

- **Going the extra mile**

It is lovely when a church uses a spot of imagination coupled with a generous spirit. I once found a hamper in my car after a training event (they did ask for my keys first!). It made a huge and positive impression. They had gone out of their way to do something special – as, it seemed, they did for all speakers.

Appreciation to a weekend speaker might include a bouquet of flowers (or a bottle of some kind) for a spouse at home, or for the speaker themselves. This of course would be on top of any fee charged or offered (see below).

This does not have to be expensive. 40 years ago the students on a church course I had run gave me a tie with their church crest on it (OK – but I did say 40 years ago!). It meant so much to me and I still have it and wear it.

- **Saying thank you**

It creates a good impression to receive a letter of thanks after a visit. An email is great – but a posted letter or card is better. Hand-written is better still. On the few occasions when I receive a card signed by an entire group, it goes on display in my study for weeks to come. It really means a great deal.

- **Paying proper fees and expenses**

Many churches appear to have no idea of what it costs for someone to come and lead a weekend or just preach on a Sunday.

If we take someone working for and paid by a Christian mission on an 'average' mission salary, who comes to a church to lead a single one-day event, the cost to that mission agency is about £500. That covers salary (plus national insurance and pension) for time plus preparation and pack down (two days), promotional literature given out and supporting PR, and office back-up costs for arranging the visit and supporting the mission worker. Travel expenses might add anything up to £100 at a normal mileage rate although train fare might be cheaper (provided the church then offers lifts from and to the nearest station).

So if a church gives a gift of £200 for the visit, they are cheating the society out of at least £300 and, perhaps, more. If the church is to show due hospitality it ought to pay the real costs and then give a gift to the society on top of that. They might also need to pay for accommodation, as above.

If the speaker is someone like a Minister who is already paid by a church and/or on a stipend, then the payment ought to be to that church to cover an appropriate part of that stipend plus all expenses. Plus an appropriate gift to the speaker.

It should go without saying that if a church are paying for someone to travel by car they pay at the proper mileage rate (currently 45p for HMRC purposes).

- **Showing generosity to mission workers**

All the above should also apply for global mission workers back at base for a period and other visitors from other countries. A hospitable church will arrange accommodation, meals, transport and other support as necessary.

Offering meals and care for various groups

Here is a range of ideas of groups you might want to lay on a meal for either one-off or on a regular basis.

- **Those who live on their own or from abroad**

Some churches arrange a Christmas Day lunch for those who would otherwise be on their own, but the idea can be extended to regular generosity of this kind. Those in student areas may lay on a Sunday lunch for all single people – but it would need to be free of charge to count as a proper part of a hospitality category.

For churches in areas where they are overseas students, it can be a lovely way of showing Christian love to offer meals in people's homes, accommodation similarly at holiday times, and outings with church members. Many overseas students come from cultures where this would be the norm, and not seen as especially hospitable – so all the more reason to do it.

- **External groups that hire your rooms**

How about arranging an occasional meal for all those who book your church premises? OK – it may have a spin-off of loyalty and repeat bookings, but it is also a generous gesture for people who have made use of your facilities.

- **Newcomers' meals**

Churches that offer newcomers a special event to introduce the church and its groups often do so with a meal included. This can be a generous way of entertaining newcomers rather than just offering an evening with instant coffee and cheap biscuits.

- **Events for the local community**

Some churches lay on fun days or other community activities and invite everyone in, without charge. Some people may take advantage of this but it makes a powerful statement to the local area that the church is not just for those who obey its rules and follow its forms.

Examples range from street parties, giving away coffee and cakes at a local shopping precinct, Saturday open days with bouncy castles, displays, games, barbecues, ice creams and the whole works – all paid for by the church.

Encouraging a church-wide culture of hospitality

If a church is to obey the biblical command to be hospitable, it has to be the work of individual members of the congregation in an informal way, as well as more formal arrangements at church. A church policy on hospitality can encourage this. For this to flow naturally you need to help Christians work out a theology of who owns their home. Consider:

- **Those able to invite visitors back to Sunday lunch**

Some people cook for more than just their family so, at church on Sunday morning, they can invite people back to lunch on the spot. It is lovely when the church culture is that many members regularly invite others into their homes, not just those who will then invite them back, of course.

- **Those who use their homes for others**

Some church members may have homes and gardens that are suitable for church meetings, courses or other events, and are happy to entertain on this basis. Others may be able to put up interns and student workers, with or without charge. Such people may be seen to have a gift of hospitality, or see that as their ministry within the church.

- **Hospitality in small groups**

One of the easiest places to develop a culture of hospitality is in a church's small group structure. Some church groups meet round a meal in different people's homes, many encourage practical love and caring within the more intimate setting of a group who know each other well. Members can then be encouraged to offer similar services to strangers.

- **Church meals for those who would value help**

Many churches have pastoral schemes so that people offer to deliver an evening meal for a week or two to church members with new babies, those who are recently bereaved, those just back from a stay in hospital or to any in special need. This can now be done with the help of software such as takethemameal.com.

What about vulnerable rough-sleepers and others who come to churches or to Ministers' homes asking for money? This needs a carefully thought-out section of the policy because to give money may not be the kindest thing to do, especially if it is immediately spent on drink or drugs. A church can be hospitable in other ways: hot drinks and basic food, meal vouchers with a local supplier, links with specialist local agencies for the homeless, and so on.

So there are some idea of what a Church Hospitality Policy might include. Christians need to recognise their responsibility as disciples in this field. For a fuller treatment and other practical ideas, not only in a Messy Church context, see the book 'Messy hospitality' by Lucy Moore (Bible Reading Fellowship).

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN107. See also Articles A28, *Rooms to let*, for 'hospitality packages' when hiring rooms, and A31, *Helping people back to church*, plus Training Notes TN14, *Setting up a Newcomers Team*, TN83, *The service isn't over yet*, TN86, *Customer care for churches?*, and TN109, *A test for your church's welcome*.

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN107 under Management.

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