

Hospitality Maximiser: I was a Stranger

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Introduction to Hospitality

This last year the Adventist church in Australia received some exciting news. We scored a 14% increase in Australians identifying them with the Seventh-day Adventist church. For many decades we had been declining and in the previous survey, just holding with a slight increase in 2006.

I was one of the first to hear this as I have had a long term involvement with the Christian Research Association. I remember calling up the Union President on a Friday night to share the good news. I said to him, "Chester I have some news that will make your day, no, your year!

As this good news has been shared I have noticed a strange phenomenon, that some people do not like good news. They don't find it easy to accept. In this month's ATODAY there is an article questioning that the Australian Census result is good news. I noticed at the ministers Conference at Avondale early this year a similar attitude amongst some. They seemed to want to discount this amazing result with the comment, 'They are mostly immigrants', as if this in some sense lessens the good news.

Yes it is true that the Adventist church in Australia has had a large number of immigrants identify with the church. This is the largest component of the 14% increase. And yes it is only Western Australian, Victoria and Northern Territory where we see an increase in non-migrant identification.

Now it is valid to ask the question were these new Australian's Adventists before they arrived? Did they have a loose connection with the church back home? Was a family member an Adventist? Did they attend an Adventist School? My experience is that many were not Adventist before coming to Australia.

But overall we should be very excited that 5181 new Australians identified with the Adventist church since 2006. What this result tells us is that the Adventist church is doing a reasonable job at welcoming strangers. We know that when people relocate, this is both a time when they seek out community but it can also be a time when they drift from the church.

The Big Issue

The Christian church primarily exists to welcome strangers into the family of God. Paul puts it in these words, "All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to Himself who gave us the ministry of reconciliation." 2 Corinthians 5:18. The Main Game for Paul, is the reconciling of man back to God. Reconciling meaning to integrate, unify, reunite and merge. This is not just some intellectual cognitive exercise but rather a literal movement of a person from one place to another. It involves physically bringing a person who is outside of God's family back into a relationship with Christ and his body. What is his body? It is us, the Church.

The welcoming of strangers and caring for them of course is the BIG ISSUE of Matthew 25.

"For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a **stranger** and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me." Matthew 25:35, 36.

It is so easy for the church to confuse its' activity with the 'MAIN GAME' of befriending lost people. Some years ago the London Transit Authority was receiving a lot of complaints because their buses were driving past customers who were standing at the bus stops. The Transit Authority put an explanation in the paper that has become infamous with public relations departments. The explanation said, "It is impossible for us to maintain our schedule if we are always having to stop and pick up passengers." Clearly, that company had forgotten its purpose.

Many churches make the mistake of acting as if the main reason for their existence is the 'program' of church. I have often sat in Sabbath School classes as a visitor and observed the program being rolled out without having experienced any sense of welcome or connection to the people. There is something rather incongruent when we tell the lost that God loves them then we show no real interest in them. The apostle John challenges us:

If someone has enough money to live well and sees a brother or sister in need but shows no compassion—how can God's love be in that person? Dear children, let's not merely say that we love each other; let us show the truth by our actions. 1 John 3:17, 18

If our seminars, evangelistic campaigns, cooking schools, door to door work etc. are not done for the purpose of befriending people and based on relationship building, then they are not the 'main game'. Programs are only a vehicle to that end. Making friends for eternity is why the church exists.

Definition of Hospitality

God's method of reclaiming the lost is simple! Use those who have been found, who are part of God's family, to find others. Have them do it by welcoming strangers, people who don't know God, into their lives. Unconditionally offer friendship to these people so they may have the opportunity to experience God through the life of his body. Have the members of the body offer hospitality to strangers frequently.

The offering of hospitality is a recurring theme in the apostle letters to the early church. What does Scripture mean by hospitality? The Greek word for hospitality, *philoxenia*, literally means "love of strangers". A compound of two words, *philos*, denoting love, and *xenos*, a stranger, hospitality describes the grace of opening our homes to those we do not know.

Scripture distinguishes hospitality from entertainment. Entertaining friends and relatives is important. We have family and friends over because of a friendship that exists. We expect to be invited back on some occasion. If after two may be three invites there is no reciprocal invite then you probably won't give another invite. Hospitality by contrast is about opening ourselves in friendship to a stranger unconditionally. It is a selfless act as there is no guarantee that you will ever receive a return invitation. It involves time and money with no certain return.

Jesus said, "When you give a luncheon, or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbours; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed..." Luke 14:12, 13

Biblically speaking hospitality is the kingdom building practice of Christ's disciples. It is about inviting a person who is outside of God's family to experience for a brief time its' fellowship. This experience is based around the simple things of life, like eating and socializing. It could also include ministering to people's needs.

Not Entertainment:

Hospitality is an act of inclusion that conveys respect to a stranger. It is not about the host; it's not about their entertainment skills, their flash home or cooking skills. It is not a Mrs Bucket experience.

We see the difference between entertainment and hospitality in the way Mary and Martha related to Jesus.

"Now as they went on their way, he entered a village; and a woman named Martha received him into her house. 39 And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. 40 But Martha was distracted with much serving; and she went to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me." 41 But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; 42 one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her." Luke 10: 38-42

Here we see Martha upset with her sister Mary. She is doing all the preparation for the guests while Mary is simply talking with Jesus. Jesus' reply to Martha is interesting, "you are a worrier, and bothered about all manner of things" – the state of the house, what food to prepare, where to bed people down for the night, etc. Mary has chosen the "good portion", having meaningful dialogue with Christ. She sought to find out what had been happening in His work. This was more important than her own concerns.

Jesus makes a very important point for us today. It is not a 'Mrs Bucket' experience of showing off our entertainment skills that is needed. It is about us bringing people into our life, our everyday existence. Not some fabrication of the real you.

Being Vulnerable

Scripture characterizes the giver of hospitality as being in a constant state of readiness to welcome the stranger. With moral nerve the disciple of Christ is prepared to be vulnerable to who God puts in their path. This readiness takes courage, gratitude and radical openness.

The hospitality host enters into a de-centering perspective. They are ready to enter into another's world and into a new experience. The act of giving hospitality shifts the frame of reference from self to others. "...hospitality is not so much a singular act of welcome as it is a way, an orientation that attends to otherness, listening and learning, valuing and honouring." (Amy Oden, Hospitality for a Gospel-Hungry World) Hospitality hosts attend to the spiritual needs of guests through listening to their stories or receiving them into the larger community.

A Christian Duty

All disciples of Christ are called to the ministry of hospitality. "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers..." says the writer of Hebrews (Hebrews 13:2). Show hospitality because the stranger may be an angel? Well may be for Abraham! I think the point is that when inviting a stranger over, you never know who they may become in God's family.

The apostle Paul concludes his list of love imperatives to the Romans church with two words, 'practice hospitality.'

"Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honour one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction and faithful in prayer. Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality." Romans 12: 9-13

Practicing hospitality is the practical workings of 'doing good', of 'honouring' others, of 'serving' and 'sharing' with people in need. This is not a one off exercise, or a once in a while activity but part of the lifestyle of the Christian. It is a 'practice' that encapsulates the essences of Christianity.

The apostle Peter is no less forceful on the importance of adopting a lifestyle that practices hospitality. He says, "Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling" (1 Peter 3:8, 9). Peter recognizes the fact that on occasions, and this is more so for some, you just don't feel like being social. But this is a spiritual duty that is not optional.

All are called to this ministry, some are gifted for it. For some hospitality is as natural as breathing. For others, the practice must be acquired. For all, the gift must be nurtured. "...hospitality is something that can be stretched into." (Karen Mains Pohl Making Room)

Hospitality ranks high on the list of qualities essential in church leaders. Both Timothy and Titus were reminded that elders "must be hospitable." (1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:8) Exercising hospitality is to live out the gospel. Each time you extend your hand in friendship you are sharing the goodness.

Meeting Christ

Offering hospitality in the New Testament goes beyond Christian duty. It is a spiritual discipline where one encounters Jesus himself. "I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in" (Matthew 25:35) It is a spiritual encounter with Christ through the stranger.

Offering hospitality is fraught with surprises. The biggest surprise is the fact that a stranger may reveal an aspect of Christ to us. To live expecting surprises, is a Biblical concept. We accept, on faith, that we are called to offer hospitality, to strangers, even enemies and somehow we will be blessed by their presence.

In a strange sense the stranger brings a gift to this encounter. The guest mysteriously becomes the host. God sits at the table with us when we extend the cup of cold water in God's name. It is not easy to recognize Christ in the stranger, one must have eyes to see. The sheep are unaware of their ministry to Jesus.

It was just ordinary stuff the 'sheep' were doing. What the judge deems important, what becomes the deciding factor between life and death, are the mundane, daily-life actions of a humble disciple. Not the eloquent preacher, nor the profound teacher, not even the risk-taking evangelist is named. The righteous are those average disciples who give hospitality to other average people.

Ellen White provides us an insight into this relationship.

"What a oneness Jesus here represents as existing between himself and his suffering disciples! He makes their case his own. He represents himself as being, in their person, the very sufferer. Mark this, selfish Christian; every neglect on your part to care for the needy and to sympathize with those in distress is a neglect of Jesus in the person of his saints. Our heavenly Father has blessings disguised in our pathway. Angels are waiting to see if we embrace opportunities within our reach of doing good,—waiting to see if we will bless others, that they in their, may bless us." (Ellen White HM, July 1, 1891 par. 9)

For both those on the right and on the left, the act of hospitality becomes the criterion for reward or punishment. Nothing is mentioned of the horrendous deeds that the wicked may have done – deeds of murder, hatred, stealing, or lying.

Albert Schweitzer in his conclusion to his book, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, expresses this principle of discovery through life's mundane experiences:

"He comes to us as one unknown, without a name, as of old by the lake side. He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same words: 'Follow thou me', and sets us to the same task which He has to fulfil for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts and the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience who He is."

Hospitality is more than offering refreshments after church or at its best 'lunch at my place'. No hospitality is a very spiritual discipline. It enriches ones understanding and connection to Christ himself.

Hospitality is Evangelism

Bill Hybels makes the point that hospitality is about creating a safe surrounding in which a non-believer can hear a dangerous message. It is when the non-believer feels secure in a relationship that they are able to cope with, the life changing implications of hearing the gospel. For becoming a follower of Jesus will turn their world upside down. It will rearrange their priorities. It may lead to the loss of friendship or family.

Christian hospitality is implicitly a subversive activity. "...it shatters social boundaries, especially those boundaries enforced by table fellowship. When we eat with the lowly and welcome strangers and "sinners" to our table, we topple social expectations and bear witness to the kind of love God has for all his creatures.

It is not coincidental that Jesus critics considered his practice of table fellowship as scandalous. "He eats with tax collectors and sinners"—this was not a compliment. And it was precisely the radical nature of Christian hospitality.

Christ's Method

It is a fact that persons brought into the church by a friend or family member are more likely to stay around than those who come in cold turkey. Ellen White has a lot to say about the importance of personal work and friendship making. Here are some of her classic statements:

"Christ's method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Saviour mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, 'Follow Me'." Ellen White Ministry of Healing, p. 143.

"Here is a lesson for the disciples of Christ through all time, not to exclude themselves from society, renouncing all social communion and seeking a strict seclusion from their fellow beings. In order to reach all classes, we must meet them where they are; for they will seldom seek us of their own accord. . . ." {ML 186.4}

"There is need of coming close to the people by personal effort. If less time was given to sermonizing, and more time was spent in personal ministry, greater results would be seen. The poor are to be relieved, the sick cared for, the sorrowing and bereaved comforted, the ignorant instructed, the inexperienced counselled. We are to weep with those that weep, and rejoice with those that rejoice. Accompanied by; the power of persuasion, the power of prayer, the power of the love of God, this work will not, cannot, be without fruit. {TSDF 102.9}

"This was the way the Christian Church was established. Christ first selected a few persons and bade them follow Him. They then went in search of their relatives and acquaintances, and brought them to Christ. This is the way we are to labor. A few souls brought out and fully established on the truth will, like the first disciples, be laborers for others".—Review and Herald, Dec. 8, 1885. {WM 60.2}

"Sermons will not do it. By visiting the people, talking, praying, sympathizing with them, you will win hearts. This is the highest missionary work that you can do. To do it, you will need resolute, persevering faith, unwearying patience, and a deep love for souls.—Testimonies for the Church 9:41."

Remaining Strangers:

The importance of welcoming strangers can easily be lost when the Christian forgets their own 'stranger' status. Scripture calls the followers of God "...strangers and pilgrims on the earth." (Hebrews 11:13) Remembering that "we were strangers in Egypt" is central to the Christian's identity.

The idea that God is calling the Christian to remove themselves from the world, to live separately, to dress differently, to look differently, to be unconnected to the world, goes contrary to the teaching of Scripture.

Early Christians and Hospitality

The early church treated hospitality very seriously. Luke records that following Pentecost the believers meet every day in the temple courts and broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts. This level of hospitality very much impressed their neighbours and friends and the Lord added to their number daily. (Acts 2:42-47) Hospitality played a major part in the spread of early Christianity.

Historian Marjorie Thompson says "...the remarkable explosion of Christianity in the first century was due not only to proclamation of the gospel, but to the extraordinary quality of Christian hospitality."

The early Christians, unlike the Jews, took seriously the 'salt' metaphor of mingling with their communities. They were deeply involved in the affairs of society. They moved from being a despised offspring of Judaism to a well-respected position. The Romans weren't quite sure how to relate to this group. A letter known as the Epistle to Diognetus 2nd Century:

"Christians are not distinct from the rest of men in country or language or customs. For neither do they dwell anywhere in special cities of their own nor do they use a different language, nor practice a conspicuous manner of life... But dwelling as they do in Hellenic and in barbaric cities, as each man's lot is, and following the customs of the country in dress and food and the rest of life, the manner of conduct which they display is wonderful and confessedly beyond belief. They inhabit their own fatherland, but as sojourners; they participate in everything as citizens, and endure everything as foreigners. Every foreign country is to them a fatherland and every fatherland a foreign country...they live on the earth but their citizenship is in heaven."

The early church was regarded by both Romans and Greeks, in its early stages, as an alien religion of a few weird Jewish malcontents. As the conviction of a special calling and mission grew and spread among these early Christians, there developed a strong determination to master such hostile environments and to permeate society with their new message. Once Christianity became a respectable religion the church (true) had different issues to deal with.

Christian hospitality would change the way society cared for the sick, poor and elderly. In a sense the Christian churches success in creating specialized institution of care - hospitals, hostels, and hospices - would lead to a decline of hospitality as a widely shared tradition.

Hospitality was treated seriously by early church leaders. The letter to Sulpitius Severus (363 – c. 425) from Paulinus of Nola Letter 24 is a sample of this commitment. Paulinus was bishop of Nola where he and his wife founded a home for monks and cared for the poor. His vast correspondence with well-known figures of his day, paints a picture of popular Christianity. Writing around 400AD he writes to his friend Sulpitius Severus, praising him for his understanding of his Christian identity and his involvement in ministry to the poor. Severus no longer owns land, but retains its use for travellers and beggars.

“As I have said, you have undertaken two saintly roles, by refusing to own the land you have retained, and by achieving perfection through that which you have sold. So in your apparent role of owner you are perfect, because your mind is free from the ties of possessions; mindful of how short the time is, you fulfil Paul’s injunction by possessing without possessing, for you keep possessions not for yourself but for those with nothing. You play host in your house so that your house may be a hospice. You are a traveller from your native land and an exile in this world that you may dwell in Paradise and be a citizen of your former country. You do not crowd your houses with dining tables, or cram them with masses of furniture or wealth. You measure off a corner for yourself and fill the house with travellers and beggars. You live as a fellow servant with your own slaves. The temporary lodging which is your dwelling, you do not possess like the father of a household, but you lodge there like a mercenary or a lodger, paying the Lord a regular rent for the favour of the lodging by serving your neighbour with body and mind.” (And You Welcomed Me Amy G Ogden p44)

Celtic Practice

One of the most important examples from history of the effectiveness of hospitality is seen in the Christianising of Ireland. Much research has been done of late to try and understand how it was that one man by the name of Patrick could in half a life time, take Christianity to Ireland and make it the dominant religious force.

Patrick was born around 360 AD most likely from Scotland or northern England. He grew up in a Christian family. Christianity had been brought to Britain by the Roman soldiers. By the time of Patrick’s youth they had departed. Patrick was stolen in his youth from his home and taken back to Ireland as a slave. During his lonely life as a shepherd he came close to God. After escaping and returning home, he had a dream where God called him to train for the priesthood and to return to convert the land of Ireland.

How did Patrick manage to oust the Druids and convert most of Ireland in his life time? One of the key factors was the practice of hospitality. Celtic Hospitality was fundamental to their outreach. We see this illustrated in ‘The Rule of Ailbe’, one of the bishops of Ireland. He charged the Celts to keep “a clean house for the guests and big fire, washing and bathing for them, and a couch without sorrow.” The Celts welcomed travellers, strangers, people in need into their communities.

Leslie Hardinge, in his book, *Celtic Church In Britain*, tells us that “Hospitality was an inflexible rule of all Celtic settlements. Dire penalties were to be inflicted on those who failed to supply the wants of the needy. The care of the wayfarer and pauper, the widow and orphan, was regarded as a most important practice of the Celtic Christian. “No call for help was ever denied.” Even to those abroad who desired an education, the Irish monasteries provided free board, lodging, books, and tuition. The ancient law condemned inhospitality as a crime. “The Celt was hospitable because he loved people.”

Giving Priority to Hospitality

Hospitality is just as important to day as in the early church. Hospitality is the ‘welcome mat’ ministry of God’s Kingdom. Few will enter into church life without having first spent time in a church member’s home.

Research of newcomers to church tells us that 80% of people joining the church have been brought by a friend or family member. These people come because they want to explore what they have observed in a church member’s life.

Hospitality is the great leveller. No matter what a person’s standing in society is, all are eaters and drinkers. Through the act of hospitality, we are able to connect with all of humanity.

The big questions for the local church are:

- Who are these people with the gift of hospitality?
- How do we currently use them in our church?

People with the gift of hospitality usually find it easy to make friends. They are very good at gathering people together and including strays and newcomers. Their challenge is to keep up with all their friends.

Typically these people are those in key leadership positions, highly involved in ministry to the saints. I will never forget the comment of one of our local church elders who said to me after sharing some of this material, “I would love that type of ministry but most of my nights are involved in going to committees. This week I have been out six nights at church committees.”

People with the gift of hospitality need to be released from all major church responsibilities for the purpose of building friendships with seekers. Isn’t that a bit extreme? No! It is simply that important.

Three Steps of Evangelism

Hospitality is fundamentally a relational approach to evangelism. George G. Hunter III, in *How Christianity Can Reach the West*, outlines the difference between the Celtic (relational) way of evangelism and the Roman (Traditional) way:

The Roman model for reaching people (who are ‘civilized’ enough) is:

1. Present the Christian message;
2. Invite them to decide to believe in Christ and become Christians; and
3. If they decide positively, welcome them into the church and its fellowship.

The Roman model seems very logical to us because most evangelicals are scripted by it! We explain the gospel, they accept Christ, and we welcome them into the church!

Presentation > Decision > Assimilation

Celtic model for reaching people:

1. You first establish community with people, or bring them into the fellowship of your community of faith.
2. Within fellowship, you engage in conversation, you involve them in ministry, prayer, and worship.
3. In time, as they discover that they now believe, you invite them to commit.

Friendship > Ministry > Commitment

The Celtic model reflects the adage that, for most people, 'Christianity is more caught than taught!' Research: by John Finney in UK reports that "most people experience the faith through relationships, that they encounter the gospel through a community of faith, that becoming a Christian involves a process that takes time." In his later book, *Recovering the Past*, Finney summarizes their chief finding in four words. For most people, 'belonging comes before believing.'

Jesus Modelled

If you review Christ's life, you see that he was a 'party person'! His first public appearance in adult life and first miracle was at a wedding party. Many of Christ's most significant miracles and teaching occurred at social events. Ellen White suggests that Christ's method alone should be our method. (See *Ministry of Healing*, p. 143):

1. Mingle
2. Sympathy
3. Ministered To Their Needs
4. Built Trust
5. Invited them to get involved.

What we know about the importance of building relationships is this:

1. Newcomers are seeking relationship before truth. While newcomers may be of any age, they are much more likely to be in their 20s and 30s.
2. Adventists do not spend as much time with non-church attendees as other Christians.
3. Newcomers led by a friend or family member have more staying ability: Research says: More than 80% of those who trust Christ and remain members are led to the Lord by a friend. More than 70% of those who trust in Christ and drop out are led to the Lord by a stranger.

4. Those with the gift of hospitality and evangelism are often too busy doing 'maintenance ministry' to be involved in making friends with seekers.
5. Many of our church ministries are failing to succeed because of their inability to connect with seekers.
6. We need more strangers among us because they keep us healthy.

Loneliness A Growth Industry

An epidemic of loneliness threatens to be one of society's greatest challenges in the 21st century. Never before have so many people in First World countries lived alone. Never before have families been so small, nor as geographically dispersed. But because it is an everyday change and one of our own choosing, it is easy to be unaware of its significance. Human isolation has a severe impact on the quality of many people's lives.

Along with this loneliness are a host of other social problems - depression, relationship dysfunction, youth suicide, drug abuse, gambling and violence. These social problems broadly reflect steadily increasing loneliness, alienation and social exclusion. It was in the late 1960s that our society saw the collapse or erosion of many of the social structures around which people built relationships, personal worth and a sense of belonging.

Today in Australia and most western countries there is an epidemic of loneliness. For much of the last century the nuclear family proved itself a resilient centrepiece of Australian culture. The typical Australian home as most of us would have known was - three bedrooms and a backyard on a quarter acre block. Mum Dad and at least two children. But recently a new trend has been evident - the rise and rise of the single person household.

The dark side of this story of loneliness is that more people will be experiencing loneliness and alienation, feeding our epidemic of depression. Complicating this change in family structure, since the late 1960s has been the collapse or erosion of many of the social structures around which people built relationships, personal worth and belonging. A recent study found that 10 per cent of elderly Australians see another person on average, less than twice a week.

It is within this cauldron of human need that God has placed his church, its mission being to make available the good news of how humanity has been reconciled to God and each other through Jesus. The gospel message is very much about dealing with man's alienation and loneliness. The apostle Paul said, "All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to Himself who gave us the ministry of reconciliation;" 2 Corinthians 5:18. This work of reconciliation is not just a future happening but is an integral part of the work of the church.

Hospitality as Evangelism

For many years, many Christian leaders and students of church growth have spoken of the importance of relationships in growing God's kingdom. The idea that 80% of people joining any

church are led by a friend or family member surprises few. However, until the last few years little attention has been paid to the clear scriptural command to show hospitality to strangers. The systematic and intentional befriending of strangers has not been a major feature in church growth literature.

It was back in 1999 that I first came across Josh Hunt. He would add some details to my understanding of this subject that would have a major impact. Josh focussed on using hospitality as a way to grow Adult Sunday School classes. His method was simple, challenge members to give one night to Jesus to connect with the un-churched and have your class commit monthly to a social activity. Upon these two principles we established a strategy known as 'Homes of Hope'.

'Homes of Hope' are a strategy by which to encourage churches to get intentional and systematic about putting the welcome mat out more often. Within churches there are appointed hosts who are supported by a Sabbath School class or home group. The host's role is to find "seeker" type people and to slowly introduce them to their small group and eventually to their church family. This strategy was bolstered by providing an expense budget of a thousand dollars a year to each host. What has been amazing about this strategy is the quick success for churches who have got involved.

In August 2005 we conducted a survey of hosts to see what was happening. Fifty four hosts reported of which thirty four had been involved in this ministry for more than twelve months. They reported a hundred and eight new people in church (baptized, profession of faith, former member or conversion). That was an amazing result! But what is even more amazing is how quickly many of these new people made a commitment.

It was not expected that the largest number of contacts would make a commitment within 3 months of a host connecting with them. Today's wisdom says that people take longer in making a commitment. Well that probably is true using traditional forms of evangelism. But not so when your focus is on the harvest. Harvest people are people who are ready to be brought in. The church has not been good at distinguishing between the ripe fruit and the green. But it would appear that the 'Homes of Hope' hosts generally speaking had been working with people who fit the harvest or seeker definition and hence they reaped a quick result.

The other significant data from this survey is found in the question: "Did They Attend a Public Series? 45% attended a public series?" Of those who attended a public series: 48% were already known by hosts. What this is telling us is that hospitality ministries will reap a harvest as a stand-alone ministry, but it will also multiply significantly the results of more traditional evangelism strategies.

The greatest challenge in fulfilling Christs command to 'welcome strangers', is in making it part of our life style, individually and corporately. Inviting people socially into your life is not 'rocket science' we do it all the time. However, it does require a level of intentionality and system. Assimilating a seeker (person in crisis or undergoing major life change) into a church community occurs as you over a period of time build a friendship with them yourself, and slowly, with your church friends, preferably a small group, and finally with the extended family the corporate church. It requires finding time to socialize in ways that are conducive to relationship building. Ultimately it is about welcoming strangers into your life and into Gods Kingdom.

Homes of Hope Strategy

The Homes of Hope strategy is a simple one! Spend time with people who are looking for friendship, support and a better life.

Pizza and Pictionary

‘Homes of Hope’, is very much about having people over for pizza and Pictionary. It is about identifying people in your life - work colleagues, neighbours, former Church attenders, even the person who cuts your hair etc. - and connecting with them in friendship. It is primarily about committing yourself, as a host, to be available to people on a weekly basis.

The second component of the ‘Homes of Hope’ strategy is, to gradually involve these new friends, if appropriate, with your church family. This will involve inviting some of your church friends along when you are having new friends over. It will mean planning with your home group or Sabbath School class suitable once a month social activities that you can invite your new friends to.

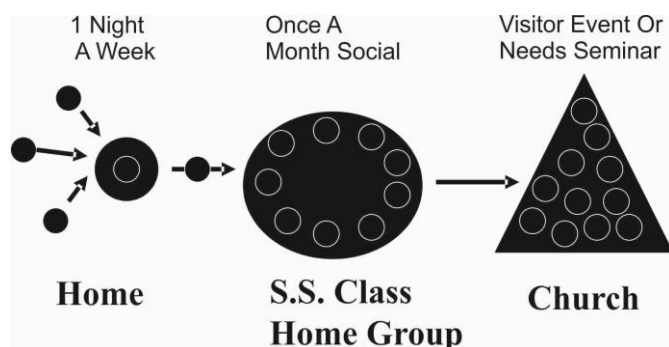


Figure 1 Hospitality Steps

Meeting Needs

The third and final component is to invite, if appropriate, your new friends to church events and programs that may be of interest to them. As you get to know them you will begin to identify needs they have that you and your class or group can meet. This may include simple things like child minding or watching a video on parenting, to larger projects, e.g. buying a car.

At all times it is important to remember, your task is to be their friend. It is their choice as to whether to extend that friendship to your church network. It is not your task to coerce or manipulate anyone. We are to make ourselves available, no-strings attached, in friendship and support at the level people choose.

Systematic

The ‘Homes of Hope’ strategy is based on the normal process of assimilation that occurs with most newcomers when they enter the church community. The key to this strategy is for the church to increase the frequency and opportunities of contact with seekers and former members through the three steps of assimilation.

Homes of Hope Budget

Providing hospitality and support to people requires both time and finances. The ‘Homes of Hope’ budget is an expense budget for covering some of the cost of this ministry. It may be used for entertainment costs, e.g. food, or purchase of materials, e.g. books and videos that are given to friends. Contact your local conference Sabbath School Department for details.

Relational Evangelism

Hospitality is fundamentally evangelism via relationship. There is a lot of misunderstanding of what relational evangelism is. Here are six key truths outlining what relational evangelism is about:

Firstly, it is Authentic: Your relationship to God is the single most important qualification for becoming a redemptive person. Jesus said if we "...abide in him" we will "bear much fruit". (John 15:5) Christians are to be good news before they share the good news.

Second, it is Natural: Instead of being what we are not, relational evangelism reflects our own personality and style. It fits who we are! This puts others at ease and gives us confidence to take risks for God that match who we are.

Next, Relational Evangelism is Personal: When it comes to reaching people for Christ, there are two possible approaches: Personal or impersonal. People are becoming immune to many of the less personal methods.

Fourth, it is verbal: Evangelism involves more than just building friendships and hoping they will work out what makes us tick. Paul says: "And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?" For someone to really understand the gospel it needs to be explained to them. We have to live and explain the gospel.

Fifth, it is Process-oriented rather than Event-oriented: To be effective, we must not inappropriately rush or push a person. It takes time to understand the message, believe it, and act on it. We must patiently bring people along, step by step.

Finally, evangelism is Team-orientated: God rarely uses just one person to bring someone through the entire process of coming to faith in Him. Different people contribute different help. We need to be supported individually.

Reaching Secular People

Often Christians hesitate to reach out to non-Christians because of a wrong understanding of the way secular people think. The following material explores three of the common myths and the typical characteristics of secular people.

Three Myths about Secular People

1. **Secularisation has erased all religious consciousness from people's minds.** Many of us hesitate to talk about spiritual things because we believe that we live in an age of "no-religion". NOT So! Secularisation has not made people less religious. It is true they shop around more and attend the traditional form of religion less frequently.

2. **Secularisation has erased moral consciousness, so that secular people are simply "immoral".** The fact is that secular people participate in many moral struggles and make numerous moral choices, but are no longer programmed by Church and scripture. The 20th and 21st century has seen an explosion of moral causes.

3. All secular people are sophisticated geniuses who have explored Christianity thoroughly and rejected it on rational grounds. The vast majority of secular people are mostly naive, superficial, gullible people who may fall for anything. Many of their thoughts are mere tapes of their cultural scripting, such as “There are too many hypocrites in church.”

Ten Characteristics of Secular People

1. *Secular people are essentially ignorant of basic Christianity:* Secular people feel wary about being involved in church. They do not understand the language nor have a background when it comes to Christian spirituality.

2. *They are seeking life before death:* The western world is no longer preoccupied with the threat of disease, famine. They are more interested in living life in a satisfying way now.

3. *They are conscious of doubt more than guilt:* Personal guilt is no longer as relevant. There is a pluralism of truth. People doubt Christianity’s claim on truth. There is a resistance to the view of Christianity being superior to other religions.

4. *Have a negative image of the Church:* They have a negative image of the church. They doubt the church’s intelligence, relevance and credibility. Many secular people have once experienced an irrelevant church. Many drifted out in their adolescent years and are not angry, but indifferent to the church. They are not sure Christianity makes any difference.

5. *Have multiple alienation:* People are alienated from nature, government, community and their vocation. There is little security and sense of belonging. Many secular people are intensely lonely.

6. *Are untrusting:* We enter the world with a sense of growing insecurity. Life experience for many, compounds this alienation.

7. *Have low self-esteem:* Many people are afflicted with a loss of dignity, or low self-esteem. People don’t value themselves enough to accept the idea that God loves them. Most believe that they have to do something to earn His love.

8. *Experience forces in history as out of control:* Many secular people face the future with great anxiety, because they perceive history as out of control. eg. assassination, wars, volatile stock markets. Many people feel no one’s in charge.

9. *Experience forces in personality as out of control:* Many people experience forces in their own life that they cannot control. Everyone seems to have some problem - alcohol abuse, drugs, gambling, abuse, dysfunctional marriages etc.

10. *Cannot find the ‘door’.* Many deny God because they cannot find Him. For secular people the church is not an easy door to God.

Growing Relationships

Sharing the Gospel

It is not what we say but what we do in a relationship that people take most notice of. 'Homes of Hope' ministry is about offering friendship and support to people who have unmet personal needs. Joseph Aldrich says:

"Evangelism is godliness fleshed out." "We fit into God's purpose by loving him, obeying him, and loving others until they ask why." "...we are commissioned to prepare webs of relationships so that Jesus may come to them." "Evangelism is a process through which people flow toward the foot of the Cross."

Communication Approaches that Don't Work

The biggest mistakes that Christians make in trying to reach unchurched people -

"Would-be evangelists alienate people when they put them down, or talk down to them, or reveal, perhaps in body language, that they don't respect them. We turn them off when we don't take time to find out where they are coming from, or when we act as though we have all the answers. Perhaps most of all, we miss engaging people when we fail to perceive and appreciate the faith they already have, and the hunger for faith they have." Donald Morgan

Seven Positive things that Effective Communicators do

1. *Listen Actively*: We need to discover the other person's story, their sufferings, hostility, and alienation - and share our own. It is important that they experience our acceptance, and interest in them. The more they feel understood and heard the more ready they will be to listen to us.

Listening Skills: Attending: Need to find times when we can give seekers our full attention both physically and psychologically. Talk about their agenda and their concerns.

Reflective: Do more active listening to what the seeker is saying and expressing emotionally. Reflect back often what you think they are feeling concerning what they have shared. This will increase their level of personal sharing and build trust between you.

Deeper Understanding: The skill of giving feedback for a person's deeper understanding about themselves. This feedback is based on the listener's intuition and should be given cautiously as sometimes our hunches are wrong. These (Ahha moments of feedback) can be of great help to a person learning new and better ways of living.

Avoid: Judgmental, evaluative responses and hollow, cliché statements.

2. First engage people on neutral turf, or their turf.

3. Relate to the seeker as a friend and ally, not an adversary to win. Treat them as one of your family even though they may not always exhibit Christian values and standards.

4. Don't do all the communicating. Faith is more caught than taught. Let the seeker discover the faith for themselves. Most people get involved first, then, they ask the Biblical and theological questions, and then move to commitment.

5. Speak early to the questions of immediate human need. Show that Christianity is relevant to their lives. eg, loneliness, relationships, peace, meaning, etc. Begin where people are, not where we want them to be.

6. Nourish the adoption process over time. Slowly increase the invitations to the seeker to be involved in your personal, group/class and church life.

7. Do not put pressure on. The aim of this hospitality ministry is to build relationships and meet people's needs. It is not to pressure them into a 'yes' vote. It is better to involve them in the life of the church and even in ministry, before calling for a commitment to Christ.

Increasing the Strength of Relationships

1. Forget the Silver Service. Get to a point of normality as soon as you can in your relationship. Keep your entertainment simple so they can easily return your hospitality.

2. Do lots of fun activities. Fun activities quickly build relationships.

3. Find excuses to love their kids.

4. Take an interest in their interests.

5. Do the little things

6. Anticipate problems in their life.

7. Ask for their help.

Make your relationship two-way by asking for their assistance when needed.

Starting Spiritual Conversations

Talking Spiritual

The 'Homes of Hope' ministry will create many opportunities for conversations that lead to spiritual matters. It is important to be aware of the other person's needs and your own witnessing style. The following page outlines three methods by which you can initiate spiritual conversations. In doing so it is essential that you respect the rights of the other person at all times.

Three Methods

1. *Direct:* This method best fits those who have a confrontational style. It typically takes the form of a question or statement. Example: "Do you ever think about Spiritual Matters?" Or "Where are you on your spiritual journey?" Or "If you would ever like to know the difference between religion and Christianity, just let me know."
2. *Indirect:* This approach builds on the direction the conversation is already heading by using the topic being discussed as a bridge to relate to a spiritual topic. It is using everyday subjects and putting a spiritual twist to it. For example: If your friend is going through a difficult time similar to what you have encountered, you can make a transition to a spiritual conversation by sharing with them how your faith in Christ helped you.

3. *Invitational method*: The invitational method transitions the conversation by inviting our friend to a Christian event that relates to the topic we are discussing. For example: Suppose the topic of music comes up and there is going to be a concert at your church. Use the invitational method by saying “If you are interested in music, we have a concert coming up at our church in a couple of weeks that you might enjoy. How would you like to come?”

Spiritually Interested?

One of the important principles for Christ’s disciples to understand is how to identify who are those people in our life that are ready to be harvested. Who is it we should invest extra time in?

It is important to understand that the factors that influence personal receptivity. A person’s view on Christianity and spiritual things is very much the result of a number of factors:

- a. The circumstances under which a person learned about Christianity.
- b. The caricatures which have distorted their grasp of the gospel.
- c. The Christian a person has known and their influence upon him or her.
- d. The previous attempts (if any) to evangelise them.
- e. The individual’s family loyalties and the role religion play’s in determining them.
- f. The individual’s degree of satisfaction / dissatisfaction with life.
- g. The nature and stability of his or her interpersonal relationships.
- h. Where your friend sits on a continuum between strong opposition and acceptance of the gospel.
- i. The condition of the soil of his or her soul.
- j. The nature and frequency of contacts with the church.
- k. The transitions facing the individual, whether social, emotional, physical, financial, geographical.

It is important to understand a person’s background before trying to convince them of the truthfulness of Christianity.

Spiritual Interest

People show they are ready to go further when:

- they enjoy being with their Christian friends.
- their religious background and experience ceases to be a hindrance.
- they have responded positively to the ‘seed planting’ efforts of their Christian friend.
- they become aware that the gospel may contain solutions to their felt needs.
- they are curious about religious things.
- they are willing to speak of their own spiritual pilgrimage.
- they take the initiative to include you in their social activities.

- they are willing to participate in some harvest events.

Conclusion: Today's Challenge

Today we live in a world where it is becoming more and more difficult for the Christian message to be heard. The churches position on homosexuality, same sex marriage and abortion make the church appear judgmental, bigoted and unloving. This is compounded by the vicious condemnation that is seen on street corners by a small number of Christian zealots protesting against gays and women who undergo abortions.

Equally as destructive to the churches reputation has been the unacceptable abuse of children and cover up by Christian institutions. This is a huge credibility issue for the church. This behaviour contradicts the core values of Christianity. All this means that the public is less likely to listen or give attention to the church and its message.

Today the church is also experiencing a new wave of militant atheistic attacks. These people are so hostile towards religion that it is near impossible to have a rational discussion with them. They portray the church as anti-rational superstition.

So as in Ancient Rome the church today has a need to exhibit a "manner of conduct" which is "wonderful and confessedly beyond belief." (Epistle to Diognetus 2nd Century) Today the Christian witness will not be so much what is said but what is lived. Christian hospitality in its many forms is an essential component by which the church can communicate the gospel message.

Christ said he came not to condemn but to save (See John 3:17). That saving message must be wrapped up in a loving and welcoming Christian community.

Appendix Social Ideas

Many seekers, because of their life circumstances - loneliness, sickness, shyness - have little fun. Social activity will not only help the seeker to cope more effectively with their life difficulties but help grow the relationship between host and seeker.

The following activities are designed for both 'Homes of Hope' hosts and class/group monthly socials.

Host's Social Activities

Here are some social ideas for growing friendships. It is preferable to involve some of your class members with you.

Shopping: For many ladies this is one of the easiest activities! Why not include a non-church attendee? Shopping for clothes has a personal element to it that is conducive to relationship building.

Sport: Invite both a church friend or friends and a non-church person to join you in a sporting team. eg, squash, tennis, golf etc. The important thing is regular participation.

Sport Events: Instead of going to sporting events on your own invite a seeker friend.

Dining Out: Eating out is probably an activity that is mostly done amongst good friends. Include your non-church friends with your class friends. It requires little effort to add one or two persons to your group. Be sensitive to cost.

Concerts: Attending performances with friends can be a fun activity. Avoid entrapping your non-church friends by attending religious performances unless clearly requested by them.

Holidays: Inviting a friend on a holiday has got to be one of the most personal things one can do. Including another friend from your Sabbath School class will extend their friendship with church goers.

Games Night: Having people into your home for a 'board' games night is a simple activity,

eg, Pictionary. Check out their interest before inviting.

Film Night: Borrow a data projector and invite the 'boys' over to watch the football final.

Trail Riding on Horses or Mountain Bikes: A great activity for a small number of people.

Christmas in July: Have a Christmas banquet in July, inviting your closest friends and those who you would like to become good friends with.

Street Party: Choose a time of celebration, eg, Christmas, football finals, and invite your street to a barbeque picnic.

DVD and Discussion night: Have a seeker over to view a video on a topic of interest - hobby, issue etc. Include a group friend who shares an interest in the topic.

Jokes and stories night: A story telling/joke night works well with seekers and your group members if there is a level of friendship already. Have some nibbles and munches on hand.

Special Breakfast: Take a few close friends from your class and some seekers for a special breakfast. Could be at a fancy restaurant or at sunrise on the beach.

Dinner Party with Theme: Have a dinner party based on a country - Thai/Mexican/Old English etc. Choose a theme based on a seeker friend's nationality.

Uno or similar card game: Simple games like 'Uno' can provide fun in the right setting.

Ten Pin Bowling night: Bowling is an excellent social sport.

Attend a Cricket Test or One Day Match: Cricket provides lots of opportunity to talk.

Fireworks Display: Attend a New Year's Eve celebration.

Combined Garage Sale: Profitable and helpful things to do with seeker friends.

Class/Group Socials for Seekers

Here are some ideas for monthly class socials which are suitable to invite non-church attenders to. Visitors should know that the other people are your church friends. Preferably they have met some previously.

Picnic: Food and friends are an excellent combination. This might be done after church on a special visitors' day.

Barbeque: A barbeque in the park or at home can be a relaxed way to get together. Explain beforehand that some of the group will have a vegetarian menu. Have a backyard treasure hunt for the kids.

Camping: A class camping weekend is an excellent place to invite non-church goers who are starting to show interest. Camping creates plenty of opportunity for people to sit around and chat.

"Tupperware" Type Events: Use "party ware" sale evenings as class events where you invite your non-church friends.

Competitions: Why not enter your class into a competition where you can invite other friends to participate.

Fun Run

Quiz Night: Organise a quiz night with your work and church friends for a special cause.

River Cruise: Tourist attractions like river cruises can be a low key activity for the class.

Beach Outing: A class outing to the beach is a very casual activity to invite non-attenders to. The beach is very conducive to sitting around chatting.

Go-Karting: An exciting activity for the 'big boys'. Don't embarrass anyone with the cost.

Water Skiing: A fun activity that can include the kids.

Poetry Night: Have people bring their favourite poem to share include some snacks.

Bowling: This was a popular game that still can be a very social event. Hire out the whole place and have a party.

Couples' Weekend Away: Spoil yourselves and go away for the weekend to a guest house without the kids.

Mystery Restaurant night: Most people enjoy eating. Research a selection of good quality and value restaurants. Announce the location one hour before arrival time.

Progressive tea (on a small scale): A great way for newcomers get to know the group quickly.

Mothers or father's day event for the group: This really goes down well for single parents who you are trying to reach.

Karaoke Night: Can be a lot of fun, more suited to extroverts.

Cricket Match: Organise a cricket match between two Sabbath School classes and include some seeker friends.

Round-Robin Games Night: Great for classes to compete against each other with invited guests. Particularly great for the single parent seeker families.

Car Boot Sale: Conduct a Car Boot sale in a local public area or park.

Breakfast at the Church on Sabbath: Good for inviting irregular class attenders.

Picnic lunch/tea in local park: Again, great for inviting infrequent class members and seeker friends.

A World Cup Rugby Match Social: Major sporting events are a great excuse to get together with your class and seeker.

Late Summer Evening Beach Walk