



Handbook for Creating *Your* Room In The Inn

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Room In The Inn: A Communion Meal

Charles Strobel

Since our beginnings, I've used many images to explain the importance of Room In The Inn. I've described the program as a "sanctuary" from the violence of the streets, "Ellis Island" for urban refugees, a "Red Cross tent" in a war zone, an "oasis" in an asphalt desert, a gathering of "friends," and as a rewriting of the original "no room in the inn" story.

The most important image I use now is the notion of a "communion meal."

Consider all the ways we eat a meal—often on the run. Twelve people sitting individually at a McDonald's eat a meal. But something is missing.

The gathering of twelve people in a Room In The Inn congregation also experience a meal, to be sure, but more. It's not just a meal, but a communion meal. A communion meal is a meal that has sharing and intimacy. It reaches the depths of the soul and the heights of mystery. It is called sacred by people of religion. Unlike God, however, no one ever doubts or needs to prove its existence. A communion meal is experienced the way we experience the sunsets and the mountain tops.

For years homeless and housed individuals have gathered to sit down and share such a meal. It has been a powerful element of grace and hospitality that has transformed thousands of lives. Regardless of the food—chili, lasagna, turkey, hamburger, potatoes, corn, salad, rolls and drink—a Room In The Inn supper carries the force of the unleavened bread, unblemished lamb and choicest wine eaten at those ancient Passover suppers and at the Last Supper.

Ultimately, such a meal contains the possibility of a communion with the God among us.

Over the years people have come together to do this. Reluctantly at first, for suspicions were plenty. Some congregation members stood on the other side of a serving counter, like vending machines dispensing food without sharing, while homeless guests wanted to go off and eat in a corner by themselves.

But the invitation of God to come, sit down and eat together won the hearts of all. And the miracle of a communion meal was born.

Now all these years later, I believe it remains our most important connection. Room In The Inn may be safe and warm, clean and quiet, dependable and secure. But most importantly, it is loving hospitality—found in the sharing, the laughter, the tears, the memories, the hopes and all those other moments that bring us communion with others and with God.

Who Are The Homeless?

Room In The Inn

The Chronically Homeless invariably suffer from a combination of several of the following disabling conditions:

Mental Illness

Schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and other severe and persistent mental illness;

Physical Disabilities

Profound injuries, illness, birth defects, or socially debilitating physical traits (such as disfigurement, dental deficiencies, or obesity caused by a “survival” mentality);

Educational Deficiencies

The inability to read/write, the lack of basic academic skills or no high school diploma;

Severe Trauma

History of sexual or physical abuse, combat, catastrophic loss of family, or a similar traumatic event;

Addiction

Drugs, alcohol, sex, gambling, and other addictions;

Severe Family Dysfunction

Abusive parents, broken homes, and/or multiple residences/caregivers;

No Family or Significant Support System

Total lack of family or support systems due to death, alienation, or institutional childhood;

Learning Disabilities

Dyslexia, ADHD and other disorders that interfere with education and life functioning;

Developmental Disabilities

Low IQ or brain damage that hinders intellectual functioning;

Criminal History

Existence of a criminal record that seriously limits opportunity;

Limited Occupational Skill Set

Inability to do anything beyond the most basic manual labor;

Transportation Deficiencies

Inability to purchase, maintain, insure, or legally drive a car or obtain transportation through public or private means;

Life Skill Deficiencies

Inability to manage the most basic life functions such as hygiene, housing, transportation, and interpersonal relationships;

Prior Long-Term Institutionalization

Extended stays in foster care, juvenile institutions, mental hospitals, prison, or other institution;

Generational Poverty

Two or more generations of family dependent on public assistance or charity for basic living needs that has fostered an attitude of hopelessness;

System Navigation

Inability to effectively navigate Government and Social Service Agencies;

Cognitive Disability

Impairment to how a person thinks reacts to emotions or behaviors, inability to problem solve, lack of understanding of consequences of ones actions, emotional immaturity, the all or nothing thought process, inability to manage life, impairment of mental process of knowing, including aspects such as reasoning and judgment.

Gifts You Give and Receive

Room In The Inn

November 1-March 31

When we step out in faith and offer ourselves in service to others, we receive many gifts in return. Room In The Inn blurs the line between giver and receiver.

Gifts You Give. . .

Safe, warm shelter in the coldest time of the year

A hearty, home-cooked meal eaten together

Respite from the desperation of the streets

Kindness and acceptance

Time to listen

Dignity and respect

Encouragement

Hope

Gifts you receive. . .

New friendships

Gratitude

Joy of sharing a meal

Laughter

Chance to hear stories from guests

Education about homelessness

Overcoming myths and stereotype

Working with other volunteers from your congregation

Broader sense of community

Satisfaction from knowing you make a real difference

Deeper understanding of your blessings

Organizing The Program

Room In The Inn

November 1-March 31

Step One: Enlist Volunteers and Coordinators/Plan Program

One person can recruit volunteers, but a team works best. This team is responsible for establishing guidelines for the guests to follow while at your congregation, scheduling volunteers, addressing problems, and serving as congregational liaison to Room Inn The Inn's downtown office. Some congregations have a main coordinator and several team leaders in charge of meals, transportation, supplies, etc.

Step Two: Recruit Volunteers

This can begin as early as August with a thank-you note to last year's volunteers and/or a message from the pulpit. In continuing weeks, the team leaders and coordinator can promote Room In The Inn to Sunday school classes and other small groups. Some congregations have "kick-off" events like a dinner to recruit volunteers. Word-of-mouth is also very effective.

Step Three: Talk with Groups, Classes, and Departments

Sometimes getting groups involved in Room In The Inn is easier than recruiting individuals. There is a comfort in working with people you know. Some congregations assign an evening to a specific group and ask that group to plan the logistics.

Step Four: Follow-up

Volunteers should place their names on sign-up sheets well in advance of the scheduled night for Room In The Inn. The coordinator or team leaders should remind the volunteers of their commitment the Sunday before their scheduled night. It's also a good idea to thank volunteers for their efforts. One congregation uses its weekly bulletin to express its thanks.

A Final Note

If you have questions, need help solving a problem, or would like a sounding board, please call the Room In The Inn staff members at (615) 251-9791.

How Do We Get Started?

Room In The Inn

November 1-March 31

To begin, imagine that you are homeless and on your way to a shelter. What would be some of your basic necessities? Here is a list of items congregations should provide.

Sufficient mattresses, cots, and blankets (Room In The Inn assists with these.)

Space for comfortable arrangement of cots and blankets (fellowship hall, gym, classrooms, etc.)

Table and chairs for sharing the meals

A place to prepare and serve food

Enough food and drink for two meals and a snack

Adequate bathroom facilities

Sufficient heating and cooling

Proper ventilation

Approved safety exits with clear access

Adequate lighting

Designated smoking area

Telephone service with posted emergency numbers for volunteers

First aid kit

Fire extinguisher

Toiletry items like towel, soap, wash cloths, etc.

How Many Volunteers Will We Need?

Your congregation will also need volunteers to operate your program. Some of the responsibilities include:

Transporting guests from the downtown center

Setting up for Room In The Inn

Preparing the evening meal

Serving the evening meal

Spending the night (2 volunteers)

Preparing the morning meal

Serving the morning meal

Transporting guests to downtown center in the morning

Cleaning up after Room In The Inn

Scheduling volunteers and providing oversight of the program

Ideas for Congregational Volunteers

Room In The Inn

November 1-March 31

The heart of Room In The Inn is the local volunteers who open their doors and welcome in strangers as honored guests week after week. The volunteers give Room In The Inn its power and meaning. No matter how many congregations participate and how large the program grows, the intimate experience of eating together and sharing stories is the critical element. Each volunteer has a unique opportunity to offer the gift of hospitality.

Here are some volunteer guidelines to make the Room In The Inn experience positive for everyone.

Dress appropriately.

Maintain confidentiality. Do not share personal information such as your telephone number or address. Also, do not share personal information about guests with other people.

Be respectful of each guest and volunteer.

Refrain from accepting gifts and giving gifts to individual guests.

If you wish to do something additional for an individual guest, please speak to a Room In The Inn staff member.

Consider each guest as an individual.

Listen to each guest but do not expect to "fix" the situation.

Be honest and do not make promises that can't be kept. Feel free to say "I don't know" or "I can't."

Always use a calm voice.

Do not touch a guest without permission under any circumstance.

Accept responsibility for your actions.

Welcome the guests to your congregation and explain all rules upon arrival, including lights out, smoking area, wake-up times, etc.

Give the guests clear expectations. Your guests go to different congregations every night and each one has a different set of rules.

Check your heating system. Some systems are on a timer and operate at lower temperatures at night, which can result in uncomfortable sleeping conditions.

Monitor your clothing room. One or two changes of clothing should be sufficient for any guest.

Ensure all blankets are returned to the downtown center by the volunteers.

Complete the summary sheet from the previous night and return it to the downtown center the following morning. This form is critical in evaluating the ongoing program, in identifying problems and concerns, and for capturing data about Room In The Inn.

Do not overstep your bounds as a volunteer.

Use your instincts. If you are uncomfortable with a guest or a situation, let someone know.

If your congregation has leftover food, please have your van driver take it to the Guest House door by the wooden fence. It can be used for participants in our residential programs.

Helping Individual Guests

Room In The Inn guests often share their personal stories with volunteers at each congregation, and their experiences can inspire generosity and kindle a desire to become more deeply involved with a particular individual. This might include offering special assistance with employment, housing, medical needs, or some other request.

Before providing help to a guest, volunteers should consider consulting with a member of the Room In The Inn team. Staff members may not know about the difficulties a guest is experiencing and can provide additional support and guidance. They can serve as liaisons between the congregation and guest in order to protect confidentiality and fairness. Finally, Room In The Inn staff members might be able to present a more complete picture of someone's specific needs.

Reaching out is an act of faith. Room In The Inn provides a venue for fellowship that can result in empowerment and change. Its staff serves as a sounding board in determining appropriate assistance for individual guests so that a congregation's resources can be used in the most effective way.

Small Gifts of Hospitality

Room In The Inn

November 1-March 31

When planning meals, please remember many guests have chronic health conditions. It is a good idea to offer low-sodium and sugar-free options at dinner.

Serve your guests at the table. They have to wait in line for so many of their meals.

Serve only decaffeinated products in the evening.

Have the cots and mattresses set up before the guests arrive.

Place a mint on each pillow.

Provide the daily paper.

Watch television for evening entertainment.

Have a "movie night" with popcorn and sodas.

Have a "tailgate" party and watch a football game on television.

Let volunteers show off their talents. There may be singers, magicians, or musicians in the congregation who would love to perform for the guests.

Provide and mail holiday cards for the guests.

Eat with your guests instead of sitting with other volunteers.

Include guests in special activities at your church like musical performances, holiday events, and parties.

Take time to listen to your guests, even if what they say doesn't seem important. They need to be heard.

Play dominoes, checkers, or board games with your guests.

Have a sundae bar for the guests.

Place an inspirational card at each place setting at dinner.

Ways for Youth Groups to Participate

Room In The Inn

November 1-March 31

All members of your congregation have something they can give your guests. Here are some ideas for involving youth.

Have children decorate the sacks for sack lunches.

Ask children to create centerpieces for the tables.

Allow the youth choir to perform for the guests.

Have children make cards for the guests.

Ask each child to give part of their Halloween candy to be placed in sack lunches or on guest pillows. Candy has value to children and can be used to teach about generosity.

Give teens the responsibility of setting up the cots or mattresses.

Ask the youth to manage the clothing closet. They can solicit clothing donations, sort the clothes, and arrange them before distribution.

Have children bring a dollar to Sunday school for a field trip to a dollar store. After some discussion, allow the children to buy what they think is needed for Room In The Inn. The outcome is usually great for this project. Some may wish to pool their money.

Give teens the responsibility of planning and preparing an evening meal.

Ask the youth to do fundraisers to provide the money for sack lunches.

Allow teens to plan a drive for holiday gifts for the guests.

Have teens plan a holiday or football party for the guests.

Have the youth create a talent show for the guests.

Other Ways to Help

Room In The Inn

November 1-March 31

Some members of your congregation may not be able to serve dinner or spend the night with your guests. Here are some suggestions on ways they can join in the program.

Provide financial support to your congregation for Room In The Inn.

Donate food or supplies for the program.

Coordinate a donations drive for holiday gifts.

Help put holiday gift bags together.

Collect toiletries from hotels while traveling.

Organize the Room In The Inn pantry at your congregation.

Do shopping for supplies and food.

Help organize the clothing closet.

Donate magazines for the guests to read.

Call congregational volunteers to remind them of their Room In The Inn commitments.

Write thank-you notes to congregational volunteers.

Holiday Gifts

Room In The Inn

November 1-March 31

Ideas if your congregation would like to give guests gifts:

Bus passes

Phone cards

Backpacks

Wallets

Socks

Fast food gift certificates

Puzzle Books

Batteries

Hand Warmers

Thermal Underwear

Inexpensive Watches

Inexpensive radios with headphones

Flashlights

Jewelry and makeup for women

Sewing kits

Toiletries

Razors

Pens and notepads

Your guests would also enjoy a holiday party with hot chocolate, cookies, and a holiday movie!

Contact Information

Room In The Inn

November 1-March 31

Room In The Inn
251-7019

After 10 a.m. Weekdays-Mary Wilder
Mary.Wilder@RoomInTheInn.org

Room In The Inn
251-7064

24/7 Emergency Number

Room In The Inn's Main
Switchboard
251-9791

8 a.m.-4 p.m. Weekdays

Administration@RoomInTheInn.org

Congregational Helpline
251-7024

8 a.m.-4 p.m. Weekdays

Administration@RoomInTheInn.org

Fax Number
251-3274