

Creating a Culture of Hospitality

Bryan Elliff with Joey Elliff

Church doesn't just happen on Sunday morning and Wednesday nights. We all know that. In our busy and self-isolating culture, we have to make intentional, personal contact with each other if we want to be a real community. But how do we do it? Let me suggest one centuries-old method: invite people over.



There is something amazingly bonding about being in someone's house. You enter their world. You see their interests and their style of life. You see their kids' schedules and get a feel for some of the daily challenges they face. In other words, you step beyond the neutral-site church meetings and begin to understand them in context. That's why a church whose members invite each other over can develop stronger community.

How to make it happen

Set a manageable goal. I recommend that you make a decision to invite people over regularly. Look at your calendar and set a goal you can manage (e.g. once every two weeks, once a month, or whatever works for you). Set a calendar reminder to invite them over at least a week beforehand.

Commit to stay simple. If it's too hard to do, you won't do it. So take the pressure off yourself and remember that the goal is fellowship, not perfection. Here are some ideas my wife and I have come up with to achieve simplicity.

- Pick two or three meals that you always make. Keep them easy and don't be ashamed to make them over and over again. And if you can't do that, just order pizza!
- If they ask if they can bring something, say yes! Let them share the load.
- Don't worry much about presentation. You don't always have to have the table set before they get there. You don't always have to use the fancy goblets or extra forks. It's fine sometimes, but remember that it will create more work.
- Remember that it doesn't have to be dinner. Sunday lunch, Saturday brunch, or evening dessert all work well also.

Involve the whole family in the preparation. Try to keep all the work from falling on the wife. The husband and kids can pitch in and tidy up and help make the meal.

Who to invite

Invite the same people more than once. While that depends on your context, I recommend that you decide to invite some people multiple times. This is a way to focus on deepening your relationship with them.

Invite more than one family at once. Not only is this a great way to work on relationships between you and others, you can also facilitate relationships between others. Or, consider inviting a single to join your meal with another family. I remember that this was very meaningful to me when I was single.

Invite yourselves over, but bring the meal. This is a good idea if the other family finds it hard to get out. You could take a crockpot meal or something similar. It's a good idea for singles as well. Hospitality isn't only for families!

How to make your time together meaningful

Think about the table conversation beforehand. What would you like to know about them? What do you think would build them up? I've recently started to come up with questions for everyone to answer, going around the table. Things like, "How did you become a believer?" "Who has been your most influential mentor?" "What is an area of spiritual life or character that you would like to grow in?"

After dinner, you may consider reading a passage from the Bible. Or you could teach something or tell a Bible story. You could sing together and pray for one another. All this to say that dinner together can be a great time of spiritual fellowship.

A quick word to women from my wife

I know you may be reading this and thinking, "I sure hope my husband doesn't see this. He's going to want me to add hospitality to my list, and I've already got enough on my plate!" First of all, I can't stress how important it is to keep it simple. Spend a little extra money if you have to. Not everything has to be homemade or gourmet, and a crockpot meal works just as well as a five-course meal. If you exhaust yourself cooking and cleaning all day, you will not have anything left to give during the actual meal, which is the whole point. Make sure you are sitting down and fully engaged for at least most of the meal. Your kids can even help get things from the kitchen or keep the glasses refilled- and the dishes can wait till everyone leaves!

Let me assure you, it is so worth it. Yes, it does add some stress, but keep reminding yourself that it is not about you at all. It is not about your house or your meal; it is about the Christ-centered fellowship that takes place at your house over your meal. If you keep that in perspective, it won't matter so much that the kitchen is still a mess and the food's not quite ready when you hear that dreaded knock on the door. Take a deep breath, swallow your pride, and go greet them with a smile on your face. You won't regret it, and they won't forget it.