

Volunteer Chaplaincy: Motels and Hotels

Facing the Need

Weaving themselves across the nation, millions of Americans are on the move daily, pausing long enough to spend the night in a motel or hotel and then traveling on. As ministers watch this mobile society go by, they are sensitive to the staggering needs that may occur among these transients and the unlimited opportunities for Christian service and ministry.

Needs of travelers vary. Some travelers meet unexpected emergencies. Some face crises, which called them away from home to a distant place. Some began their trips, seeking to escape personal problems; but they could not be left behind. Whatever their situations, motel/hotel guests are strangers to their surroundings and uninformed as to where they should turn for assistance when needs arise.

Opportunity to Minister

Christian ministers are best prepared to aid travelers in distress. They are uniquely motivated to reach out from servant churches toward solitary people. Ministers are non-judgmental, reconciling agents, and understanding of all people, of all races, creeds and economic status. Because churches usually afford their ministers opportunities to offer their services as chaplains, without charge, they are accessible upon request, thus symbolizing the availability of the gospel. Also, chaplains usually are knowledgeable of local helping agencies when referral is needed.

Establishing a Ministry

Most hotel/motel managers recognize the invaluable role of chaplains and welcome their assistance. Managers may have responsibilities to other guests and be unable to give to troubled persons the quality of attention needed. And often they feel they are not as qualified as chaplains to respond to the deeply personal needs that arise.

Although managers want assistance, they seldom initiate a productive relationship with a minister. Only a few major motel/hotel chains actively enlist ministers as chaplains. Therefore, caring ministers are encouraged to volunteer their services. Even if the manager is not familiar with the chaplaincy ministry concept, he/she is acquainted with the problems encountered. And, since the minister's vocation requires dealing with intense human needs, the friendship of those who can provide advice and support is deeply appreciated. Furthermore, a large number of motel/hotel personnel are Christians—viewing their work as a fulfilling lay ministry—and they are open to fellowship with the pastor.

Developing a Ministry

Once the minister has assumed the position of motel/hotel chaplain, his/her name and telephone number should be posted in each room. This personalizes the offer of assistance, and informs guests how to reach the chaplain. However, should motel/hotel regulations prevent posting this information in each room, it can be made available to the desk clerk, who can telephone the chaplain when needed.

Being available to guests can involve the chaplain in many diverse situations. One motel chain, with chaplains at each of its properties, classifies needs expressed by their guests in these categories: alcohol/drug abuse, bereavement, death at the motel, family conflicts, illness and threatened suicide. Specific inquiries arise concerning conversion and biblical teaching on moral issues. In each case the chaplain must use personal judgment to relate religious convictions to counselees. Some motels/hotels even provide devotional services for their staff and guests and enlist chaplains as worship leaders.

Motel/hotel ministry is similar to other pastoral services, yet it has unique characteristics. This type of pastoral counseling usually is limited to a single contact with someone the chaplain has never met. The chaplain must move quickly to establish a relationship, resolve conflicts, assess the person's resources, make referrals when needed and create a sense of hopeful expectation. Quite often the chaplain's response sets the stage for further counseling with someone at a later date, and rarely is it possible for chaplains to follow up with counselees.

Telephone contacts are important in motel/hotel ministry. A telephone conversation is the only counseling some people will receive and it should be respected as a valid form of therapy. Whatever services the motel/hotel chaplains may render, it must be emphasized that the chaplain is not a law enforcement officer or emergency medical technician. When crisis intervention demands these and other types of specialized training, motel/hotel chaplains complement the others out of their unique calling and experience.

Yet no one is more aware of how to serve effectively alongside of other helpers than a Christian chaplain. Consequently, cooperative responses to crises become increasingly productive when minister-chaplains are present.

Representatives of Churches

There is another dimension to motel/hotel ministry. Effective chaplains see themselves as representatives of churches. Chaplains know they are not alone; they embody the concerns of all Christians as they counsel on the telephone at a lonely hour to motel/hotel guests they will never see. Knowing this truth, the chaplain is never fully satisfied until the stranger can be guided through the crisis of the moment into a church for ongoing care and support.

When the motel/hotel chaplain functions as an extension of the church, the church is assisted in two ways. Contacts outside the congregation become a means of reminding the church of the world beyond her walls, and the outreach further enables the church to extend a Christian witness to the world she seeks to serve.

For more information and assistance in establishing a volunteer chaplaincy ministry in motels/hotels, contact the Missions Development director in your church or association, or write to: Chaplaincy Evangelism Team, North American Mission Board, SBC, 4200 North Point Pkwy., Alpharetta, GA 30022-4176.