



Winter Shelter Program 2024-2025 Congregational Handbook

It is in the shelter of others that the people live.

IRISH PROVERB

Room In The Inn Congregation Handbook

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The Basics

What is Room In The Inn?

Mission

To provide programs that emphasize human development and recovery through education, self-help and work, centered in community and long term support for those who call the streets of Nashville home.

Core Values

Through the power of *spirituality* and the practice of *love*, we provide *hospitality* with a respect that offers *hope* in a *community* of *non-violence*.

History

Room In The Inn began with a simple act of hospitality. Charles Strobel, then the priest of a congregation in East Nashville, invited people into his church building for the night when they had nowhere else to go. Struck by the realization that hundreds of congregations had warm, hospitable spaces, Strobel invited other houses of worship to open their doors to neighbors struggling with homelessness.

In December 1986, four congregations committed to shelter homeless people through March 1987. By the end of that winter, 31 congregations had joined. Now hundreds of congregations in Middle Tennessee and over 7,000 volunteers sheltering more than 2,000 men and women from November 1st through March 31st each season. 365 days a year, Room In The Inn's downtown Campus offers emergency services, transitional programs, and long-term solutions to help people rebuild their lives.

The heart of Room In The Inn remains its hospitality. In 1995 we moved from Demonbreun Street to 8th Avenue South to make way for Bridgestone Arena. In 2010, we opened a new 45,000 square foot building and began offering permanent supportive housing for the first time. We now can walk with people on their journey out of chaos, through periods of great change, and continue to support them as they rejoin the workforce, seek education, and work with partner agencies. We do this work with an emphasis on one-on-one relationships and a commitment to serving all those who call the streets of Nashville home.



What is the Room In The Inn Winter Shelter Program?

Since 1986, Room In The Inn has been a community of people bound together to offer shelter and compassion to people experiencing homelessness. Local congregations open their doors to welcome guests in the winter months.

Room In The Inn's winter shelter program runs November 1 - March 31 every year. Congregations host groups once a week, once a month, or just during the coldest months of January and February when the temperatures are dangerously low.

- Congregations are asked to host 8-15 guests.
- Congregations are needed to host men, women, and families.
- Room In The Inn staff will guide you in setting up your program and will train your team leaders and volunteers.

Volunteers serve in the following ways:

- Recruit volunteers from within your congregation or partner with other congregations/organizations.
- Transport guests, picking up each evening from Room In The Inn's downtown campus and dropping them off the following morning.
- Prepare and serve meals, including dinner, breakfast, and sack lunch for the following day.
- Assist with set up and clean up.
- Spend time during and after dinner each evening conversing with the guests, playing games, or watching movies.
- Serve as overnight hosts.



What a typical night might look like

Sample Schedule

- 4:30 p.m. Volunteers begin set-up
- 6:00 p.m. Pick up guests at Room In The Inn downtown
- 6:30 p.m. Arrive at congregation
- 6:30-7 p.m. Welcome guests, allow them to get settled, explain smoking area, locations of bathrooms and smoking areas, lights out time, etc.
- 7:00-8 p.m. Dinner and conversation
- 8:00-10 p.m. Movie, television, or game time for those wanting to stay up
- 10:00p.m. Lights out
- 5:00 a.m. Wake up
- 5-5:30 a.m. Get ready for the day and clean-up sleeping area
- 5:30-6 a.m. Breakfast
- 6:00 a.m. Leave for downtown Campus, Volunteers complete clean-up



What does it take? How do we get started?

Congregations that host Room In The Inn guests are asked to provide just a few basics. Using the facilities and people they already have, congregations offer life-saving relief to those who would otherwise face winter on the streets. Nashville's Room In The Inn Winter Shelter program runs November 1 through March 31.

Facilities – Classroom space or community room, activity center

- Sufficient mattresses, pillows, cots, and blankets
- Table and chairs for sharing meals
- A place to prepare and serve food
- Enough food and drink for dinner and breakfast
- Adequate bathroom facilities
- Toiletry items like towels, soap, wash cloths, etc.
- Sufficient heating and cooling
- Approved safety exits with clear access
- Designated smoking area
- Basics like a first aid kit, fire extinguisher, and phone service

People – Staff and volunteers willing to give their time and energy a few nights during the winter season

- Transport guests from Room In The Inn's downtown Campus and back in the morning
- Set up for Room In The Inn
- Prepare and serve the evening and morning meals
- Spend the night
- Clean up after Room In The Inn
- Schedule volunteers and providing oversight of the program
- Launder any linens and towels used



It Sounds Impossible...

You're right---at first glance, sheltering people in a place of worship does appear to be a major problem. But it is not as complicated as it seems. Otherwise, there would not be so many Nashville congregations doing it year after year. The experience of dozens of congregations large and small is proof in itself that Room In The Inn is a reasonable, practical, and effective way to organize an emergency shelter.

The feedback from those congregations is overwhelmingly positive. Often they are surprised at how simple and easy running a shelter can be.

There are many details of hospitality to attend to, but they are details that most people have faced in welcoming guests into their own homes.

Generally, what works at home for our friends will work at church for the homeless. You might find this hard to believe at first, perhaps because it sounds so simple. Yet it is true. A shelter at a congregation can be modeled after a home. What we like to provide our guests there---a clean, warm room, a fresh set of linens, a place to wash and bathe, some refreshing and nourishing food, and most important, personal conversation---we can provide at our own synagogue.

It takes simple know-how and the will to do it.

(from the book *Room In The Inn: How Your Congregation Can Help Homeless People* by Charles Strobel)





Volunteers

Recruiting Volunteers



Volunteers are the heart and soul of Room In The Inn's Winter Shelter program. Here are some tips for recruiting more people into this life-changing experience.

- The best way to recruit volunteers is to ask people face-to-face. People are 41% more likely to volunteer if asked personally.
- Be clear about what you want people to do.
- Clearly explain the time commitment.
- Provide detailed descriptions about the various responsibilities.
- Offer volunteer positions at all age levels and all comfort levels.
- Be sure to follow up with anyone who expresses an interest.
- Recruit for specific positions rather than general help.
- Make volunteering seem like a meaningful way to use limited free time.
- Ask other volunteers to help you recruit.
- Explain how volunteering makes a difference.
- Encourage friends, life groups, and large families to host a night.
- Ask people you wouldn't normally ask.
- Plan an event, meal, or informational meeting to attract volunteers.
- Think of creative ways of presenting your needs.
- Use positive language and methods for recruiting volunteers.
- Reach out to new members of your congregation.
- Share your passion.
- Ask Sunday School classes and other established groups to volunteer together.
- Have your clergy promote Room In The Inn during services.
- Gather and share stories from volunteers about what Room In The Inn has meant to them.

Healthy Boundaries

- Working with individuals struggling with homelessness is a unique experience. Accordingly, it is important that unique considerations be made by all participating volunteers. Here are some best practices.
- Be respectful to all guests and volunteers and consider each guest as an individual.
- Do not share personal information such as your telephone number, address, or email.
- Do not friend guests on social media.
- Do not give guests rides in your personal vehicle.
- Maintain confidentiality. Do not share information about your guests with other people.
- Refrain from accepting gifts and giving gifts to individual guests. If you wish to do something special for an individual guest, please speak to a Room In The Inn staff member.
- Listen to each guest but do not expect to “fix” their 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 and do not touch a guest without permission under any circumstance.
- Accept responsibility for your actions.
- Use your instincts. If you are uncomfortable with a guest or a situation, let someone know.
- Dress appropriately.

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.

Getting Kids and Youth Groups Involved

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

- Allow families volunteer together to serve a meal.
- Give the youth group the responsibility of setting up the beds before the guests arrive.
- Have the children decorate the bags for the sack lunches.
- Invite the youth choir to perform for the guests.
- Ask the teens to plan a holiday or football party.
- Let older youth plan and prepare the evening meal.
- Have children make placemats or cards for each guest.
- Give each child five dollars and take a field trip to a dollar store. After a brief discussion about homelessness, allow everyone to purchase items guests would need.
- Let the youth wrap holiday gifts or put together gift bags.



Involving Older Adults

- Call volunteers to remind them of their scheduled night.
- Write thank-you notes to volunteers.
- Send desserts or treats to serve with dinner.
- Donate magazines for guests to read.
- Knit or crochet hats and scarves for guests.
- Write notes of encouragement for the guests.
- Shop for items for sack lunches.
- Donate supplies to the program.
- Buy socks or underwear to distribute to the guests.

The Role of the Coordinator

Each congregation that takes part in Room In The Inn will have a coordinator. This person will assume the responsibility of overseeing the winter shelter program for the faith community.

There are five basic responsibilities for a coordinator.

Organization and Coordination: The coordinator will work with other volunteers to create a detailed plan for carrying out Room In The Inn. This will include identifying shelter space, obtaining cots/mattresses, soliciting donations for supplies, identifying volunteer tasks, and managing any budget.

Recruiting and Supporting Volunteers: There are many strategies for finding volunteers: announcements at services, notices in the bulletin and congregational emails, recruiting small groups and classes, posting on social media, participating in a missions fair, or hosting a Room In The Inn kick-off event.

To equip congregations volunteers for providing shelter, staff members from Room In The Inn downtown are available to lead training sessions. Please email shelter@roomintheinn.org to learn more.

Coordinators will want to teach volunteers the details of shelter at their individual congregations.

Scheduling: The coordinator is usually responsible for scheduling volunteers for each night of shelter. This would involve making sure all responsibilities are covered: set up, transportation, meals, overnight innkeepers, and clean up.

Serving as Liaison: Part of the coordinator's role is to communicate on a regular basis with congregational leadership, the volunteers, and Room In The Inn downtown. Any schedule changes should be reported to downtown as soon as possible at shelter@roomintheinn.org or 615-251-7019.

Handling Issues and Emergencies: There may be times when a coordinator has to figure out how to cover for volunteers who don't show up, resolve conflicts, and handle emergencies with the guests.

Driving Instructions

Please arrive between 5:30 p.m. and 6:30 p.m. to pick up your guests.

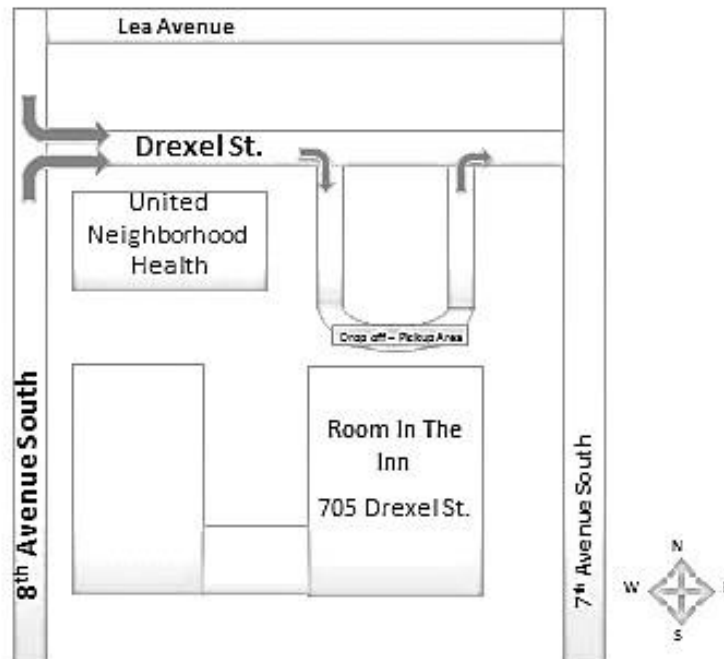
From 8th Avenue, turn on Drexel Street. It is the street next to Room In The Inn. If you are coming from downtown, you will turn left on Drexel. If you are coming from Franklin Road, you will turn right on Drexel.

You will see our parking lot on the right after turning onto Drexel. The parking lot is marked by a brick wall with a large sign for Room In The Inn. Pull in the first entrance and follow the arrows around the semi-circle drive.

Please park your vehicle forward as far as you can so other vehicles can pull in behind you.

Please remain in your vehicle. A volunteer will let Room In The Inn staff members know you have arrived. Your blankets will be brought to your vehicle. Within just a few minutes, your guests will be escorted to you.

After your van is loaded, you can exit out of the parking lot on Drexel. Because traffic has changed, we do not advise turning left onto 8th Avenue from Drexel Street. It may be easier and safer to access the roundabout via 7th Avenue and Lafayette Street.



Please pull your vehicle as far forward as possible in order to make room for other vans. Volunteers will bring your blankets and your guests to your vehicle.

**Room In The Inn
705 Drexel Street
Nashville, TN 37203**

615.251.7019



Your Guests

Expectations

All guests at Room In The Inn must attend an orientation session before staying at a congregation. This orientation explains how the winter shelter program works and about the principles of nonviolence and respect. If guests do not follow these guidelines, they will be asked to leave the program for a period of time.

The orientation video is available on our website at roomintheinn.org.

Before guests leave Room In The Inn downtown, they must pass several checkpoints. Volunteers and staff members check guests for intoxication and behavioral issues. If a guest is not appropriate to stay at a congregation, other arrangements will be made for shelter.

If you have concerns about a guest's behavior, please call the Room In The Inn emergency number at 615251-7064.

A Look at Our Guests – Who Are The Homeless?

The people served by Room In The Inn come from a wide variety of backgrounds. Many are natives of Middle Tennessee, while some come from other places. A large number of participants have college degrees, and others have had little formal education. They are sons, daughters, parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles. Some have had successful careers in business, the arts, or the military.

Each person has a name, a story, and dreams for the future.

While a small part of our population is experiencing homelessness because of economic issues, most are facing a much more complex set of issues. People who are *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 'survival' mentality)

Educational Deficiencies: 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 function such as hygiene, housing, transportation, and interpersonal relationships

Prior Long-Term Institutionalization: Extended stays in foster care, juvenile institutions, mental hospitals, or other institutions

Generational Poverty: Two or more generations of family dependent on public assistance or charity for basic living needs

System Navigation: Inability to effectively navigate Government and Social Service Agencies



Offering Hospitality to Men

Adult men are the largest group of people at Room In The Inn, comprising about 80% of our population. Within this large group, there are several people with unique experiences and issues. There are veterans, people struggling with addictions, people with severe mental illness, and men who have a criminal history.



In spite of these hardships, the talents and gifts of your guests are diverse as well. Each guest is an individual with a complex personal story.

TIPS FOR YOUR CONGREGATION

- See beyond the stigma of homelessness. Make an effort to find common ground with your guests. You may have more in common with them than you think.
- Homelessness strips away dignity. Try to honor each guest as an individual and offer encouragement.
- Your guests stay at a different congregation every night. Help ease their anxiety by explaining the location of restroom and smoking areas, time of lights out, what areas are off-limits, etc.
- Hearty, home-cooked food is always popular with the guests.
- Sit at the table and share the meal with your guests.
- Give guests an opportunity to help in some way. Some people feel better when they have a chance to contribute.
- Allow guests to go to bed early if they choose. Many of them are working or spend all day on their feet.
- If there is a sporting event, let the guests watch it on television.
- Razors and shaving cream are hard to come by for your guests. If your budget allows, provide them to your guests.
- If there are any hairstylists or barbers in your congregation, ask them if they would be willing to offer haircuts.
- Provide a television and/or movies.
- Allow your guests access to outlets to charge cell phones and electronic devices.
- Remember that not everyone is going to want to share their story.

Offering Hospitality to Older Adults



Room In The Inn considers anyone 65 years of age or older as elderly. Many of our elderly guests have been chronically homeless for many years. They often deal with severe health issues and are especially vulnerable on the streets.

Our staff prioritizes the needs of senior adults when allocating shelter space. We also offer assistance in connecting these individuals to any entitlement benefits and housing opportunities for which they may qualify.



615.251.9791 shelter@roomintheinn.org

TIPS FOR YOUR CONGREGATION

Your older guests may be experiencing chronic health issues. If there is a concern about someone's wellbeing, please call the Room In The Inn emergency line at 615-251-7064.

It might be a good idea to have over-the-counter pain relievers and antacids on hand.

Older guests may need to use the bathroom frequently at night. If possible, place their beds as close to the bathroom.

Provide a night light or leave a light in the hallway on so guests can find their way to the bathroom.

Some of the older guests may have mobility issues. They might need help getting in and out of bed or negotiating steps.

You might want to provide extra blankets or pillows for your older guests.

Having softer foods available at dinner will help anyone with dental problems.

Older guests may want to go to bed early. Try to separate the sleeping area from the television.

People who are ill or tired might be irritable. Please be patient with older guests who seem grumpy. They probably don't feel well.



Practical Considerations

Insurance

- This insurance information is provided by an insurance broker who served on our board for many years.
- In the state of Tennessee, no additional liability insurance is required to cover Room In The Inn activities at the congregations.
- Standard liability policies cover all guests and visitors at a congregation. Room In The Inn guests are no different from other visitors to the building.
- If there is a concern about liability, congregations should consult with an insurance broker with experience covering non-profit agencies.

Cots/Mattresses

- Never use cloth-covered mattresses.
- Vinyl-covered mattresses or canvas cots are recommended.
- Vinyl mattresses are more comfortable for guests and are easy to clean. They can be expensive to purchase and difficult to store. Our supplier for mattresses is Mattress Express at 2412 Antioch Pike. The phone number is 615-833-3444, and our contacts there are Rusty or Richard. Please let them know you are purchasing mattresses for Room In The Inn, and they will know what the specs are for the mattresses you need.
- Cots are easy to store since they fold up. They can be tricky to assemble and may not support larger guests. Many congregations have purchased cots from Friedman's Army Navy Store at 2101 21st Avenue South in Nashville. Friedman's phone number is 615-297-3343. The manager there might be willing to offer a discount to Room In The Inn congregations.
- Some congregations use air mattresses. These are comfortable for the guest but can take a long time to inflate. Also, they can puncture fairly easily.
- If a congregation cannot afford mattresses or cots, there may be another congregation which may be giving away its old ones.

Transportation

- Many congregations have vans or buses. No additional insurance is necessary to transport Room In The Inn guests.
- There are congregations without vans that ask volunteers to use personal vehicles to transport guests. Again, no additional insurance is needed.
- We have a couple of congregations that rent vans every week for Room In The Inn.
- One congregation uses a taxi service to pick up guests, while another hires a limousine service.
- Another congregation borrows a van from a neighboring congregation.

Frequently Asked Questions

What night will we host Room In The Inn?

Each congregation chooses the night it will host Room In The Inn based on building usage and volunteer availability. The program operates seven days a week, and beds are needed every night.

How often do we have to host guests?

Some congregations welcome guests once per week while others once or twice each month. Each congregation plans its own schedule.

How many guests do we have to take?

Room In The Inn believes smaller groups provide more safety and the opportunity for conversation and relationship. Congregations typically take 10-12 guests, but each faith community decides how many guests it can comfortably accommodate in its facilities.

Will we have male or female guests?

Room In The Inn welcomes both male and female guests as well as families. Each congregation decides whether they will welcome men, women, and/or families. While our largest population is single adult men, on some nights there are not enough beds to accommodate women and families.

Should we be concerned about liability or insurance?

A congregation's existing liability coverage will cover Room In The Inn. No congregations should have to purchase extra coverage since liability policies cover all visitors. If you have questions about liability, please call Room In The Inn downtown at 615-251-7019.

Do we have to have a shower?

A shower is not required to host Room In The Inn. Showers are offered each day at Room In The Inn's downtown Campus.

What do we use for beds?

Most congregations use folding cots or vinyl-covered mattresses. A few use air mattresses, but these can puncture with heavy usage. Make sure whatever bedding you use can be cleaned easily. Never use a cloth-covered mattress. Room In The Inn congregations usually purchase their own cots or mattresses.

How do we get bed linens?

Room In The Inn downtown will provide blankets sanitized by a hospital laundry service every time a congregation hosts Room In The Inn. The driver will pick up the blankets downtown and bring them back for the night. The morning driver will bring the blankets back downtown in the morning.

Sheets and pillowcases are provided by the congregation and laundered by volunteers at the congregation. Often members will donate bed linens to the congregation's Room In The Inn program.

What if there is an emergency?

If a situation is life-threatening or dangerous, congregations should call 911 immediately. For all other concerns or questions, Room In The Inn has an emergency number that is answered 24/7 at (615)2517064.

What should we serve for meals?

Guests love simple, hearty, home-cooked food. For some guests, it could be their only meal of the day. Some guests may have dental issues, so it is a good idea to cut food like carrots and apples into slices and avoid crusty bread and harder foods. It is also good to have some food choices for people with high blood pressure or diabetes.

For breakfast, some congregations prepare a hot meal while others prefer a continental style breakfast with cereal, pastries, and fruit. Either kind of meal is appropriate.

Most congregations give each guest a sack lunch. Items in the lunch should not need refrigeration since guests have no access to a refrigerator.

The Role of Room In The Inn's Campus & Staff

In response to the needs shared by guests in Room In The Inn congregations, our downtown Campus was formed in 1995. In addition to daytime emergency supportive services, we offer long-term support in the areas of health, education, employment, and housing. As many as 400 people struggling with homelessness are served each day.

We would love to host you and members of your congregation for a tour. Contact us at shelter@roomintheinn.org to schedule a time.

The Winter Shelter Team

Members of the Room In The Inn staff team are here to support your work of providing shelter during the winter season. Staff take responsibility for providing support for your congregation, screening and sending guests to your congregation, and handling any emergencies that may arise.

Please do not hesitate to contact us with any questions or concerns.

**shelter@roomintheinn.org
615-251-7019**

24-hour emergency number: 251-7064



The Room In The Inn Experience

The Communion Meal

by Charles Strobel, Founding Director

Over the years, we have used many images to explain the importance of Room In The Inn. We'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.

After more than 30 years, the most important image we 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.

Since 1986, 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.

For more than thirty 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.

Room In The Inn from the Guest's View

Room In The Inn is a simple idea---faith communities across Middle Tennessee invite people experiencing homelessness into their houses of worship to share a meal and spend the night. In the coldest months of winter, thousands of volunteers work countless hours to make sure their guests have a hearty, home-cooked meal, an opportunity to engage in friendly conversation, and a warm, safe place to sleep. Without the congregations that take part in Room In The Inn, thousands of lives would be at risk and thousands of people would go hungry.

But listening to guests talk about Room In The Inn, it becomes obvious that something powerful is at work. Below, four guests share their experiences at the congregations. While all of them expressed deep gratitude for having shelter from the cold, they also spoke of the ways volunteers have touched their hearts.

Their words reflect the compassion and generosity they have encountered.

Richard:

They do such a good job. You can tell their hearts are in it. They're excited to be part of it. You can tell they're sincere. We sit down together to eat dinner and have real conversation. It feels normal. It's the simple things that show they care. Like one congregation had white beans and cornbread for supper one night. It was the best meal I had in a long time.

Michael:

You get to meet different kinds of people. They want to know about you, and they want you to know about them. It makes you feel better about yourself and not be down. They believe in helping people the best way they can. They do whatever they can to help and to show you are cared about.

Dana:

Sometimes at the holidays they serve us steak. All the good food, it's a reminder of home. I'm not always a talkative person, but I appreciate the efforts the people make to reach out to me and make me feel welcome.

Barry:

It's a place to stay, but it's more than that. It's friendship, fellowship, and a sense of stability. You can always count on the congregations. They're prepared for us. We're always welcome. It provides you with hope during the winter. I don't have to worry about freezing. You know you'll be warm during the night. The little things they do at the holidays help you make it through when you are absent from the people you love.

As far as the meals, hunger is something that keeps you awake, won't let you sleep. A good meal helps you relax and sleep and deal with the problems you may face the next day. Everybody is showing love. A lot of us on the street are angry or have some really hard issues on our minds. The congregations allow us to find some peace.

Steve and Deb LaForge: Partners in a Life of Service



LaForges.

When Steve and Deb LaForge first met, Steve was very involved with Habitat for Humanity. After they got married in 2007, Deb also got involved with Habitat and together they became project supervisors, helping to direct volunteer groups in the building of new homes.

One of the homes they oversaw belonged to Randall, who had been a participant in Room In The Inn's recovery program. Randall had actually worked on the construction crew for Room In The Inn's new facility in 2009 and 2010, saving his earnings to pay for his new home. Other recovery program participants, along with staff members from Room In The Inn, volunteered to help build, under the capable supervision of the

On the day of Randall's house dedication, Steve and Deb had the chance to meet Charles Strobel and others from Room In The Inn. Inspired by the way the Room In The Inn community had come together to support Randall, they wanted to get more involved. Their congregation, Woodmont Christian, was part of Room In The Inn's winter shelter program. Steve and Deb responded to a plea for overnight hosts. Steve says, "we became an overnight pair and have had many wonderful experiences. We love that this is something we can do together."

Woodmont Christian is one of Room In The Inn's "on call" congregations, meaning that in addition to hosting guests on a weekly basis, the congregation often opens its doors on nights that are freezing cold, snowy, or icy. Woodmont's extra efforts, combined with those of other on call congregations, means fewer or no people turned away from a night of safe shelter. Deb notes the importance of being there for her neighbors who have nowhere else to turn, saying, "I would pray that if I found myself in that situation someone would be there for me, bringing to life 'do to others as you would have them do to you.' I know I would not want to find myself out in the cold with no place to go. Because I do have a place to go, I want to share what I can."

As much as Steve and Deb love serving others themselves, getting other people involved is just as gratifying. They recall inviting a new family with teenage daughters to get involved. The first night these new volunteers served, the church had set up a television to watch football and served barbeque and popcorn. The girls and the guests were divided on who they were cheering for, and as Steve remembers, "it was like having all of your friends over to your house for the big game."

The LaForges attended last summer's Second Sunday Series, an educational opportunity for Room In The Inn volunteers. Steve says, "Using the information the staff provided, we have widened our Room In The Inn program to not only serve the gentlemen, but also women and families. We have a better knowledge of the challenges our guests face every day."

In thinking about the impact of Second Sunday, Deb said, "it was good to learn that there is no one way of hosting and providing for our Room In The Inn guests. Each congregation does it a little differently."

Deb sums up her experience with Room In The Inn by saying "We both have had occasions where we've been able to share stories with our guests. We've cried with them, we've laughed, we've prayed with one another, and each time it's been a humbling experience. It becomes its own form of addiction and the desire to serve grows each time because you want to hold tight to that feeling."

The Room In The Inn Experience

Charles Strobel, Founding Director

Room In The Inn is a simple concept addressing a complex problem. It starts with building relationships of trust and respect in an atmosphere of non-violence. It believes in the power of love offered in one-to-one encounters with one another.

What it is not

- Room In The Inn is not an attempt to resolve all of the issues of the homeless. The problems are too deep and too personal.
- Room In The Inn is not a program through which a congregation takes one or more homeless people “underwing,” providing them with economic assistance, job training, and personal spiritual direction. These gifts can be offered in time, as relationships develop.
- Room In The Inn is not about establishing another large shelter downtown where hundreds of people are cared for nightly.
- And it is not about boards of directors and major fundraising campaigns for capital projects.

What is it?

- Room In The Inn is a way for more people in every sector to understand the problems of the homeless by becoming directly involved with people who are homeless.
- Room In The Inn is a means through which congregations of every faith open their facilities to welcome twelve to fifteen homeless people as guests on cold winter nights.
- Room In The Inn is about changing people, guests and hosts alike. It creates an environment with the opportunity for the guests to learn that there are people who care...and for the hosts to come to understand that the faceless figure on the street corner is more than a statistic...and that there are solutions.
- Room In The Inn is about serving without prejudice or pride. It is about accepting everyone.
- Room In The Inn is about people of religion putting the tenets of their faith into practice.
- Room In The Inn is not about giving; it is about receiving. It is about everyone, both guests and hosts, receiving a blessing—an encounter with God in the midst of suffering, hardship, pain and grief.
- Room In The Inn is an opportunity, not an answer. It is an experience, not a solution. In short, Room In The Inn is an opportunity to experience the presence of God in a different way.



Finally, Room In The Inn gets its name from a story in the Bible about a family coming to a small town called Bethlehem and not finding any room in the inn. We cannot go back in history 2000 years and change that story. But what we can do in Nashville each evening we are open is to change that story's ending by providing room in the inn.