

PART V:

Hosting International Guests

Be sure to welcome strangers into your home. By doing this, some people have welcomed angels as guests, without even knowing it.

—Hebrews 13:2 (CEV)

Welcoming visitors is at the heart of *receiving*—that part of accompaniment in which we graciously receive gifts from others. When we open our lives and homes to offer hospitality to others, we create a space where gifts can be exchanged. Host and guest have much to offer each other in terms of cultural knowledge. Both are ambassadors for their cultures, churches, and countries.

Extending hospitality to global companions can be an exciting and educational experience. This section covers the many aspects of inviting and hosting international visitors. Use it to plan a successful visit or exchange!

The gift of cultural exchange

People in relationship are curious about one another and want to get to know one another's reality. When you travel to visit your companions, you get a first-hand taste of the culture and context in which your companions live and carry out their ministry. Your companions are just as curious about you! They want to see where and how you live, work, worship and serve. When both companions have experienced one another's reality, your ability to understand one another will grow, and your relationship will deepen. So will your understanding of your own reality, because your guests will

enable you to experience it through new eyes.

Because cultural exchanges are cross-cultural experiences, they challenge all participants. Seeing your own culture through the eyes of a guest can be frustrating. By offering cross-cultural training to everyone who participates in your program—committee members, hosts, and others—all participants will increase their cross-cultural competence and benefit more from the visit.

Helpful resources on hosting international guests

- *Welcoming Friends from Abroad: A Guidebook for Hospitality*, available from ELCA Global Mission.
- The University of Minnesota's *International Visitors Guide*, online at www.international.umn.edu/visitors/guide/ (very helpful, although written for international exchanges within the university).
- *Africans and Americans: Embracing Cultural Differences* by Joseph L. Mbele. Order through www.afri.conexion.com.

Set the vision and purpose

Why are your visitors coming? Before you invite anyone, you and your companion should define the purpose for the visit.

- What does your synod hope to gain from having visitors?
- What do congregations hope to gain?
- What does your companion hope to gain by visiting?
- For your committee, what would be the characteristics of a "successful" companion visit to your synod or congregation?
- For your companion, what would be the characteristics of a "successful" visit?

Clarifying a mutual purpose and developing mutual goals *before* you begin planning will help focus your work. Are you inviting a delegation to a special festival or synod

assembly? Are you focusing the visit on health and well-being ministries, rural issues, young people or education? Are you exchanging leaders to better understand the context of ministry? The overall vision for the visit will make it easier to plan activities.

Other questions you may want to consider to help you define the purpose and vision for the visit:

- What ministries would you like to share with your companion?
- How can synodical members prepare themselves in attitude to receive the guests?
- How can synodical members be encouraged to listen to the witness and observations of the guests?
- How will you create occasions for your guests to speak to your synod?
- Are you prepared to be changed by their visit?

Keep both bishops in the loop!

Even if your exchange is between two congregations, be sure to inform *both* bishops of your intention and keep them apprised of all developments.

Who should visit?

While the vision and purpose of the visit will help pinpoint the guests to be invited, it's a good idea to strive for diversity. Offer people of all ages the opportunity to visit, so that as people mature, there are always younger participants to continue the relationship. Remember to include men and women, young and old, people from various ethnic backgrounds represented in your congregation or synod, and leaders with different gifts:

- choirs, music directors, and musicians;
- pastors;
- lay workers;
- Sunday school or vacation Bible school teachers;
- women's groups;
- men's groups;
- youth groups; and
- dancers and drama groups.

Send the invitation

When you and your companion have established your mutual purpose, send two letters of invitation to your companion.

The first letter, addressed to the companion bishop or president, spells out the vision and invites your companion to continue thinking about what is expected from the visit. It should also clarify the dates of the visit and who is invited.

→ See *Appendix 6* for a sample.

A second, "official" letter—one for each guest—outlines the purpose and overall expectations and includes the appropriate language that the U.S. Department of State requires in order to issue a visa. Make sure this letter clearly states the fact that your congregation or synod is an expression of the 5-million member ELCA—a factor that will add credibility to your request for a visa.

→ See *Appendix 7* for a sample.

Agree on mutual responsibilities

A visit or exchange will go more smoothly if you and your companion take the time to draw up an agreement of mutual expectations first. This covenant agreement can list in detail:

- the purpose or vision for the exchange;
- the responsibilities your synod or congregation will take on for the visitors;
- what visitors can expect from the hosting companion'
- the expectations, needs and responsibilities of visitors;
- financial expectations—the overall budget, per diem payments, and so forth; and
- what will happen if either party fails to meet its responsibilities.

Clarifying mutual expectations and responsibilities up front can save disagreements later—disagreements that can be hurtful and disastrous once guests have arrived. A mutual covenant can help prevent conflict triggered by unclear expectations.

The more detailed and mutual the covenant, the more likely it will be that the visit will run

smoothly. Sharing the covenant with individual host families and others involved in the exchange or visit will also answer questions about their responsibilities.

When the covenant agreement is complete, both bishops should sign it before the visit, along with representatives of the planning committee, the guests and perhaps the host families. Both parties are expected to abide by the covenant. However, if its terms are broken by either party—as distasteful and as unlikely as this may be—conditions for doing so should be stated in the covenant itself. For the guest or the host, this might involve termination of the visit and/or reimbursement of funds.

If an agreement cannot be reached, then arrangements should be cancelled early in the planning stages.

Some points a covenant or mutual agreement might cover:

- **Dates.** Precise dates of arrival in and departure from the host community should be set.
- **International transportation.** Who pays for air travel to and from the guest's country and the U.S.?
- **National transportation.** Who pays for travel within the U.S.?
- **Local transportation.** How will guests get from place to place? If public transportation is available, who will pay for it? How often can the visitor rely on designated drivers and cars? Will the guest have a car at her or his disposal? (If so, an international driver's license will be needed.)
- **Housing.** Will guests stay in a single home or with different families for specific periods? What about hotels? Will there be any time when the guest will have to pay for his or her own food or accommodation? If so, remember that your guests may not be able to come up with resources to cover these expenses.
- **Activities.** Approximately how often will the guest be expected to attend meetings or make presentations? How much free time will he or she have?
- **Paid employment.** Is paid work possible either as part of the guest's

official duties or privately? (Most visas do not permit visitors to work.)

- **Allowances and per diems.** Will the host provide any special allowances to the guests? If so, for what purpose, how much, and when will it be paid?
- **Insurance.** What types of coverage will the guest have? Who funds it?
- **Reporting.** Will the visitor be responsible for making a report of the visit? What guidelines should the report follow?
- **Fund-raising.** Will the guest be able to raise funds for a ministry back home or sell hand-crafted items?

Sample planning timeline

16–18 months ahead

With your companion, discuss and discern:

- the purpose of the trip;
- mutual hopes for the visit;
- possible groups to invite—e.g. women's groups, youth group, synodical leaders; and
- mutually convenient dates.

With your committee:

- form a planning committee or leadership team and name a chairperson;
- schedule an overall orientation for committee members that includes cross-cultural material (draw from Orientation Sessions 3 and 4 in Part IV);
- establish a schedule for committee meetings;
- determine number of participants and criteria for selection; and
- gather cost estimates and develop a budget.

When mutual hopes and expectations, the number and names of the visitors and the budget are clear:

- Develop a covenant with your companion, clarifying mutual expectations and responsibilities.

12–16 months ahead

- Send two letters of invitation—one spelling out the vision for the visit, and one providing details necessary for the U.S. Department of State.
→ See *Appendices 7 and 8.*

- Begin to discuss itinerary with the companion.
- Discuss what will be needed to accommodate guests (housing, transportation, translators, and so forth).
- Communicate closely and often with your companion and the specific guests who will be coming.

9–12 months ahead

- Prepare materials to assist visitors with U.S. State Department visa process.
- Secure biographical and medical information on guests; determine any special needs (diet, mobility, and the like).
- Begin to find hosts for visitors.
- Based on mutual discussions with your companion, begin firming up itinerary.
- Finalize the budget.
- Communicate closely and often with your companion and guests.

6–8 months ahead

- Confirm host families and/or individuals.
- Exchange biographical info— host families get profiles of guests; guests get profiles of hosts and host families plus background on hosting congregations and communities.
- Prepare materials (additional letters, interview tips, and so forth) to assist your guests through the visa application process.
- Continue to communicate closely with your companion and guests.

4–6 months ahead

- Monitor your guests' progress through the visa application process so that problems can be addressed as soon as they arise.
- Plan cross-cultural and country orientation sessions for the hosts and local participants.
- Schedule opportunities for your visitors to share their stories and gifts.
- Begin to publicize the visit in your synod or congregation communications.
- Continue to communicate closely with your companion and guests.

1–3 months ahead

- Hold a cross-cultural orientation for hosts and other participants.

- Continue to communicate with your companion and guests.
- Prepare a final itinerary with destination addresses, phone numbers and e-mail of hosts and share with your companion.
- Get emergency contact information for your guests.
- Plan welcome and farewell events.

When guests arrive

- Make sure guests can rest upon arrival, before any visits or events take place.
- Have a general welcome event where everyone involved in the exchange can officially welcome the guests.
- Schedule an orientation for the guests.
- Confirm that you have emergency contact information for your guests.
- Purchase and distribute phone cards so guests can call home if that is a possibility for them.

As the visit ends

- Debrief the guests on their experience, and let their wisdom enhance planning for future visits.
- Debrief the hosts and other participants on their experience.
- Debrief the committee.

Have questions about hosting exchanges and delegations? Ask your peers in these synods, who have considerable experience with large-group visits:

- Metropolitan Washington, D.C. Synod
- Nebraska Synod
- Northeastern Ohio Synod
- Northwest Synod of Wisconsin

Plan the visit

Once the purpose and vision of the exchange or visit has been clarified, appoint a planning committee to create the program and line up hosts. Be sure to assign a key contact who can oversee the entire process—one person who will know everything about the exchange. A key contact and a small, core committee of 2–3 people will be more focused and less likely to drop details than a much larger committee. The core group can always delegate additional tasks to others.

Everyone playing a role in the visit—core committee or ad hoc members, hosts, and others—will benefit from a general orientation to the country, church and culture. Draw on the history of your relationship, the ELCA companion profiles (www.elca.org/companionprofiles) and the cross-cultural orientations in Part IV of this handbook to construct an orientation session.

Among the details committee members will need to coordinate are:

- monitoring and assisting with the visa process;
- arranging visits to ministries;
- arranging other tours and visits;
- securing opportunities for guests to share in your synod or congregations;
- identifying host families and housing;
- securing visitor insurance;
- arranging transportation to the U.S. and your location;
- arranging transportation during the visit;
- orienting host families and participants;
- arranging interpretation and/or translation services;
- identifying special needs of guests (disability, medical issues, and the like);
- planning the guests' arrival;
- orienting the guests;
- planning welcome and farewell events;
- arranging per diem and other financial arrangements;
- troubleshooting during the visit;
- handling medical emergencies; and
- debriefing participants.

Help guests secure visas

Your guests need to secure non-immigrant visas in order to be admitted to the United States.

→ See *Appendix 8* for summaries of the types of visas that work best for international church visitors.

For information on the overall visa process, visit the U.S. Department of State Web site, http://travel.state.gov/visa/visa_1750.html.

Through their applications and in personal interviews, applicants for U.S. visas must convince consular officers that:

- they are not terrorists (consular officers who issue a visa to a person who

commits an act of terrorism are personally liable);; and

- they *will* return to their home country and not stay illegally in the United States.

The Consular Officer of the U.S. Embassy in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, in a meeting with ELCA representatives, gave these reasons why church members from Tanzania may have a hard time getting U.S. visas. These reasons apply around the globe.

- Church members are just as likely as non-church members to overstay a visa and remain in the U.S. illegally.
- Tanzanians and others from countries that are statistically high on the list of people who don't return will have a more difficult time getting visas.
- It is difficult for males, singles or young people under 30 to get visas because consular officers feel that they are less likely to return (in countries suspected of terrorism, young men are suspected of being terrorists).
- It is difficult for anyone earning less than \$1,000 a month to get a visa.

To increase the likelihood of admission, guests who are young, single, and earning less than \$1000 a month can bring along these items to their interview:

- a deed to a home;
- current bank statement and a letter from the bank stating how long the person has had an account;
- letters from their own church showing that they are an elder in the church and have been a member for a long time, preferably 10–12 years;
- letters from employers showing that they have held their job for a long time; and
- anything to prove deep roots in their community, such as letters from local institutions (ward, community, or district councils).

Detailed itineraries can help

An interview with a U.S. consular officer lasts approximately two minutes and thirty seconds. The prospective guest must answer a series of very personal and often culturally insensitive questions very briefly and clearly. Often these questions concern where the person is going and what he or

she will be doing on arrival. *You can help by providing a detailed itinerary that includes where the person will go, who he/she will meet with and the purpose of the meeting.*

Instead of saying “July 1: visit St. Paul’s Lutheran Church,” say something like, “July 1: Visit St. Paul’s Lutheran Church, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, to speak to the St. Paul women’s group about women’s ministry in Tanzania.”

Practicing ahead of time is a good idea

Ask your guests to practice the interview beforehand with someone who has gone through the process. They should practice answering rapid-fire questions like:

- Where are you going?
- What is the purpose of your journey?
- Who will you meet with?
- How much money did you make last year?
- Do you own a home?

People who have gone through the process make very effective coaches!

Start early

To increase the likelihood that your visitors receive visas, encourage your guests to start the visa process early. If they wait too long, they may receive an interview appointment that falls after the date of your invitation!

Arrange tours and visits

If the initial visioning process was thorough, arranging tours and visits will be a matter of implementing the overall vision for the visit.

Seek ways to integrate your guests into the life of the community. Plan to have them participate in a variety of activities including small and large, formal and informal events. Take into account the guests’ background and any special talents, interests and preferences. Be sure that everyone is clear about when and where activities are to take place.

Your guests will want to experience all aspects of the reality of life in the U.S. Don’t edit! Aim for the broadest possible experiences. To show that poverty and suffering exist in the middle of our abundance, take them to food pantries or serve a meal to the homeless together. Look for places you might not normally take a visitor. A visit to a thrift store can introduce a new perspective: that some people in the U.S. have clothes to spare, while others can’t afford to buy new clothes in the store. That’s an important insight for anyone seeking to deepen their understanding of the context for U.S. ministry.

Plan on rest, spontaneity and family visits

Leave time for rest. Make it clear to everyone that the guests will have some time off, perhaps a day or two each week. Let the guests determine the activities (or absence of them) for these days.

Time for spontaneous, fun activities is good, too. Once your guests have arrived, confirm that the program covers areas that they are interested in, and ask about any additional activities or sights they would like to participate in or see.

Many guests will have family or friends in the U.S. that they will want to visit or telephone. Ask about these relationships early in your planning process, so you can determine together where the itinerary can include visiting time and who will pay for any domestic travel to see friends.

Address financial issues early

In consultation with your companion, committee leadership needs to clarify who will pay for what during this visit. Who will pay for airfare to the U.S.? Domestic airfare? Travel around your area? Hotels, if needed? What about per diem payments? When we travel outside the U.S., we bring along spending money. That may not be true for your visitors. Arranging a per diem payment means that even if hosts absorb the cost of housing, food and transportation, your guests have the autonomy and means to buy their own toothpaste, books or

newspapers. Money means strength and autonomy. Make sure your guests have enough to make their own choices.

Arrange for housing

If long-term visitors are being housed with families, allow at least a month with each host. Moving from house to house too often can be exhausting.

A household with lots of people, including children, can alleviate loneliness and avoid tensions in relating exclusively to one or two people. Look for families or couples who have *time* to spend with their visitors—not people who are continually on the run.

When you approach people about hosting, clarify that they are willing to accept responsibility for the guests, especially transportation, which can be a considerable burden. Ask how a guest would complement or interfere with their life style. Will someone be displaced from a room in order to accommodate the guest? How will that affect family dynamics? Ideally, host families should be able to maintain their normal routine while graciously including an additional member. Guests should be treated as members of the family and given choices about participating in family activities.

Are there pets in the home? Dogs and cats are not indoor animals in many parts of the world, and your guest may be afraid of them—or surprised to see them treated almost like people!

A cross-cultural orientation will help prepare people for the surprises and misunderstandings that will inevitably occur when people from different cultures live together. Other hints for hosting can be found in the reproducible Handout H, “Receiving International Visitors.”

Arrange local transportation

Transportation requires careful planning. For short-term visits, it is reasonable for the committee to plan and provide all necessary transportation. But if guests are staying for more than three months, discuss whether

they will have access to their own car, money for public transportation, or will still rely on others for transportation.

Draw up a roster of activities, such as shopping, visits, sporting events, meetings, and worship, along with the names of people who are responsible for taking the visitor to and from venues. As an alternative, assignments can be made for specific periods of time. The guest’s transportation needs can be combined with those of family members whenever possible.

Make sure your visitors know these transportation assignments and have a list of names and numbers of people to call in case of emergency.

Provide insurance for medical care

The ELCA has contracted with Rust International Associates and HTH Worldwide Insurance to provide all ELCA-affiliated international guests with emergency medical insurance. To enroll your guests, contact your synod office to speak with your synod’s international travel insurance administrator. For each guest, you will need a birth date, place of birth, and arrival and departure dates.

Ask your guests to complete a medical information form. Make copies and distribute to the guest and everyone who will host the guest, so that medical emergencies can be taken care of promptly.

Enable guests to share

In a cultural exchange, everyone listens. Include plenty of time in the schedule for guests to talk about their culture, church and country with members of your synod or congregation.

When you set up visits to congregations, prepare them for your visitors. Distribute their biographies plus information about their church/congregation and country before the visit so that everyone has some background into the visitors’ lives.

Plan various ways that visitors can share. Speeches before large groups of people may not be the most effective way for guests to communicate. Small groups, panel presentations and interviews with time for clarification may be more productive.

Take care not to schedule speaking events during meals. It forces your guest to rush through his or her meal and is considered insulting in cultures where eating meals together is held in high regard. Eat first and have the speech follow.

During your orientation, help your visitors organize their information so they are ready to adapt their words to different time lengths. Help him or her prepare a short greeting, a 5-minute greeting and overview, as well as 15- and 30-minute presentations. Some ideas for presentations:

- a story about a person, incident, or situation that had impact on their faith or person;
- a cross-cultural interaction that taught the guest something about the body of Christ;
- a typical day in their life and how the U.S. seems different;
- a particular custom, tradition, ritual or saying from their culture that is special to them;
- the meaning of life lived in their country or cultural context;
- the meaning of community and family in contrast to a focus on individual fulfillment, needs and desires;
- theological insights from their cultural context; and
- interpreting and understanding Scripture in their cultural context.

Will your visitor need equipment to show a PowerPoint® presentation or a DVD? Find out about technical needs before the visitor arrives or during the orientation, so congregations can be prepared to meet these needs.

Use the ELCA companion profiles (www.elca.org/companionprofiles) to provide basic facts about your visitor's country. Make sure they are distributed, along with a brief biography or bulletin insert about the visit, to congregations and groups before your visitor arrives.

Orient your visitors

After your guests arrive and have an opportunity to rest, invite them to a formal orientation where they can get a clear idea of the itinerary, arrangements and expectations for their stay. Together, review the mutual covenant of agreement and its details, and answer any questions. Distribute per diem payments, phone cards, domestic tickets or other documents guests will need. Other topics to cover might include:

- the planned itinerary, day by day;
- how the visitor will move between destinations;
- special events or highlights of the itinerary;
- host families, congregations and cities;
- the visitor's role in the congregation or synod;
- the role of the North American church in the visit;
- the role of the visitor in the community;
- responsibilities of the visitor;
- responsibilities of the host congregation/synod;
- how personal needs will be met;
- financial guidelines (advice on purchases, expenditures, collecting receipts for reimbursement and the like);
- an introduction to North American culture, especially male-female relations and the individualistic focus of U.S. culture (consider distributing the article by L. Robert Kohls, "The Values Americans Live By," available at several Web sites);
- names of people to call for help or in case of emergency; and
- an introduction to the city, campus, local public transportation system, and so forth.

During the visit

On day one or two, consider taking guests for a drive so they can get a sense of the area. Otherwise, postpone orientations and activities until day two and let your visitors rest.

Hold a welcoming event during the first week where everyone involved in the visit can meet one another. Introduce North

American culture by serving “typical” food and including typical music and games. Include time for formal welcoming remarks from your synod or congregational leadership, and time for visitors to express their feelings about the visit.

Assign a primary host or contact person to each guest who will check in often—even daily—to see how the visit is going and to handle any problems that might arise. It’s better to err on the side of *too* much contact and companionship than assume that visitors share our independent, do-it-yourself

mindset—something that can seem rude and indifferent to visitors from other cultures.

When the visit ends

Invite guests and all hosts and participants to a formal closing celebration, where gifts can be presented and farewells made. Schedule time for the guest to debrief with the contact person or committee chair. Debrief hosts and other participants, too, and use all the feedback to plan a better visit next time!