

Eat and rejoice: the value of social events

Many churches thrive on social events. They are occasions for celebration and fellowship and the gift of hospitality is an important expression of stewardship. Such events can look outward to the community as well as to the congregation. This paper offers some guidance on how social events can be used to enrich a Giving in Grace programme.



In the bible the sharing of food and drink is a feature of living and giving generously as God's people. In Genesis 18 Abraham's hospitality to strangers opens the door to God's blessing. Deuteronomy 16 summarises the three great festivals of Israel before God: the Passover, The Feast of Weeks and the Feast of Tabernacles (cf Exod. 34:18-24). Each festival was characterised by a shared and joyful celebration with feasting that positively included the poor and disadvantaged.

Of particular interest to us is the summary found in Deuteronomy 16:11: 'No man should appear before the Lord empty handed. Each of you must bring a gift in proportion to the way the Lord your God has blessed you.' Times of shared celebration and worship were also the appointed times for generous giving. And in Israel the bringing of the tithe was itself an occasion of shared celebration: 'in the presence of the Lord your God, you and your families shall eat and rejoice in everything you have put your hand to, because the Lord your God has blessed you.' (Deut. 12:7; Deut. 14:26,29). We should note two points:

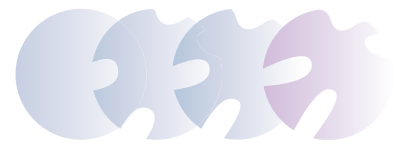
- These OT passages make an important theological connection. The people come before God and feast before God with the widow and the orphan three times a year. The obedience and the celebration are a reminder, as is the tithe, that God is the Giver of all that they have. Coming before God at these great festivals is linked to their possession of the land (Exod. 34:24) and its fruitfulness (Deut. 16:15).
- There is a paradox at the heart of giving. The people are commanded to come, to give generously and to share with the poor. They are bluntly told, 'you must tithe' (Deut. 14:22). Yet, when they come in obedience, there is freedom, joy and celebration (Deut. 14:22-26). It is obedience to the discipline of giving that releases the joy of giving.

For Christians, our central act of worship is a shared meal with origins in the Passover meal Jesus shared with his disciples and in Jesus' table fellowship meals with both sinner and saint. It is no accident that we make our offering just before we break bread and share wine together.

Open house

So Christians need no excuse to party together and have every reason to extend hospitality and to talk generosity in the context of food and drink. Social events can and do play an important part in the practice of stewardship and the encouragement of giving. While talking money can be difficult, almost taboo, a social event offers a safe and pleasant space to talk about the financial needs of the church.

Certainly, the focus of Giving in Grace is that generous giving is a key part of our Christian discipleship and spirituality. A social event need not detract from that core message; indeed we should be careful that it does not contradict it. In and of itself a social event is not an adequate vehicle to carry a holistic stewardship challenge. But as part of the stewardship



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mix a social event richly complements the preaching in church and any small-group teaching.

The heart of a social event is coming together to hear a simple, clear presentation of the financial needs of the church and a request that people respond generously. The private reading of the clergy letter and brochure is balanced with a pleasurable, shared coming together to see how we can each contribute according to what we have. Together we recognise that our giving matters, that it makes all the difference to the ministry of the church. This can be done without embarrassment and with enjoyment. It is not an occasion for more preaching or passionate appeals for money.

Congregation and community

Because social events are all about sharing, celebration and a simple message, they are a great way for the church to share its needs with the wider community who care for it. There are many people, especially perhaps in rural communities, for whom the church is part of the fabric of the community, though they rarely if ever attend. They are friends of the church and, if we invite them, the form and content of the event should recognise this. A simple grace over the food and a blessing at the end are appropriate; the rest of the event need not be overtly religious.

Types of events

There is no right or wrong way to run a social evening, other than to have lots of food to share! One small rural church invited the entire village to a Friday evening buffet in the village hall; around 60 people attended. After a welcoming glass of wine, the vicar said grace and a 'bring and share' buffet meal was enjoyed by all. After the meal, a short welcome by the church warden was followed by a 5–7-minute talk by the diocesan stewardship officer on the financial challenge, which drew attention to the literature packs for each person to take home. Finally, an invited guest speaker spoke to the need for giving and the difference the church makes in the community. On Sunday, the vicar preached to the regular congregation about the need for generous giving to resource ministry and as a normal part of personal discipleship.

By contrast, a suburban church in the North-west ran a small number of socials (two evenings and one lunchtime), as a focus for the attending congregation to consider the challenge to generosity laid down in their Giving in Grace programme. A brief presentation of the financial need of the church accompanied the

meal, along with the distribution of the literature. Seated at small tables of six or seven, those present were able to engage in small-group conversations and this is recalled as the key feature of the social events.



Socials will take many forms and the following ideas are a just a few starter suggestions:

- Celebrate the festivals: Harvest, Epiphany, Pentecost; a church anniversary or saint's day
- A 'bring and share' lunch after a Sunday service
- Coffee and cake after a midweek communion
- A quiz night, barbecue or musical evening with light refreshments or a meal and speaker
- Build on regular meetings, e.g. the Mothers' Union or a men's fellowship
- A Generosity Fika: Swedish for coffee, cake & chat
- Best of all ... what you normally do!

Incorporating the giving message

The giving message at a social event should not feel like the church equivalent of selling timeshares! It is not a hard or emotional sell but a simple, confident request to meet a clear need.

- Don't preach: that belongs to Sunday worship
- Be cautious about PowerPoint: brevity and storytelling are more powerful
- Talk about the difference the church makes in the lives of its people and the community.