

HOST A WELCOME MEAL



Purpose:

To provide direction how to host a host a Welcome Meal and point to how such events can help you to live out the call to welcome the stranger.

Target Audience:

Individuals or Small Groups



INTRODUCTION

Nothing brings people together like a meal. To break bread with others is a traditional sign of hospitality and points to the possibility of a budding friendship, dialogue and encounter. Encounter Meals are opportunities for people from diverse backgrounds or who identify with different cultures to share a meal together and get to know one another. When we get to know immigrants, we learn not only about their struggles, but also about their hopes and dreams for a peaceful future. We also learn about new cultures and experiences and are reminded how we all share basic human dignity. Welcome meals demonstrate that migrants can bring a vibrancy to local communities and serve to strengthen, rather than weaken them.

Cover Source: Stock



Source: CNS, Gregory A. Shemitz

5 EASY STEPS A SUCCESSFUL ENCOUNTER MEAL

1. Welcome all guests

It is understandable that preparing for a meal can bring with it distractions, but be sure that when people arrive at the location of the event that the host(s) are there and ready to greet attendees as they arrive. First impressions matter, and it is important that guests feel welcome upon their arrival. This is particularly important for guests who might be a little on the shy side. There is nothing worse than arriving at an event, not knowing anyone, and standing off in the corner by oneself waiting for the event to begin.

2. Invite people to introduce themselves to each other

It's an *Encounter* meal. Eating in proximity to one another is only going to get us halfway- we must engage and dialogue.

People are gathered to share and learn each other's stories, and that begins with a warm welcome to help guests get past an unfamiliar setting and new faces. Too many in this world rarely get the basic welcome they deserve and having a warm welcome can help ease people and make them comfortable. One way that you can help ease the situation for people is to go around the room and ask everyone to share an interest fact, a hobby, or an interest that makes them unique. This will help to personalize the encounter right off the start.

That said, it is not for the host alone to make guests feel welcome. We all must try to engage one another, share stories, listen humbly, and be respectful of each other's experiences.

3. Offer a blessing for the meal

Before Christ fed the multitudes, he gave thanks. Prayer before eating reminds us that we are all beholden to one God, and one grace. It connects us with God and connects us with each other, those present and those absent. And as we share our food and drink and companionship, it connects us to those who are still hungry, still thirsty, still alone.

4. Allow unstructured time to share the meal together

Ensure that there is ample time for people to share in conversation and get to know each other organically. There may be a period of quiet while people find common topics, but you should generally let groups work through this on their own. Nevertheless, if you notice a group that is particularly quiet, it is ok for you to go and join them with the goal of provoking interesting conversation. It is good here to have some pre-determined questions to assist in this process and an open-ended dialogue can also work well.

Welcome one another, then, as Christ welcomed you, for the glory of God.

—Romans 15:7



5. Close with opportunities for education, ways to work together or follow up encounters.

With the Holy Spirit's blessing, an Encounter Meal/meal won't be the end of a journey, but the beginning. Shared stories can be passed on. New relationships can lead to new communities. Attendees can join in outreach, community prayer and engagement and advocacy efforts, with people whose table they have shared, and into whose eyes they have looked.

With this in mind, it is important that in the early stages of this relationship that the host or another appointed figure be intentional about trying to pull together a future event. Reconnect with attendees sometime in the following week and express your appreciation for their attendance at the meal. At this point in time you can throw out suggestions for another meet-up. You can also make sure that

everyone has the emails of the other attendees – perhaps pull together a listserv or a spreadsheet with contact information – so that those involved can stay connected.

It is impossible to predetermine what kind of follow up and relationship-building will be created from the original encounter meal. Some meals might lay the groundwork for strong friendships and future initiatives; other meals might be more of a one-off event without a whole lot of apparent follow through afterward. That is ok. The importance of the welcome meal is to provide a forum that emphasizes the fact that migrants and native born people alike do not have to be permanent strangers, but can eat together, learn from one another, and realize that in our shared humanity we have more in common than we might have previously believed.



Credit: Vatican/Migrant and Refugee Section