

Christian Innkeepers Seek to Give Ministry Workers a Restful Break

Participants in the Christian Hospitality Network offer hotel and retreat discounts to pastors and missionaries

When pastors need a break from the stresses of ministry and missionaries return from their fields of labor, there is a network of inns and retreats dedicated to serving these ministers at a portion of the cost to traditional patrons.

The burden that goes along with full-time Christian ministry has inspired innkeepers around the world to offer their hotels and getaways to Christian workers as a place of refreshing and renewal. They have joined the Christian Hospitality Network (CHN), which within a year has attracted 880 lodging properties that offer a minimum 25 percent midweek discount to ministers.

These innkeepers subscribe to the practice of hospitality as a Christian virtue, pointing to the Bible's instruction in Hebrews 13:2 to "eagerly show hospitality to strangers because in so doing some have entertained angels without knowing it." This belief has fueled the early success of the CHN, along with the dedication of its founder, Paul Cowell.

"Over 1,800 full-time Christian workers leave the field every month due to the stresses of the ministry," Cowell said. "We [Christian innkeepers] have the opportunity to help pastors, ministers and missionaries find a place to get the rest they need to continue the battle God has called them to."

First inspired to minister through hospitality in 1963 while visiting a camp in the Adirondacks Mountains, Cowell spent decades traveling with his wife, Jean, to hundreds of inns and retreats around the world. Thirty-four years of notes later, he built Whitestone Country Inn, a luxurious AAA Four-Diamond estate in Kingston, Tenn.

Touted as "A Sanctuary for the Soul," the bed and breakfast is set on 360 acres on Watts Bar Lake and includes 21 bedrooms, three conference rooms, three dining rooms, 12 miles of walking trails and a wedding chapel meticulously built to replicate a historic Anglican church.

The realization of Cowell's dream came after he spent 25 years as pastor of Christ Chapel in Knoxville, Tenn. Cowell made a series of profitable investments, including the eventual purchase of more than 100 outlets of Book Warehouse.

He also recognized early on the potential for growth in television home shopping. He bought 51 percent of Shop-At-Home, the precursor to the wildly popular Home Shopping Network. Cowell eventually sold his shares and business ventures, which provided the capital to build Whitestone.

"I am sovereignly blessed," Cowell said. "A return on my investment is not my top priority."

Cowell launched CHN in hopes that weary Christian workers could find relief at inns worldwide. "In the first five years of being an innkeeper, hundreds of pastors came, and I thought, why not expand this to other innkeepers who are perfectly willing to give pastors and missionaries the same opportunities I do," Cowell told Charisma.

“In the first six months, we had 700 innkeepers join CHN,” said Steve Tackett, executive director of the organization. “We’re excited about what God is doing among those who are joining together to proclaim hospitality as a Christian virtue.”

Today the network makes more than 1 million room nights available and hosts a getaway for missionaries each year. “This is a four-day retreat for missionaries on the field in which they are working,” Cowell said. “We come to them and give rest and relaxation in a way that they have been unaccustomed to, at least since becoming missionaries.”

The first such retreat took place in Chiang Mai, Thailand, in November 2002. Through proceeds from fund-raisers and donations, CHN treated more than 100 missionaries to four luxurious days at the Chiang Mai Westin Hotel. The amenities even included foot massages.

Interviews with the families indicated that they not only had a refreshing weekend, but also were rejuvenated for the ministry, as some participants had been on the brink of resignation. CHN officials held a similar event in November in Sao Paulo, Brazil, and have plans for a third in Ghana in November.

“Missionaries and pastors are front-line soldiers and they need a place of refuge,” Cowell said. “They have experienced acts of violence and prejudice, and others are just worn out—or worse yet, burned out.”

Cameron Fisher in Kingston, Tenn.

For more information about the Christian Hospitality Network,

log on to their Web site at .