

HOSTING VISITORS IN YOUR HOME

THANK YOU for being part of Greater Cincinnati World Affairs Council's mission to promote understanding between Greater Cincinnatians and the world. The following guidelines are offered to help both new and current volunteers develop a successful hosting experience.

Hosting allows Cincinnatians to make friends from around the world, experience different and exciting cultures, as well as hearing first-hand what is happening around the world. The visitors, in turn, take a true perspective of the United States back to their native countries, in addition to fond memories of generous and hospitable Cincinnatians.

Who are the visitors?

The visitors are leaders from around the world. Typically, this is an opportunity to host high school students who are taking part in a student exchange program through a nearby university. The students' range in age from 15-17. There are some opportunities to host older professionals as well through other exchange programs.

What are some hosting expectations?

The council looks for families willing to host two or more students, but other arrangements can be made. The hosts may be a family, a couple, or a single person. They are volunteers who are interested in meeting visitors and learning about their countries and their views, and in sharing their own perspectives and interests with the visitors. We ask that you provide each student with a separate bed and access to a bathroom (shared is ok).

Do we treat international visitors in any special way?

No. Be yourself. Remember, your guest is probably tired! He or she may feel the need for some privacy amidst so much activity, or may need some quiet time after struggling all day to express him or herself in a foreign language.

Upon arriving, your guest will appreciate a tour of your home. In his or her bedroom, demonstrate how any special features, such as an alarm clock or electric blanket, work. In the bathroom, explain sink or shower fixtures, the location of lights, wall switches, and door locks. Explain operation of the television. In the kitchen, show where food and snacks are stored, and how to operate commonly used appliances. Explain a family routine, especially the use of bathrooms if they are shared. Discuss meal times and laundry with your guest. If you wish, you may direct them to a nearby Laundromat or instruct them in the usage of your washer/dryer.

What foods should I serve at mealtimes?

Usually, it is best to serve your favorite American food and observe visitors' dietary constraints, if known. If unknown, it is best to avoid any form of pork because Muslims, Jews, and vegetarians cannot eat it. A good safety measure is to prepare one more

vegetable dish than you would normally. Many visitors who do not drink alcohol appreciate fruit juices (rather than pop) as an alternative.

Where is Burkina Faso?

Greater Cincinnati World Affairs Council has background information on almost every country. Ask for it if you are unfamiliar with the home country of a visitor. Avoid the stereotype of American ignorance about other countries by preparing in advance. Use a current atlas and go as far as your curiosity takes you.

What if my guest's English is not fluent?

Greater Cincinnati World Affairs Council will try to find hosts who speak the visitor's language. Since this is not always possible, the use of a dictionary or phrase book may be helpful. Even if the visitor's English is good, **speak slowly, clearly, in normal volume, and avoid slang.**

What should we talk about?

Encourage your visitors to talk about themselves, their countries, their families, and their ideas. Explain our customs and our cultural and social values, but remember that we are not a sales agency for the United States. They have much to tell; we have much to learn. You will have plenty of opportunities to talk with your guest in your home. If your experience is typical, you will be surprised by how similar we all are and will feel very comfortable in your communications. The most important thing to remember is just to relax and be you. The best communication will be gained through your natural hospitality and your desire to know your visitor as a person. That is how lasting connections are built.

Should we mention previous international visitors?

Avoid talking too much about them or showing gifts you received from them. Your guest will not want to feel that he/she is "one of many," but is "special."

Two watchwords are **Sensitivity** and **Respect** - sensitivity to another person's feelings and respect for differences. Hosting an international visitor is a blind date. Our council knows both of you, but you don't know each other. We hope you will enjoy getting acquainted!

What are the steps to become an overnight host?

1. Fill out general volunteer application.
2. Someone from our office will contact you to do a "site visit" to your home. This is a short (20 minute) visit of your home to confirm the accommodations and to answer any questions you might have.
3. Review your application as a whole and let you know if you have qualified to host.

Tips on How to Host With the Most

- ★ Casual attire puts people at ease. We recommend keeping your overnight rituals casual and informal.
- ★ Please feel free to invite your friends and/or family to join you, particularly those who may share the same interests, languages, profession, or travel experiences as those of your visitors.
- ★ Please entertain in the manner that is most comfortable to you (barbeque, buffet supper, formal dinner, etc.). Feel free to invite the guests to join you for other activities – perhaps an Independence Day barbeque, a block party, Halloween, etc.
- ★ People in many cultures enjoy having wine or other alcoholic beverages with their meal; people in other cultures may not drink at all. You are not expected to serve alcohol, but you may do so if you wish; if guests have any dietary restrictions about alcohol or other food, you will be provided with that information in advance.
- ★ You may want to have an atlas or a map of the guests' country, so that they may show you where they live. If you have photographs or mementos of where you are from, please feel free to share those with the guests as well.
- ★ At the beginning or the end of the stay, you may be presented with a small gift. Gifts are not expected from either your guests or from you, but if you do wish to reciprocate, you could present your guests with a gift such as a postcard, calendar, or small souvenir. It should be inexpensive and easy for them to pack in their suitcase.
- ★ Please pass on any photos, videos, and feedback to Greater Cincinnati World Affairs Council staff; we welcome your stories and photos! Before posting photos or updates to your blog or Facebook page, however, please consult with the Greater Cincinnati World Affairs Council program team and be sure to ask the international visitors for their permission.

Remember that this experience is likely to be a highlight of your visitors' time in the U.S.

Your generosity in opening your home to international guests is much appreciated. Thank you!

International Religion Protocol

Early last week, a member emailed me with a conundrum. Her eclectic Thanksgiving dinner guest list included people other than her family. In this case, one Muslim, one Jew, one Sikh and one atheist. No, this is not the beginning of some bad, inappropriate bar joke; this was her reality. She and her family are Protestant Christians, and they opened their home to an eclectic gathering of friends of varied faiths (or no faith) for this wonderful holiday.

Her questions were simple – Do we offer a prayer at the beginning of the meal, and, if so, what kind?

In this case, the answers were equally simple. When we have guests in our home, we certainly wish to make them feel welcomed, appreciated, comfortable and even loved. However, one fact remains – home is home. Period. When guests come to our home, they do not – and should not – have any expectation that we will jettison or adapt our rooted traditions, things important or even sacred to us, in order to accommodate them, especially around holidays, celebrations or other occasions where ritual enters into the equation. We might do so if we so choose, but the choice rests with us.

Applied here, if her family always paused and offered a blessing prior to the Thanksgiving meal *in their home*, then the continuation of that tradition, no matter the guest list, is altogether fitting and proper. Maybe the patriarch or matriarch of the family, before praying, says something such as this: "Welcome to our home. We are honored that you would join us on this special day where we remember with gratitude the blessings of the year now ending. In our home, we always offer a Christian prayer before the meal, which I will now do. No matter your faith, I invite you to pause and reflect."

Or something along those lines. The key is to acknowledge and explain the following: 1) you have guests; 2) the guests might believe differently than you; 3) the custom in your home; and, 4) the custom will continue.

Most people crave authenticity, including guests. We want the "real" experience, which, in this example, included a prayer. To do otherwise cheats those in attendance and, in many ways, creates a false notion of who we are.

And keep in mind, this particular incident involved a prayer in the home of Christian adherents, but the faiths or even the actions matter not. The key is that when people come into our home, they come into the place where we can be and are ourselves... or at least we should be.

Transporting this same dilemma into the public sphere, though, poses a greater challenge, especially in places where a clear delineation between church and state exists. However,

in many places in the world, invocations and/or benedictions are offered during a panoply of public events and gatherings. This phenomenon is quite common throughout the Caribbean, in parts of Africa and the American South, all places with pluralistic societies and varying faiths and degrees of faith.

As a gentleman once told me in Trinidad, "Chris, if we don't pray before an event, people might just get up and walk out." And at an event I attended in Lagos, Nigeria, a government minister took the podium and said, "Since no one has prayed yet, let me lead us in this invocation." And she did.

Again, I believe in authenticity – in being who you are as a person and who you are as a people but doing so without creating awkward situations. In most public gatherings, overt expressions or favoritism of one faith over another are rarely, if ever, warranted – e.g., when a pastor veers into the political; when a chaplain exceeds his role on the program; and so forth. We all know those situations, because our internal “protocol-ometer” churns our stomachs a bit.

Too many times, though, we allow the police of political correctness to pervade our common sense. We rewrite parts of the script in order to avoid any offense. Public ceremonies and events may not be times for proselytizing, but an invocation or benediction can certainly be in order, especially if it is ecumenical in nature and rooted in your history.

You can avoid some of the controversy, if any exists, by transferring the burden of selection. Involve your local interfaith or ecclesiastical council. Most cities and towns, no matter their size, have some sort of group, formal or informal, of pastors, priests, rabbis, imams, gurus, senseis, etc. Cultivate a relationship with them, and allow them to supply you with someone. If anyone questions it, you have a ready-made and completely proper response, especially if they base their selections on a rotating roster of faith leaders.

Whenever spirituality, faith, and religion intersect with the worlds of protocol and etiquette, we become a bit uneasy. We look to avoid controversy and make everyone happy, both laudable but frequently unattainable goals. What is often more important is sincerity and honesty, expressions rooted not in preference for one faith over other, rather in genuineness and fealty to who we are, at home or in public. Those sorts of expressions, more often than not, build bridges of mutual understanding rather than animosity or distrust.

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