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*“A Vital Christian Presence in Social Work”*

**AMAZING GRACE: THE UNEXPECTED BLESSING OF MUTUAL AID  
FOR A GROUP PROVIDING HOSPITALITY TO HOMELESS MEN**

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## **Abstract**

*The intersection of a community task group and mutual aid was achieved while providing hospitality and overnight shelter to homeless men in a program in Jackson, Tennessee, called Room in the Inn. The completion of the appointed task, the development of mutual aid, with examples, and implications for group work will be described.*

## **Introduction**

This paper explores an intersection of a community task group and mutual aid while providing hospitality and overnight shelter to a group of homeless men in a program in Jackson, Tennessee, called Room in the Inn. The development of mutual aid in the community task group translated into more comfort for the homeless guests.

Room in the Inn Jackson, Tennessee, began in November, 2007, with only four churches and a prayer! This program for providing hospitality and overnight shelter to approximately 200 homeless men during the winter months was modeled from Room in the Inn Nashville, which has been in existence since the winter of 1986, when Father Charles Strobel sheltered a few homeless men who sought to keep warm by turning a car on and off for heat outside his bedroom window (Garr, 2008). Father Strobel's idea was to utilize volunteers from several churches to provide hospitality and overnight shelter the homeless each night for the coldest winter nights, from November to March. From such a humble beginning, Room in the Inn Nashville has now grown to 150+ churches that take turns hosting the homeless during the winter months, under Father Strobel's leadership (Garr, 2008). Unlike Nashville, Jackson, Tennessee, has no shelter for men.

When, Lisa Peoples, Executive Director of Area Relief Ministries, a social service agency known for offering utility assistance to Jackson residents, heard about Dr. Strobel's

Room in the Inn (RITI) program in Nashville, she decided to use his idea to use church volunteers to provide hospitality and overnight shelter for RITI in Jackson, TN (Personal communication, L. Peoples, November 1, 2007).

Only four churches signed on to begin in November, 2007. Fellowship Bible Church, Mother Liberty C. M.E. Church, Northside Assembly of God, and Walnut Baptist Church were those churches. The directions from the agency were to transport the homeless guests to the selected church, feed them, provide an activity, and shelter them for the night. Additionally, the guests would be fed a quick breakfast the following morning, and then be transported back to the agency by 6 AM (Room in the Inn Manual, 2007). Each of the four churches had to recruit volunteers among their members, and then decide how they, as a group, might go about providing hospitality to the guests. Some churches used the same group each time to provide hospitality to the homeless guests every time they served, and some used different Sunday School classes to serve each time the homeless guests were sheltered.

Those complete directions were provided for tending to the guests; however, none were provided for the workers who would offer hospitality to the RITI guests. At Northside Assembly of God, RITI was highlighted at a ministry fair, and those who were interested signed a sheet, complete with contact information. At the organizational meeting, 23 strangers came together to plan for providing hospitality for the RITI guests. Over the following months, and even beyond the March 31st closing of RITI, the relationships formed by those former strangers continued, as they now enjoyed the mutual aid offered only by the intimacy stage of group development (Shulman, 2009).

The degree of the integration of task and mutual aid group was remarkable. Although volunteers met to perform the task of hospitality, they found that they received more! There was

no pre-determined attempt to develop into a mutual aid group; however, it was in the doing of the task that mutual aid was accomplished. Additionally, a by-product of the intimacy received was an environment where the hospitality offered by the group also provided a much more enjoyable experience for the guests.

### **The RITI Program**

Because of the need for a RITI program in Jackson, TN, Area Relief Ministries (ARM) initiated a meeting with local representatives from Jackson Area Ministerial Alliance, the Mayor's office, and other non-profit agencies that serve the homeless. The majority of pastors in the room were hesitant to open their congregations up to possible vulnerability or harm by homeless men. Because the volunteers were not trained to deal with "these people," they were unsure if the congregations would participate in the program. ARM staff had its work cut out for them!

ARM's first step to establishing RITI was to speak with Campus for Human Development, in Nashville, TN, who had been successfully running a RITI program for 20 years. Father Charles Strobel spoke with us via conference call on one occasion, and visited Jackson, TN on another. The Campus for Human Development provided policy and procedural manuals, rules and regulations for their program, as well as encouragement, guidance and warnings of the naysayers. Armed with a tremendous amount of information, fear, and prayer, ARM set out to establish a Jackson, TN program similar to the Nashville version, but unique to our city.

ARM created a church database with over 200 churches in Jackson, and did a mass mailing of an introductory letter, inviting churches to participate in the program. Those interested were asked to contact office for a congregational packet and set up meeting with the Executive Director. After minimal interest and return, a summer intern took on the task of phoning every

church in the phone book, speaking with pastors and secretaries, garnering appointments and “selling” the ministry idea to them. Out of these massive phone calls, 60% requested a congregational packet, with 25% of those agreeing to a face to face presentation. It did not take many of those presentations to realize that the biggest concern of church leaders was the safety of their volunteers. ARM was facing our largest challenge to date...how to deal with the safety concerns of the church leaders.

The answer to these concerns soon appeared in the form of a RITI coordinator. This person’s responsibilities included orientation for the homeless participants, as well as enforcement of program rules. Most importantly, the individual became the agency’s on-call contact person in case of need or emergency during the night. In early September, Steven McKinney volunteered for the position, stating that God had instilled within him a desire to serve the homeless community in a more tangible and organized fashion. Because Steve’s church was located downtown, he was familiar with, and had relationships with many of the local chronically homeless men. Once the program started, Steve came to be known as a “big teddy bear” that “walked softly and carried a big stick.” The person of Steve made all the difference with churches that were on the borderline, and had a fear for safety. Once they met Steve, their fear were somewhat diminished.

The churches required a lot of instruction. However, the manuals from the Campus for Human Development helped us greatly, in that, instead of re-inventing the wheel, we simply adopted their “how to” manuals for churches, and put them in church leaders’ hands. The manuals told how to organize the program within a local congregation, with the most important step of enlisting a RITI coordinator within the church. This person would be responsible for recruiting additional volunteers through groups and classes, and planning the program logistics.

The logistics included identifying a space for the guests, whether or not smoking would be allowed, and if so where, as well as space for dining. The church coordinator would be the key contact person for ARM, and communicate regularly with church volunteers and ARM staff. Other key positions that the coordinator would delegate to church volunteers included: providing transportation, cooking the meal, serving the meal, and clean up. Another key component for the coordinator was to identify those volunteers who would be spending the night with the overnight guests. For church coordinators, overnight volunteers proved to be the most difficult volunteer positions to recruit at the start of the program, only becoming easier as the program became more successful, and perspective overnight volunteers were able to visit active host churches and hear of their experience. Some churches, however, have not been able to overcome this challenge, and finding 2 volunteers to spend the night has remained elusive; therefore, the churches have elected to serve in other ways, i.e., partnering with another church to provide food, etc.

While the church coordinators were working to recruit volunteers within their congregations, ARM was working to recruit homeless guests for the program. Throughout the month of October, flyers announcing a program providing “shelter from the elements and a good meal” were placed in strategic locations where the homeless population frequented, i.e., the soup kitchen, library, bus station, etc. Simultaneously, the staff worked to create rules, regulations, responsibilities and rights for the homeless guests. Again, relying heavily on the manual from the Campus for Human Development, these components were created and adopted as the backbone of our local RITI program. Some very important rules included no weapons, no fighting, no stealing, no personal bags, etc. After the program began, we learned that some of the rules did not work for our local program, and some different and/or additional rules were required. In the first two months of the program, rules changed frequently, and were adapted to fit our needs. One rule that did not change, and was the most challenging for the guests, was that intoxicated persons were not allowed to participate in the program. Because of their circumstance, after

experiencing anger, despair and hopelessness, and finally accepting the hard fact of their homelessness, many men struggle with alcoholism. Although we empathize with their disease, this could not be allowed to jeopardize the safety of other guests and volunteers, as well as the entire program. The churches were assured that although they would be hosting men who were alcoholics, and some who may have smelled of alcohol, they would not be asked to host those who were noticeably intoxicated. As the program continued, a couple of factors worked together to encourage men to put the bottle down hours before RITI check-in. One factor was Mother Nature. As the winter progressed and temperatures began to drop, many individuals decided that a cot in a warm place was more inviting than a night in the cold with only a bottle to keep them warm. The other factor that encouraged soberness was the “word of mouth” of other homeless guests of the great food and wonderful hospitality they were experiencing at the churches. The homeless population warmed to the program as the temperatures outside got colder, and they realized, just like one Hurricane Katrina victim: “we got less than nothin’.” A Hurricane Katrina Survivor (Obama, 2006, p. 229).

Although the desire to drink was the largest challenge to recruiting homeless guests to the program, it was not the only challenge; the other challenge was the fear of the unknown. Because the program was new and like nothing they had ever heard of before, many men were as reluctant to participate as the churches were. “Go sleep in a church?” was the incredulous question asked many times. Many feared being judged and feared continual attempts of the “good people” to save them from themselves. They were being asked to trust total strangers in churches, and to sleep with other homeless that they did not know for 12 hours, when experience had taught them not to trust anyone. They had no idea what to expect, and for many, it took many nights to garner the courage to step out of their comfort zone into this unknown world known as Room in the Inn.

The sentiment about the opportunity to participate in RITI is generally the same for every guest.

One gentleman serves as the spokesperson for all.

“I think I speak for all of the homeless men when I say that I would have been

sleeping out on the streets in the cold. Most of us just try to get inside an abandoned building or on a park bench to keep warm during the winter. Most guys try to leave Jackson because there is no shelter here. But then we heard about this new program where we would stay at churches. At first, some of the guys were a little shaky about staying at a church, but it has been great. We always get a wonderful meal, and a nice warm place to sleep. But most of all, we have met some of the best people in the world. We have had a chance to meet families, tell our stories, and to feel like we belong somewhere again. No one really plans on being homeless. We all have different reasons we ended up on the streets. Some have families, and some have burned all the bridges that go there. But we have become a family within ourselves, and most of all, we have been welcomed like a part of the family in all the churches. We are reminded what it looks like and feels like to be apart of a family. Nobody at the churches tries to preach to us or shove anything down our throats, but it sure is easy to see the love of Jesus. This is one winter I will never forget.” (Personal communication, Frederick Pearson, a regular guest at RITI, May 20, 2009)

### **The Community Advisory Task Group**

With much fear and trepidation, RITI-Jackson finally started on November 1, 2007, with 4 churches spread across a 30 day calendar, and 4 very reluctant homeless guests. During the first week, the number of guests grew to a high of 8, but the number of churches was slower to grow. The four original churches hosted weekly, and are as much responsible for the original success of the program as the hard working ARM staff. A few weeks into the program, with hard core recruiting by board members within their churches, more churches joined the program. By the end of November, miraculously, 15 churches were participating with frequencies varying from once a month to once a week.

It is extremely important to note that with each new host church, orientation was scheduled at a convenient time for most volunteers, which more often than not, was a Wednesday night service. An orientation that clearly lays out all rules and regulations is vital to the success of the program. ARM staff conducted each orientation with a history of the program, rules for churches and volunteers, as well as expectations for guests. Volunteers were encouraged and reminded over and over again to set and stick to boundaries in order to protect



the integrity of the program. The staff answered all questions from church volunteers, taking great care to clear up any misconceptions and an attempt to alleviate fears. The enthusiasm and honesty of the staff was motivating to church volunteers, and the desire to minister spread like wildfire.

RITI is not your normal homeless shelter. It has provided a way for the faith community to put our beliefs into action.

“The way this program has brought churches together is amazing, says Fellowship Bible Church pastor and Jackson Area Ministerial Alliance President, Randy Pierson. RITI has crossed denominational and racial lines for one common good. When we first started meeting about the program way back in March of '07, there was a lot of fear in the room; fear about how congregations would react, how volunteers would respond, fears about safety, and a general fear of the unknown. Now when you are in the room with the church volunteers and church leaders who have experienced Room in the Inn, the fear has totally evaporated and has been replaced with tears.....tears of absolute joy everyone has received from a total unselfish act of doing the thing that Jesus has called us to do.” (Personal communication, Randy Pierson, Fellowship Bible Church Pastor and Jackson Area Ministerial Alliance President, May 28, 2009)

By the end of the first season of RITI-Jackson, twenty-three churches were participating, 122 different men were sheltered, and a new phase had begun in the faith community in Jackson. RITI has changed the face of ARM, the faith community and churches. Churches that were once separated by denomination and ideology now served the homeless with on one accord. Because ARM asked each host church to refrain from using proselytizing with the homeless guests, and to offer genuine hospitality instead. This proved to be the equalizing line, as church coordinators worked with volunteers to adapt creative ways to provide hospitality. Volunteers bonded with guests by playing Dominos, watching PG movies, playing Bingo, or sing-a-longs were popular activities that churches shared with guests.

Also, ARM asked church volunteers were asked to meet monthly to discuss successes and challenges. Coordinators shared openly, and over time, genuine camaraderie developed.

They no longer identified as Lutheran or Methodist or Pentecostal; rather, they identified as fellow workers in providing hospitality to homeless guests. By the end of year one of RITI and following, coordinators and volunteers consider themselves friends, as well as fellow workers. These genuine friendships fostered others, and caused other volunteers and churches to join in serving the homeless in a real and practical way. As one coordinator states:

“Room in the Inn is simply contagious. The first time we hosted, there were only a few volunteers to assist with the meal and fellowship. But it didn’t take long for the word to spread to others that they were missing out on something wonderful. Now, we have more volunteers signed up than we know what to do with. And the guys we have hosted have become like a part of the family. It is hard for me to hold back the tears when I think the program is coming to an end. I’m gonna miss these guys.....I’m really gonna miss ‘em.” (Jimmy Welch, Church coordinator of Skyline Church of Christ, personal communication, April 12, 2009)

Although the program is only seasonal, every night from November 1 to March 31, at somebody’s church in Jackson, the commandment of Jesus to “do unto the least of these” is being fulfilled. In the famous biblical story, a young pregnant girl was forced to give birth to her baby in a stable because there was no room in the inn. We can’t go back and change the story, but we can do our part to show love to those who have found themselves without shelter, by making sure here in Jackson, there is always....*Room in the Inn* (Room in the Inn Manual, 2007).

### **The Volunteer Task Group**

Toseland and Rivas (2009) provide the definition of groups as “goal directed activity with small treatment and task groups, aimed at meeting the socioemotional needs and accomplishing tasks. This activity is directed to individual members of a group and to the group as a whole within a system of service delivery” (p. 12). Further, a group is a task group when the overarching purpose of the group is not to meet the needs of its members, but to purposefully and specifically meet the needs of others, beyond themselves (Toseland & Rivas, 2009). The question at Northside Assembly of God was how to begin this work, with strangers who did not know what to do, or how to do it, but who had a heart to do it. Even though this work had to be done within the context of ministry, it was still a group. As such, it stands to reason that it could

be explained according to group development, according to William Schwartz, the wonderful ingenuous group theorist who articulated the method by which we “help people work together in small, face-to-face groups” (Berman-Rossi, 1994, p. 13).

According to Schwartz, the first step was to **“tune in”** to determine how to prepare our group for the purpose of providing hospitality to our guests. One portion of this tuning in was to begin to help the individuals envision themselves as a group with similar purpose and commonalities, but another was to engage in a conversation of fears and concerns that might be barriers to the work. For the first purpose, the church coordinator, herself a social worker and group worker, invited the other 22 volunteers to her home for an introductory “pot luck” dinner and fellowship, for it was a very “ministry” thing to do! For the most part, it was the group’s first time really getting to know those who formerly had been just faces within the church congregation. During introductions, each member was asked to share the origin of the desire to work with the homeless with the other volunteers. In all cases, each volunteer had either known a homeless person, or had felt convicted after seeing a homeless person on the street. After dinner, the group leader pulled an ice breaker out of her repertoire, and soon, the former strangers were laughing and smiling with each other about commonalities that they found among themselves. The game, “Never Have I” allowed members to disclose information about themselves in un-risky ways, while also risking to share certain “safe” information. This was the first step in helping the group relate and learn to work with each other. This introductory fellowship was fun, but the reality of the task that we were about to embark on weighed heavily during the conversation that followed.

One member bravely shared the concern of feeling nervous about working with the homeless men. She related that she had a desire to work, but was afraid that she might be robbed

or flowed when she left the church, after serving the homeless. Others then voiced similar and varied concerns. During this time, the Room In the Inn Manual (2007) became a working document, as the group shared the rules for guest and for volunteers. Volunteers and coordinator worked together to find answers to all of the questions and concerns that were voiced. Volunteers left that evening feeling excited and most assured about hosting out RITI guests.

**Beginnings** are a challenging time. Schwartz (1968-72), in his search for developing a method for group work, detailed the steps that the worker makes to draw the group to the work.

The task group soon found out that there are many tasks associated with providing hospitality to an unknown number of homeless guests. Because RITI was new, no one knew exactly how many guests would be arriving. Therefore, the group blindly assigned the main and side dishes, dessert, drinks, snacks and breakfast the following morning, and assigned members to drive vans, clean up, and perform the activity. The members also decided who would stay overnight with the guests. The group had more questions about the first hosting than there were answers; yet, the anticipation of the first hosting was felt by everyone. While decisions were agreed upon, a certain awkwardness permeated the air, as each member appeared to struggle in finding their “place” or “niche” in the task.

Unfortunately, the awkwardness did not end there, but it continued during the first hosting on November, 3, 2007. The coordinator found that 20 of the 23 volunteers congregated in the kitchen to serve, while other tasks went undone. At dinner, the volunteers sat together, instead of intentionally sitting with and engaging our guests. It was clear that fears and anxieties had returned. The activity for our first hosting was supposed to be volunteers pairing up with guests to share life stories, but most volunteers congregated in the kitchen until it was time to go home.

Because Northside Assembly of God RITI volunteers hosted every other Saturday evening, we met for planning and discussion on alternate Sundays, after morning worship. At the planning meeting after the first hosting, the coordinator had planned to re-contract with the member, but never had opportunity to mention the hesitations that she noticed at the first hosting. Members came prepared to work, and volunteered to perform those tasks where they felt more comfortable, and the coordinator encouraged volunteers to risk hearing the story of at least one guest during the next hosting. In the remainder of the meeting, those members who had volunteered to cook decided on the menu, and those who had chosen to serve met to decide who would decorate and set the table, and who would actually serve the guests. The clean-up group met, and the van drivers placed a request for keys. Decisions appeared to come easily, with everyone pitching in to make our second hosting run more efficiently.

**Middles.** “The work phase is the substantive stage of the common work – the time in which the client group addresses itself to the matters at hand and the period in which the primary issues of process will have to do with the degree of productivity the members can command in elaborating the themes of which their subject is composed, sharing the ideas and experiences they need to share, investing the affect they need to invest in order to lend urgency to their efforts, making the decisions that are required, and using each other and the worker in the process” (Schwartz, 1968-72, p. 163). RITI began to function as a well-oiled machine because the task group had begun to function well together. However, while the group was pouring themselves into the task of hospitality, they were dealing with illnesses and grief within their own families. One member’s family member had passed away in a murder-suicide. The deaths were carried in the media, and the member’s family felt shame because their family member was charged

with killing the other. The members rallied around this member's family by supplying food, phone calls, cards, and prayers. In turn, the member's family showed so much appreciation that it further caused the RITI volunteer group to grow closer. Additionally, another member's wife was diagnosed with cancer, and again, the other members did, and continue to come-alongside. These events caused the group to achieve intimacy, as they began to share successes and challenges with each other, and accept each other unconditionally.

In their discussion of treatment and task groups, Toseland and Rivas (2005) comment that each group type contains aspects of the other. In other words, treatment groups have associated tasks within them, and task groups have some aspects of treatment groups. This was certainly true for the Northside Assembly RITI group.

The concept of mutual aid includes 1) where members share information, ideas, wisdom, and experiences – members and guests would gather after dinner many times, and engage in conversations where information was shared to encourage to expound on, and to challenge. There were men groups, women groups, and mixed groups. 2) a dialectical process, where members explore, debate and integrate many points of view – this was especially true during football season, when interested parties would debate who would go to the Super Bowl, and then who would win the Super Bowl! 3) discussion of taboo topics – on one unforgettable night, Cynthia announced that she had been diagnosed with breast cancer, and then went on to tell the group that she was going to ask for a double mastectomy. As if on cue, the men started to get up to leave, when Cynthia calmly asked them to stay...and they did. 4) “all in the same boat phenomenon-universality,” where members enjoy being with others who have the same important

similarities – it wasn't until many weeks into the RITI season that many members related that they had formerly never felt comfortable in ministry, because they never felt like it was for them. They felt differently about RITI, like it was exactly how they wanted to serve. 5) mutual support, where members share successes and challenges, and sympathy and empathy, 6) mutual demand, for attention to the task – the coordinator was amazed when in the second planning meeting, the members came prepared for a mutual demand for attention to the task! 7) individual problem solving, where members use the group to address individual challenges – many of the members reported formerly being shy, but found that they had become much bolder since being a member of RITI; 8) rehearsal, where members use the group to try new ways of doing and being, and 9) strength in numbers, where members use the power of many to effect change (Shulman, 2009).

Additionally, members began to seek advice and wisdom for other members, and began to go to lunch with other members after Sunday worship. Ownership of the group was felt by all, and disagreements were settled democratically. All taken together, these developments showed that the RITI volunteer group had achieved mutual aid.

One of the consequences of this intimacy theme of group development was the spilling over of hospitality to the homeless guests. By the fourth hosting, the guests had become good friends, and members laughed, joked and talked with the guests. The activity period during that time also changed. Now, activities were enjoyed by both members and guests, with guests beginning to participate. Some of the fondest memories our volunteers are:

Carol suggested that we have a bingo night. She brought all the materials for Bingo, including mini-tooth-picks as the markers for the spaces. Carol had enlisted other members to purchase prizes for Bingo winners. Those prizes consisted of \$5 food gift cards, bus passes, t-shirts, and socks. Each table had members and guests sitting together, joking and laughing, and having a good

time! If the truth be told, in more than one occasion, a member won Bingo, but allowed the guest to choose the prize. A good time was had by all!

Usually the men of the group acted as clerks for “the store.” We would often receive donations of clothes including shirts, ties, pants, suits, and jogging sets), toiletries, social, t-shirts, and shoes. We would use tables and racks to display the items, and then invite the guests to come in very small groups. The clerks wanted to be able to give each guest good, personal service, and well as suggestions regarding what looked best on the guests. It was hard to tell whether the guests or the members enjoyed the store more!

On our final hosting, the worship pastor came and asked everyone (members and guests) on stage. Guests and volunteers brought chairs up, and everyone sat around the piano, as we all sang together. A couple of volunteers led a song, and pretty soon, the guests shared their gifts of songs, too. The highlight of the evening was when one volunteer and one guest decided to perform a duet of a very funny song! That was a very sweet time for that special evening, and I can hardly wait to begin again in November!

**Transitions.** RITI’s official ending date for the season was March 31, 2008, but Northside Assembly’s final hosting was several days before. Many of the members expressed sadness because they would not be able to see their new friends as before. They also wondered where they would sleep, and if they would be safe. The promise of a new season the following November did not satisfy them, so Northside Assembly RITI group initiated the “Dinner, Movie and Laundry Night” throughout the summer, which consisted of picking the guests up at a certain time, bringing them to our church, serving dinner, and showing a movie while laundry was done for them. They were then transported back downtown. The Community Cookout for the 4<sup>th</sup> of July was another opportunity to fellowship with our former guests. Rather than it being an ending, the RITI season was a transition.

What is even more phenomenal is that after RITI season ended the relationships between the members of the group continued! These former strangers continue to enjoy the intimacy of relationship and fellowship. RITI truly is an amazing grace, because mutual aid was the



unexpected blessing of a group who offered hospitality and overnight shelter to a group of homeless men.

### **Implications**

Now that Jackson, Tennessee, has warmed to the idea of providing hospitality to the homeless men of our community, many of us are wondering about the next step. Churches are preparing to begin year three of RITI. Even so, many are beginning to think of a permanent shelter for the homeless men in our community. We do not yet know the steps to cause this to happen, but we are committed to make it happen. As of this writing, we are preparing to meet with city officials to explore options for a homeless shelter for men. With God's help, and the cooperation of ARM, the churches, the coordinators and volunteers, we are sure that is WILL happen.

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