

SYNERGY newsletter



Ideas To Ignite Your Church's Global Impact

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DECEMBER 2007: STARTING A MOTEL OUTREACH

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LAUNCHING A MOTEL MINISTRY

Druggies, drunks and prostitutes. Homeless, struggling families. These were the residents of the Algodon Motel in San Clemente, California. Located on a street known for drug trafficking, it was the scene of frequent police raids. Like others across the country, the Algodon Motel had once housed travelers, but as the neighborhood declined over the years, it became temporary housing for the homeless and those who could not afford to rent apartments. An online review of San Clemente motels rated it filthy and one of the three "worst in town". Yet this was a setting chosen by God to start something big!



It all began with Jackie. After doing a Vacation Bible School for children of families living in motels, she found others from Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California, with a similar passion to minister to these people. Working

with Orange County Rescue Mission (which had already identified the motels of South Orange County housing the homeless), they decided to begin by prayerwalking the

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four sites of San Clemente that had been named.

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Mack Powell recounts the story:

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My group walked and prayed almost listlessly for about an hour until we came to the Algodon Motel. The Algodon sits halfway down the block southwest of El Camino Real, San Clemente's main drag, in a residential area. We didn't know it at the time, but the block was known for trafficking of methamphetamines. In fact, the Algodon Motel had been the site of 24 police raids in the preceding 12 months. It was known as a place for drug addicts, drunks and prostitutes to crash. We didn't realize all of this as we walked around the premises praying.

We were rudely interrupted by an unshaven man with a T-shirt that half covered his beer belly and smoking a cigarette. He called to us saying, "Can I help you people?" We sheepishly replied that we were with Saddleback Church and the Orange County Rescue Mission and we wanted to start a ministry to the families living in motels.

He didn't answer, but a young blond woman that overheard us did. She stood with a small child in her arms and tears in her eyes while she asked, "Are you the people I have been praying for?" Well, that stopped us in our tracks. It turns out this young lady named Tracy had come to the motel two weeks earlier with her child and \$75 in her pocket and began praying for God to send someone to help her. You can imagine our thoughts as we looked at her and listened. Someone in our group -- I don't know who -- whispered, "This must be the place."

It turned out the scruffy man with the too-small shirt was the manager of the Motel, so we asked him if we could pass out Thanksgiving baskets to the residents in a couple of weeks and he readily agreed. When we met up with the other groups that had been praying over the other motels we were hopping around like kids that just got what they wanted for Christmas. We couldn't wait to tell the others what happened, and that's when our ministry began.

Saddleback Church is vigilant about charity, firm in resolve to avoid creating dependency. But leaders are willing to use resources strategically to open new doors for ministry. Hence, the first step was to distribute Thanksgiving food baskets to residents of the motel, meeting physical needs and getting to meet them personally. Following up with a

Christmas party, they gave presents donated by church members. It was too long to wait until Easter for another holiday to create a bridge, so they decided to begin serving bi-weekly breakfasts on Sunday mornings, followed by short 30-minute church services at the motel.

Because the motel was notorious, any unusual activity there quickly became a focus of police attention. The first Sunday morning event was no exception! As the service ended, participants joined hands in a circle to pray. Mack remembers...



It was getting hard to pray because a police helicopter kept circling the area and then a police car drove up and asked what was going on. The manager told the officer they were having a Bible Study, to which the police office remarked, "They're having a Bible Study at the Algodon?" We all got a great laugh out of that one.

The Sunday events grew, and breakfast became a weekly occasion. Tristen, an original volunteer who helped start the outreach, soon began to notice that motel volunteers were approaching burnout, and efforts to attract additional recruits through the church bulletin were not providing much sustainable help. It was her idea to create a one-time small group opportunity to provide a pancake breakfast at the motel, with no further commitment. This brought a flood of people willing to serve doing the busy work of set-up and food preparation, freeing committed volunteers to rotate schedules and just focus on ministering to needs of the people.

The next challenge was how to duplicate this outreach at hundreds of other rundown motels in Southern California. Due to overloaded schedules and fear of commitment that church members have, the motel outreach was unable to train enough leaders to extend to another location. Eventually, Max McGhee, the new lay leader of the ministry, was inspired to create a system to assimilate the Bible study small groups into a pathway of leadership, responsibility and ownership.

After several failed attempts to conduct leadership meetings, Max produced a small group training curriculum. This was the key, since it could be studied during the small groups' regular meetings, providing a wide-angle view of the ministry and preparing hearts before the day of the outreach. Today dozens of groups are self-sufficient and have adopted complete responsibility. Other churches in addition to Saddleback have partnered with the outreach

to send their small groups as well. And the ministry takes place with no paid workers and no operating budget!

Using free online tools offered by Google ([see Tools](#)), the motel ministry manages small groups that sign up to participate at five motels in three cities. Each small group purchases food, cooks breakfast, visits with residents, and stays to participate in a short worship service with an inspirational message of hope. As the website states, the "ministry of listening, laughing, and praying together brings God's love in unexpected and unusual ways. Small talk can lead to God talk."

With a focus on pointing residents to God rather than providing programs for them, volunteers offer "a hand-up not a handout." They emphasize "mission", not social work, and they connect motel guests to a social service rather than provide the service. When new small groups sign up, a ministry leader helps facilitate the outreach until they can be independent. Churches like to partner with an opportunity that mobilizes and discipless their members. The outreach is thankful for volunteers, and non-profit social agencies welcome the help.



As relationships developed, children's classes and mid-week Bible studies sprang up. Residents began to respond to God's Word and the love shown by volunteers. Many gave their lives to Christ and experienced sweeping change in their lives, bearing out the acronym motto of the M.O.T.E.L. Outreach: **M**entoring **O**thers **T**oward **E**ffective **L**ife-change.

God has called hundreds of volunteers to demonstrate Christ's love, ministering in these neglected motels! Every Sunday an average of 60 volunteers feed about 120 residents from motels and 50 homeless people from the street. More importantly, most guests remain to hear a gospel message; they are physically and spiritually nourished. Many of the residents consider it "their church"; the majority are people who would never attend a "church

[TOOL PACKAGE](#)

Find out more about starting a motel ministry, and check out Google tools that are available to make coordination and administration easier.

[GREAT IDEAS](#)

Learn principles and ideas from others who have experience in motel ministries.