

Church Spotlight

Hilton at “The Gate”
By Linda Markle & Betsy Holtz

For one week in April every year, Shepherd’s Gate Lutheran Church in Shelby Township is transformed into a world class resort. Well, it seems like a resort to many of us since our goal is to provide food, lodging, laundry, transportation, personal services, spiritual encouragement, and entertainment with excellence. Months in advance, the preparations begin to make Shepherd’s Gate a warm, caring, comfortable shelter to those less fortunate souls who reside in our county. Small meetings are held. E-mails are sent out. Will our Med Room director be back in time from wintering down south? Are our Food Service chefs still on board again this year? What day- to-day non-food supplies do we need to buy? Can we get a team together who will provide lunch for all the volunteers on the Sunday that we set up? When should we begin asking the congregation to sign up to help? Maybe signing up on the Shepherd’s Gate website would facilitate the whole process. As you well know, lots of little details have to be nailed down.

We are blessed at Shepherd’s Gate to have a generous congregation that absolutely loves putting on MCREST. It is one way we can truly “be Jesus” to people we might not otherwise ever come in contact with. This past April was our 16th year of doing MCREST, and we had a full house. We had a total of 407 volunteers participating, putting in 2800 volunteer hours for the week. This averaged about 60 volunteers per night. But it wasn’t always that way.

In the beginning, our facility was much smaller and we could only accommodate half the group. Ruth Thomas headed up that first year. They knew about MCREST and thought it was something our congregation should get involved in. We stepped out in faith not knowing exactly what we were doing, but God blessed our efforts and everyone was so fulfilled by the end of the week that we knew this was something we had to do every year. In those days we didn’t have shower facilities at the church, so we talked to the local junior high school and they allowed us to drive our guests over there each night to shower. Also in those early days we had a small kitchen so people were tripping over each other during meal prep time. And the fellowship hall seemed so cramped as it was used for dining, mingling, watching TV, and other activities. In a few years as our facility expanded, we were able to accommodate all 60 MCREST guests. Our work load doubled, but so did our volunteers.

Mark Thomas, who is Shepherd’s Gate’s Business Administrator, wears the hat of MCREST church coordinator. For several years now he has had the same directors overseeing the same areas, which has its pros and cons. On the plus side, our week runs very efficiently and there is little time spent on training. Also, we can get by with fewer organizational meetings. On the negative side, fewer people are being pulled into a leadership role. In fact, we may inadvertently be sending a message to the congregation that we have it all under control and we don’t need their help. Ideally, we should be mentoring prospective directors every year so that we don’t burn out our current crew.

One of our goals from the beginning has been to make our guests feel at home, so we have always tried to schedule fun nightly activities. We have done talent shows, concerts, praise nights, comedy clubs, Bible studies, and movie nights. But since our host week is always during the NBA Playoffs and American Idol, and the TV is always set up and running, some of our activities weren't always well attended. This year we decided to focus on a few activities that were well received: haircuts, manicures, movies, Bible study, and our first ever euchre tournament. This, along with our ever present group of minglers & shepherds (members who enjoy coming to church in the evening to sit and talk one-on-one with our guests, pray with them, and encourage them) proved to be a winning combination. We had the best week ever!

Another thing we did this year to help relieve all the early morning chaos was to have several morning people come in at 5:30 a.m. to help with breakfast, showers, & the Med Room. This provided added help to our tired overnight workers who were being pulled in every direction once the guests began arising.

No, Shepherd's Gate really can't compare itself to the Hilton if you just look at the church facility alone. But, in terms of a sincere desire to provide quality service in a loving environment, we feel like we're doing a pretty decent job, and we thank God for His guidance and protection over the past 16 years.