

Guests, Not Clients

Loaves & Fishes serves guests, not clients.

Guests are made to feel welcome, hospitality is extended. Clients are expected to make (and keep) appointments. No appointment, no service.

Guests are accepted as friends, given the benefit of the doubt, and not kept waiting. Clients are expected to wait patiently, however long it takes, and then listen up when their turn comes.

Guests are treated as equals; they do not have to justify their presence. Clients must prove their need with ID and detailed questionnaires.

Guests are free to kick back, relax, and catch a few rays. Clients have to be scrutinized, toe the mark, or seek services elsewhere.

Guests are free to ask questions, criticize, and challenge the system. Clients are expected to be grateful for any service rendered, and no talking back, please.

Guests are free to help themselves to seconds. Clients are notified that one is sufficient.

Guests are free to come and go as they please. Clients need permission.

The most challenging part of being a Loaves & Fishes staff member is to understand – and practice – the difference between guest and client. Some prospective staff members are inherently incapable of making the transition from client to guest because of a deeply held bias that they are different from and therefore better than guests. Some of the measuring sticks a staff member uses to mark this difference are so superficial, they could be called silly. Some examples: education (“my degree”); fashion (“Where did you get that cute outfit?”); life style (“I’m going to work out”); mobility (“I’m going to L.A. for the weekend”); status (“What does your father do?”); career (“Where did you go to grad school?”). Even the often-quoted scripture admonition, “There but for the grace of God, go I” is interpreted to mean, “You poor bastards.”

Finally, the Loaves & Fishes staff member must be nonjudgmental, period. No exceptions. There is no latitude to say this guest deserves help, but that one is hopeless. Or this guest is ready to reform, but that one is a trouble-maker. Or this guest is cooperative and needs my help, but that one is a pain in the ass and can be ignored.

When Loaves & Fishes staff members begin to experience the joy of working with guests, not clients, they experience a new-found freedom in their daily work. This new relationship is honest, mature, and more like the values expressed in the Gospel. These guests – former clients – now suddenly have ideas and points of view worth considering. They can be wise beyond understanding and challenge us to live the present moment now, today. Some have great talents bottled up within, trying to find expression. Many are generous beyond all measure. Most have suffered traumatic physical and/or emotional injuries and walk every step with pain relieved from time to time only by self-medication. They don't justify or make excuses about their shortcomings. They do not curse their fortune or the hand that has been dealt them, and they live with such hope!

As one who has been fortunate to work at Loaves & Fishes for many years, I can sense when staff members have made the difficult transition from client to guest, because the refrain is nearly identical: "I have received from the guests much more than I gave."