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FOR CHURCHES · SIX

Shepherding tables

Choosing hosts, walking the first year.

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ONE

Choosing hosts

THE MOST CONSEQUENTIAL DECISION OF YOUR LAUNCH, ON TWO PAGES.

Everything else in your launch is recoverable. A weak first gathering recovers. A slow start recovers. The wrong first hosts is the one launch mistake that usually doesn't — not because the people are bad, but because your first two tables become the congregation's mental picture of what a table is. Choose like it matters, because it's the thing that matters most.

What you're looking for

Not your best teacher. Not your most available volunteer. Not the person who asks. You're looking for three things, in this order:

1. People feel safe around them. This is the whole qualification, and you already know who they are: the ones people *tell things to*. The person others end up next to at the potluck, confiding in without planning to. Safety can't be trained into a host in ninety days; everything else can.

2. They show up. Consistency over charisma, every time. A moderately warm host who is there every single week builds a table; a magnetic host who cancels twice a month buries one. Look at their track record with small, unglamorous commitments — that's the predictor.

3. They're honest about their own life. The table will only ever be as real as its host. You need someone who can answer "how are you — actually?" truthfully in front of others, because they answer first, every week. Polished people who manage their image make polite tables. Honest people make real ones.

Notice what's not on the list: Bible knowledge, teaching gifts, leadership experience, spiritual maturity as usually measured. Hosts don't teach — the story and the four questions carry the content. A newer believer with the three qualities above will out-host a seminary graduate without them, and it won't be close.

Who not to pick (and these will be the ones who volunteer)

The eager platform-seeker. The person visibly excited to finally lead something. Wanting the front is precisely the disqualification — a table has no front, and a host who needs one will build one by February. If they push, give them a season at someone else's table first; genuine callings survive the wait, and appetites don't.

The over-committed faithful. Your most reliable people are reliable because they already carry everything — and a host running on fumes produces a table running on fumes. If your instinct says "they'd be perfect but they're stretched," believe the second half. (Better: a table might be where they finally get fed instead of drained — as a member first.)

The fixer. Deeply caring, and constitutionally unable to let a hard moment sit without solving it. Tables need hosts who can hold silence and pain without rushing in; fixers turn Share into a clinic. They make magnificent table members and exhausting hosts.

The theological enforcer. Sound doctrine, zero tolerance for a wrong idea spoken aloud. The open chair requires a host who can hear the skeptic's honest take on question one without correcting it — the story does the correcting, slowly, which is the design. An enforcer at the table teaches everyone to stop being honest by week three.

The couple doing it to save something. A struggling marriage hosting a table puts the struggle on stage weekly. Care for them first; host later.

How to actually ask

Face to face, unhurried, and specifically — the ask itself models what hosting is. Something like:

> *"I've watched how people are around you — they trust you, and they tell you things. I'm starting something small: a few people around a table, a meal, one story of Jesus told out loud, honest conversation, and something we actually do about it. No teaching, no curriculum — I'd never ask you to teach. I'm asking because of who you already are, not something you'd have to become. I'll be behind you the whole way — my name and number go on the front of your guide, literally. Would you pray about hosting one?"*

Then three things: give them the Host's Guide to read before answering (a real yes needs to know what it's saying yes to), give them a week (an instant yes from the right person is fine; a pressured yes from anyone is a resignation letter with a delay), and take a no gracefully — a no now is often a yes in year two, unless the ask went badly.

Two final rules

Start with two hosts, never one. One table has no comparison, no companion, and no proof the model works beyond one personality. Two tables can learn from each other, and either can survive the other's stumble.

Their spouse or household has to be in. Hosting happens in a home; a home hosts as a unit. An enthusiastic host with an unconsulted, reluctant spouse is a table with a countdown running. Ask about this directly — kindly, but directly.

TWO

The year one roadmap

MONTHS 4–12: AFTER THE 90 DAYS CARD RUNS OUT.

The First 90 Days card gets a table to steady. This is what the rest of the first year actually holds — the first multiplication, the first hard moment, the celebration rhythm, and the honest word about which stretches are easier with company.

Months 4–6: the middle, which is quieter than you'll like

What's happening: the novelty is gone and the rhythm either is or isn't becoming culture. Tables that survive this stretch usually survive, period. Expect an attendance wobble around month four — spring sports, travel, life — and don't panic; the question isn't perfect attendance, it's whether people come *back*.

Your moves:

- Keep the biweekly host coffees, and change your question. Stop asking "how's the table going?" (you'll get "fine") and start asking "tell me about someone at your table." Hosts who light up talking about their people have healthy tables. Hosts who talk logistics are drifting toward running a meeting.
- Watch for **content creep** — the host who starts supplementing the story with a podcast clip, a devotional, a worksheet. It's always well-intentioned and it's always the first step back toward the classroom. The story and the four questions are the content. Gently prune.
- Around month five, ask each host the year's most important question: **"Who at your table could host?"** Not to act on yet — to start both of you watching. Multiplication in month nine is decided by who got developed in month five.
- Start feeding Sunday quietly: a line in a pastoral prayer about "our tables," a story (with permission) in a sermon. Not promotion — evidence. The congregation should start hearing that something is alive before it's ever announced.

The month-6 checkpoint (with your leadership team): are both tables still meeting without being chased? Has each completed acts? Is at least one future host visible somewhere? Two yeses of three means proceed. Less than that means diagnose before adding anything — and a wobble at month six has about four usual causes — an hour with someone who's watched fifty tables spots yours in one conversation. The money page says where that kind of help lives.

Months 6–9: the first hard moment, and the first apprentices

What's happening: by now a table has been together long enough that real life has arrived at it — a diagnosis, a job loss, a marriage strain, a grief. This is not the model failing. This is the model *working*: the table caught something that would otherwise have been carried alone. But it's the first true test of the care routing, and hosts will feel out of their depth precisely because they are — by design.

Your moves:

- When the first hard moment comes, **your response time is the whole lesson.** The host calls the name on the front of the guide; if that call gets a same-day response and real care, every host learns the net is real and the model becomes trustworthy. If it rings into a busy week, they learn to stop calling — and start carrying things alone, which is how tables (and hosts) break. Guard this above everything else in year one.
- Begin **apprenticing** the future hosts identified at month five — informally, invisibly. The current host hands them the story one week. The questions another. The follow-up on acts a third. No title, no announcement; leadership here is learned by doing and conferred by trust. By month nine they've been hosting in pieces for a season without the weight of the name.
- If a table includes kids, this is also when the household rhythms mature — the retelling roles, the act-reminders. Check the safeguarding basics are still crisp (two adults, every time); month seven is when "just this once" tries to happen.

Months 9–12: the first sending, and the first celebration

What's happening: at least one table is likely full (8–10) with an apprentice ready. This is the moment every predecessor model fumbled — Western groups historically refuse to multiply because the relationships are the product — so it gets done with weight and joy or it doesn't get done at all.

Your moves:

- **Never split; send.** The table doesn't divide in half like an amoeba. A pair — usually the apprentice and their household — is *blessed out* to start the next table, at a gathering built for the purpose: the story told (story 50, "Do you love me?", exists for this night), hands laid on if that's your church's way, real food, real tears, real joy. The sent pair's names get spoken on Sunday. Make sending the most honored thing that happens in your church this year, because whatever you celebrate, you'll get more of.
- **Start the celebration rhythm:** all tables together, quarterly to start — a shared meal, stories from the tables told out loud, the sent ones honored, and worship if it's natural. This is Acts 2:46's other half: house to house *and* together. The celebration is what keeps multiplication from feeling like loss — nobody said goodbye; the family just got a bigger table.
- **The year-one review with leadership:** tables meeting, acts completed, hosts developed, one sending done or scheduled. Then the year-two question, which is a real fork: stay at this scale and deepen, add tables at the same quiet pace, or begin the Rebirth conversation. That decision deserves outside eyes more than any other moment in the model — we'll say that plainly rather than pretend otherwise. The money page says where to find them. But the tables are yours either way, and so is the pace.

The honest failure notes for year one

Three ways first years actually go wrong, so you can see them coming: **the pastor disappears** (the hour a week quietly stops, hosts stop calling, tables drift — the fix is a calendar, not a recommitment); **success gets announced too early** (a pulpit campaign in month five floods the tables with attenders before hosts exist to receive

them — growth outrunning leadership is how models die of their own momentum); and **the first sending gets postponed** ("they're not quite ready" in month ten becomes "we don't do that" by year two — send at readiness, and remember readiness was never going to feel ready).

THREE

How staff support tables

THE STAFF GUIDE: HOW TO SUPPORT TABLES WITHOUT PROGRAMMING THEM.

This is for the associate pastor, the discipleship director, the staff member whose job description just quietly changed. If your instincts were trained in program ministry — and whose weren't — this new work will feel like doing less. It isn't. It's doing the original job.

The one-sentence job change

You are no longer the producer of group life. You are the safety net under it and the gardener around it. Producers create content, schedule meetings, recruit leaders, and push. Gardeners water, prune, watch for disease, and trust growth they didn't manufacture. The tables run themselves by design — your job is everything that makes that safe: knowing the hosts, catching the crises, developing the apprentices, and keeping the church connected to its tables.

What you do (the actual week)

- **Know your hosts as people.** The biweekly coffee is the core discipline of this whole role — not a check-in meeting, a friendship with intent. You're listening for three things: how the host is actually doing (hosts burn quietly), who at their table they light up about (that's your future host list), and anything drifting (content creep, hospitality creep, a dominating voice).
- **Be reachable, and be fast.** Your name may be the one handwritten on the front of hosts' guides. That line is a covenant: same-day response to a host's real call, every time. Speed of care is the currency of the entire model — hosts who trust the net take healthy risks; hosts who don't start carrying people alone.
- **Run the care routing.** When a table surfaces a crisis — and healthy tables surface them *earlier* than programs ever did; that's a feature that will initially feel like an

increase in problems — the host loves and walks alongside, and everything beyond a living room comes to you. Receive it as the system working, never as the host failing.

- **Develop, don't recruit.** Your leadership pipeline is now sitting at tables being watched by hosts. Your job is to help hosts see them, apprentice them in pieces, and get the sending right when it comes. You'll never run another leader-recruitment campaign; you'll never need to.
- **Carry tables to Sunday.** You're the bridge: stories from the tables (always with permission) into services, the celebration gatherings organized, the sent ones honored publicly. The congregation should feel the tables' pulse without the tables becoming a promotion.

What you don't do (and will be tempted to weekly)

- **Don't produce content.** No discussion guides, no supplemental videos, no "this month's theme." The canon and the four questions are the content. Every resource you add teaches hosts they need resources, and re-trains tables to be classrooms. Your restraint is the resourcing.
- **Don't visit the tables.** A staff member in the room turns a table back into a program for at least a month — people perform for the professional. Visit only by a table's invitation, rarely, as a guest who mostly listens. Your absence from living rooms is a discipline, not a neglect.
- **Don't manage by dashboard.** No attendance reports, no metrics submissions, no host paperwork. The three signs of health (meeting without being chased, stories retold outside the table, acts completed) are read through relationship — through the coffees — not through forms. The moment hosts report to you, you've built a program with extra steps.
- **Don't rescue too fast.** A wobbling table is usually a table about to learn something. Distinguish wobble (attendance dip, a flat month, an awkward stretch) from wound (crisis, conflict, safeguarding). Wounds get you immediately. Wobbles get a good question at coffee and room to self-correct.

- **Don't skip your own table.** Staff who shepherd tables without sitting at one become producers again within a year — it's the only outcome. Be a member (not the host) of a table yourself. It will keep the work honest, and it might keep you whole; this model was built partly because of what program ministry does to the people running it.

How you'll know it's working

Your calendar has fewer meetings and more coffees. Problems reach you earlier and smaller. You hear stories secondhand about your congregation loving people, and you had nothing to do with it. Leaders emerge you didn't recruit. And the strange one that means the most: the church needs you differently — less as its engine, more as its shepherd. That's not your role shrinking. That's the role, recovered.

If you want a hand with any of this

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