

Pity the Poor Speaker
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Dear Mrs Guinness

Please could you come and speak at one of our Thursday afternoon women's meetings? We're trying to fill our diary with speakers for next year. We would be very happy to offer you a cup of tea.

Yours sincerely

*Agatha Applethwaite
Secretary St Godolpha's Ladies Happy Hour.*

The postmark was Bournemouth. I lived in Manchester at the time - only a car journey of around six hours each way. There was no offer of expenses, let alone a fee, of a meal or overnight accommodation, and inevitably, no stamped addressed envelope for my reply. But there was a P.S. "Your husband could always drive you. We'd gladly give him a cup of tea too." Presumably, being a helpless little woman, I wasn't capable of driving that far myself. At that time my husband was in fact a teacher, and I doubt his superiors would have deemed the event worthy of time off. I wrote back, said I would go for the price of a return train fare, and never heard from them again.

Admittedly that was twenty years ago. These days speaking invitations are a little more in touch with reality. Though there was one in last year's post, from an obviously experienced calendar filler, on a postcard printed with the name of the group, where it met and its aims and objectives. The suggested date and time for my appearance was filled in by hand on a dotted line. I simply had to tick a "yes I'll come" or a "no I won't" box. It certainly made the decision easy.

And then there was the church which invited me to make a six-hour round trip on the M6 to preach one Sunday later this year for ten minutes. We have negotiated a lengthy extension.

In mid-life experience has made me quite picky about speaking engagements. These days my energy and Christian enthusiasm wither at the very thought of a

long journey in delayed, overcrowded trains, or bumper to bumper traffic on a Friday evening after a week at work. Could this be the wisdom of age at last? Or is it that I'm not always convinced that organisations have worked out the kingdom benefits of having a speaker, and therefore value the commitment they expect?

Get a group of regular speakers together and they'll have a fund of tales to tell. Listening to actors reminiscing on Radio 4 recently about their early days in rep rang a few bells - the long, enforced stays in strange boarding houses, freezing bedrooms with lumpy mattresses, the snoring through the wall, and the china chamber pot under the bed. Not exactly our experience of Christian accommodation of course. But while there's lots of much-appreciated, five-star, Egon Ronay treatment, there are also homes where jolly, warm-blooded Christians in tee-shirts run their central heating for one hour a day in the depth of winter, with beds like Blackpool's big dipper - shared with the family cat - down the longest corridor in the house from the lavatory.

Working away from home, (and working is the operative word), is a strain. It means sleeping in a strange bed, in a strange house, with complete strangers - despite the brotherhood of all believers. When I worked for Central Television, it always surprised me that on an away-shoot, the crew would opt to stay in a bog-standard, plastic hotel - even if they had friends or relatives nearby. Gradually I understood. After an exhausting day they knew exactly what to expect, didn't have to make polite conversation with hosts, could come and go as they pleased, be guaranteed absolute privacy, coffee and tea on tap, room service on demand, a long, uninterrupted bath or shower, an extended phone call home, the heating to suit their convenience, a comfortable bed - and a loo en suite!

In fact, plastic hotels are lonely places and Christian homes are for sharing, so I'm not advocating that kind of expense - only the creature comforts that go with it. It's hard to be away from my man and my kids, feeling stressed and anxious before the event, then afterwards, high with adrenalin or in the depths of despair because of the horrible, creeping certainty that I've disappointed people who have prayed, prepared and slaved for nothing else for months.

So please, don't let there be a moratorium over the cocoa. That late hour often is the moment when hosts decide to indulge in deep, meaningful social intercourse with this manifestly fascinating and famous guest they'd never heard of till the minister asked them to provide her with a bed - she who now has the conversational skills of a gnat and feels her eyes are held open by a row of pins. Or worse still, may be feeling as if her belly's stuck to her backbone, as she never had

a chance to have lunch on the way there, and supper was a "Jacob's Join" with lots of cold pastry she couldn't manage to swallow. Besides, people were so busy welcoming her that when she got to the table there was only salad left. And a truly professional speaker never touches lettuce, for fear of ending up with a distracting bit of green stuck between the teeth for the rest of the evening.

Do forgive me for writing about the subject. I have a horrible feeling that everyone who has ever kindly offered me hospitality will cringe and say, "Does she mean us, the ungracious wretch?" My answer is an unreserved "I don't". Of the negative experiences all I have these days are blurred impressions. On the positive side, I have had the privilege of staying with many wonderful people who have since become long-term friends.

Put it down to my Jewish outspokenness, but I believe the issue needs honest appraisal. Christian speakers are not consistently offered a fee - not by the Church of England at any rate, even though their livelihood may depend upon it. It seems to be universally assumed that women have a man somewhere paying the bills. In secular circles speakers can claim mouthwatering amounts, especially if they happen to be Margaret Thatcher. I know I'm not quite in her league, but any token of appreciation which keeps my car on the road and helps me support Her Majesty's government which demands national insurance from the self-employed would help. When the children were small and I needed to employ a child-minder, speaking engagements played havoc with our tiny budget, especially if I was given a book token in lieu of petrol expenses. Christians keenies are often willing to pay £6.00 for a dinner, lunch, or breakfast, but 50p per person for the speaker? Yet the Scriptures say a labourer is worth their hire, that they who teach are worthy of a double fee. "Ah", they say to me, "but you can sell your books." I do - shamelessly - but if 100 people are present and I sell 40 books at 10% royalty, I may make approximately £28.00.

I have been on both sides of the equation, weighing up the pros and cons of inviting and being invited. Organising any event is a time-consuming commitment. It can be expensive. We need to face some hard truths about why we're doing it. Is it simply to fill a programme, fulfil expectations, prolong an age-old tradition no one has the courage to kill, provide Christian entertainment? Will this event really contribute to the growth of the kingdom? All I'm advocating is that we think very carefully before we take the plunge.

Some Guidelines for Inviting a Speaker.

1. Always write. Never phone. To phone a complete stranger is an invasion of their privacy, and they need time to weigh up your request anyway.
2. When you write, state your aims clearly. Why are you inviting this particular person? What do you want them to speak about? How much input do you want from them. (Busy people will resent being invited to a planning day. What do you want them to do, speak or plan your entire evening or conference?)
3. Don't ask them what their message is, if they are right for your meeting, or even good at speaking! Check it out with others. Read their books and know their areas of expertise before you write.
4. Inform them clearly about what you are prepared to pay - taxis to and from their home station, a first or second class train fare, a meal on the train if necessary, petrol at how much a mile, overnight accommodation, a suggested fee or honorarium.
5. Always enclose a stamped addressed envelope for their reply. The event is yours, not theirs. They may receive dozens of requests a month and have no secretarial back-up.
6. If you will need publicity material, ask them in your first letter for a photograph and short biography. It saves bothering them twice.
7. When they are with you, put yourself in their shoes, provide a warm, quiet room for preparation, food and drink, privacy, and the opportunity to ring home. If they'll need a dressing gown or an extra warm nightie, if you have pets, tell them in advance. Check out their allergies!
8. Before you make an approach, check out their journey. Is your invitation realistic? Will distance mean one short speaking engagement becomes a three-day event for them? Plan their travel arrangements as far as you can. Suggest train times. Offer to fly them there if that's easier than lengthy ferries or crossing London. If God hadn't meant us to fly he would never have given us Easyjet!