**HOW TO TRAIN YOUR MEMBERS**

**FOR HOSPITAL MINISTRY**

**By Kristine Noelle**

**LAKE FOREST, Calif. (PD) —** When a church member is sick, a visit from a caring listener can make all the difference. Faced with insurance issues, treatment options, family responsibilities, and day-to-day struggles – a few minutes of prayer and encouragement is often just what the doctor ordered.

At [Saddleback Church](http://www.saddlebackfamily.com/home/today.asp) there are 60 to 70 volunteers on call, ready to make visits to hospitals, homes, or convalescent facilities. These lay ministers are specially shaped for this service and feel a calling to care for the sick. "These are the people who run to the hospital when they hear someone is sick," said Liz Puffer, director of pastoral care at Saddleback. People who have been in the hospital or who have had loved ones in the hospital often make the best candidates, Puffer said, because they understand best what patients need during a hospital stay.

One key to the success of Saddleback's ministry is that it has the pastors' support. In many churches, the traditional model is for pastors to make the hospital calls, and the congregation expects that. Saddleback Senior Pastor Rick Warren fully endorses the ministry because it frees up the church's pastors for other responsibilities and gives church members who are shaped for hospital ministry a chance to do what they love.

**Tips for training hospital ministry volunteers
1. Don't assume that people have a background in hospital care.** Saddleback starts with the basics during its two-hour training session for interested volunteers. "We don't assume that they know not to sit on the patient's bed, or that they shouldn't eat in front of the patient, or that they shouldn't wear perfume. We don't assume anything," Puffer said.
**2. Offer practical guidance.** Saddleback distributes a 30-page manual to each volunteer during the training session that covers topics such as, "The Precious Skills of Active Listening," "Visiting Children," and "Visiting a Terminally Ill Patient." "We teach them everything we can think of," Puffer said. At the end there is a question and answer time with the Saddleback staff trainer.
**3. Screen volunteers before sending them out.** "Once we send someone out, they are representing Saddleback Church," Puffer said. After the candidate completes the training session and receives a manual, the next step is to complete an interview by a Saddleback staff member who is experienced in hospital ministry. This serves as a screening process to ensure that candidates are qualified to visit patients on behalf of the church.
**4. Ask volunteers to log their visits.** Saddleback volunteers are given a log in which to record their visits. Sometimes a volunteer will not be able to continue with a patient for the duration of needed visits. In those cases, the volunteer is trained to let the ministry coordinator know so that someone else can be sent. That way no one falls through the cracks.
**5. Encourage volunteers to look for divine appointments.** Hospital visits can be a chance to witness to friends, family, and staff members by demonstrating Christ's compassion in action. "Often the patient from our church will have a lot of visitors coming and going, but their roommate may not," Puffer said. "Our ministry team is absolutely encouraged to start a conversation with the person in the bed next door, to pray for them, and to encourage them."
**6. Guard against burn-out.** Let volunteers decide how many visits they are comfortable making. Tell them that it is OK to say no when they get the call asking for their help. "God doesn't want us to go out and serve if we feel burned out," Puffer said. "We encourage people to set boundaries."

**Successful hospital ministry volunteers will:**
**1. Be assertive enough to help, but not intrusive or pushy.** "This is not a time to give advice," Puffer warned. "It's a time to just be there and listen."
**2. Look for practical ways to offer assistance.** Often the simplest gestures have the greatest impact. Just mailing a letter or making a phone call can be a burden lifted for someone in the hospital. Saddleback volunteers are trained to ask questions like, Is there anything you need me to do? Would you like me to call anybody? Can I pick anything up for you?**3. Be good listeners.** "The hospital ministry team does very little talking," Puffer said. "It's mostly listening. It's showing up with the understanding that it's not about you."
**4. Be flexible.** When the volunteer comes to visit, the patient may be sleeping or having tests run. Volunteers need to be flexible enough to wait or come back at another time.
**5. Refrain from offering advice.** "A lot of times you'll go to the hospital and the person will be overwhelmed. They'll say, Our insurance isn't working. What do we do? And you have to be prepared to simply say, I don't know and love on them and encourage them," Puffer said.
**6. Pray before each visit.** "We tell volunteers to pray before going and as they're walking down the hall to the hospital room. Otherwise we might walk in with an agenda that is not at all what is needed," Puffer said. Volunteers are also encouraged to ask if they may pray for patients during the visit.

In the years since Saddleback turned its hospital ministry over to lay volunteers, they've seen the fruit of compassion in action. "Praise reports are times when a child is sick for a long time and the family sees the hands and feet of Jesus [and] times when we take a journey with the patient and see the impact of coming alongside them," Puffer said.