

New Alliance congregational partner offers ministry of hospitality

by **Lolita Cusic**

Long before big hotel chains, Airbnbs or discount travel sites, women like Lydia opened their homes to travelers in need of lodging. The Apostle Paul and his guests even stayed at Lydia's home. That kind of hospitality lives on today in a "house" bearing her name.

[Lydia's House](#) is a hospitality ministry of [Park Avenue Baptist Church](#) in Atlanta, a new Alliance congregational partner. It's just one of the many gifts Park Avenue brings to the Alliance body. The church's tagline: Bold. Inclusive. Creative.

"Lydia's House started as the dream of a small group Bible study I was leading at a local coffee shop about missional faithfulness," said Lydia's House founder Tony Lankford, then pastor of Park Avenue. "We heard of a need to house mission groups in the city and we knew we had extra space ... so we did."

"I never could have imagined 10 years later it would still be going strong, having served thousands of people who had come to serve the city of Atlanta," he said. "I will be forever grateful to that small group who had the faith and courage to allow their study of the Bible to actually lead to action."

Lankford, now pastor of First Baptist Church of St. Simons Island in Georgia, said Lydia's House will always have a special place in his heart.

He came to Park Avenue at a time when membership had dwindled, said Jennifer Lyon, pastor of congregational leadership at Park Avenue Baptist. A man with a vision and an entrepreneurial spirit, he revitalized the church and helped it grow, she said.

Lyon calls him the restart pastor. "Tony really saw that (Lydia's House) as an opportunity for a hospitality ministry for those coming to serve the city of Atlanta," she said. "It's not the Ritz. It's not super fancy." But it is very affordable, Lyon said.

Located above the sanctuary, Lydia's House sleeps as many as 60. For \$15 a night, you'll get a clean, comfortable bed, bathrooms and showers, access to a kitchen and a common area for your group to meet. The three communal sleeping areas with bunk beds may remind some of summer camp, but that's part of the appeal of Lydia's House.

"Overall, I enjoyed my experience staying at Lydia's House," said Justin Moser, minister of youth and missions/outreach at First Baptist Church of St. Simons Island. "Coming from my ministry context in a church filled with largely middle- to upper-middle-class families who rarely experience living conditions outside of their comfort zones, I actually enjoy that Lydia's House offers an option that is community-oriented and not a 5-star hotel."

“Christian mission done in the context of complete comfort often leads to complacency. It is exactly our comfort zones God calls us to sacrifice to live fully into the mission God has for us,” he said.

Moser took a group of teens and adults to Lydia’s House last summer and in 2016. Birmingham, Ala.-based Passport Inc., a nonprofit Christian ministry that runs summer camps for youth, arranged the trip.

“When I heard that Passport was sending groups to stay at Lydia’s House and be volunteer staff for Park Avenue’s summer literacy camp, I knew it was something that I wanted my students to experience and to experience myself,” Moser said.

The Lydia’s House staff can connect groups to community service projects in Atlanta or groups can make their own plans. Past visitors have worked in homeless shelters and volunteered with the church’s literacy camp and after school program.

The Urban Immersion learning modules, which are optional, are another key component of the Lydia’s House experience. They include:

- Housing Insecurity—Issues, stages of housing and placement, driving tour
- Racial Justice—History of Atlanta, Martin Luther King Jr. Center
- Living in a Global Society—Interfaith dialogue, the “global” context
- Through the Eyes of a Child—How poverty affects children—nutrition, education, trafficking
- Loving the Stranger—Understanding issues of immigration and refugee resettlement
- Who Is My Neighbor? —A guided experience through 13 different stations of social issues

“You learn about broader issues,” said Lyon, a co-facilitator at Lydia’s House with her husband, Trey Lyon. They also bring in practitioners and experts to discuss and meet with groups.

“We don’t reinvent things. We want to partner with people who are doing good work. We serve as a kind of access point,” Jennifer Lyon said.

She estimates about 700 people visit Lydia’s House every year. Their average stay is about a week, though some stay for just a weekend retreat. There’s also lots of recurring business. Lydia’s House guests include church groups, college students looking to serve over Spring Break or during the summer and groups that aren’t faith based, but who are very interested in justice, Lyon said.

To learn more, visit www.lydiashouse.net, or email Trey Lyon at trey@parkavebaptist.com.

Lolita Cusic is a freelance writer living and working in Chicago, Ill.