THE **CHALLENGE** OF LEADING VOLUNTEERS

SEVEN WAYS TO BOOST VOLUNTEER ENGAGEMENT

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Part of the Church Leader Resource Series

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VOLUNTEERS ARE AN OPPORTUNITY, NOT AN AGGRAVATION

Although each church is unique, there are a few things all churches have in common. One common characteristic is the dependence upon volunteers to carry out the ministry of the church. Think about the impact of volunteers in your own church. What would happen if there were no volunteers on any given Sunday?

The thought of a church without volunteers is scary. Most of the responsibilities within our churches are handled by people who don't draw a paycheck. Yet, there seems to be a constant tension brewing from an often unmanaged dichotomy within most congregations: those who are volunteers and those being served by volunteers. Church leaders invest a large amount of time trying to move people from the served group to the volunteer group. This puts the focus on those who aren't volunteering. However, volunteers are people too. They should be the intended focus of the overall ministry of any church. Volunteers are engaged the same way any other person is engaged in church—through relationships.

There is a popular misconception that the object of ministry is the person who is benefiting from ministry. Though that is partially true, it is not a complete understanding. The ministry is also to the people who have agreed to serve. They are right there—ready and in need of intentional discipleship.

Jesus' first followers were expected to do more than watch ministry unfold from a distance. Authentic faith produces a life of service. Jesus called people to follow, challenged them to believe, and, as a result, expected them to obey His instructions. Volunteering is just another way of identifying authentic Christ-followers. Those who aren't willing to serve God need to be reminded what following is all about.

THE CHALLENGES OF LEADING VOLUNTEERS

Churches that have trouble finding volunteers often face one or more of the following four challenges:

1. There Is a Lack of Clarity about the Purpose of the Church

Clarity is a big deal in the church today. Many churches are operating without a concise understanding of the reason they exist. Some church leaders believe it is their job to attract and keep a crowd. Meanwhile, the effect of the church isn't noticed apart from the church campus.

2. There Is a Value Problem

Churches attract people who share their values or lean toward sharing their values. When those values aren't stated and reinforced, people don't know how their values compare to the church's values. Until the values are clear, people will be little more than casual attenders. Once people have been attracted, they need an immediate meaningful experience to solidify the relationship with the church and the congregation. Too often, volunteer experiences are focused on "getting things done" rather than building healthy relationships in the process—which may communicate the church values tasks more than people.

3. There Is a Shared Leadership Challenge

Many church leaders hold their roles too tightly. This affects how they train leaders. Ephesians 4:11 isn't about attracting more volunteers; it's about empowering God's people to do the work of ministry. We often make the mistake of railroading people toward existing volunteer vacancies rather than enabling them to participate in or establish the ministry calling in which they are best suited.

Let's face it… it is easier to fill vacancies than empower people. However, empowering people to carry out their personal ministry is better over the long haul. Real leaders look for opportunities to make others better by equipping and training them. Insecure leaders act as if they are the only ones who can perform a task and often disregard the need to share the leadership responsibilities.

4. There Isn't a Volunteer-Friendly Environment

Volunteers naturally encourage others to volunteer. A volunteer-friendly environment makes serving normal and watching uncomfortable. Unfortunately, many churches are content to collect spectators because they fear encouraging them to participate might drive some away from attending. The reality is just the opposite is true.

People want to get involved where expectations are high. They want to know they play an important role in the work of the church. If you can't validate them through the ministries of the church, they will find a place that does. By telling the stories of volunteers frequently and making a big deal out of volunteers, your church can become volunteer-friendly. This has to be more than a once a year "stand up for applause" or a thank you from someone who has no idea about the extent of the volunteer's service—it must be regular, intentional, and meaningful.

When a church catches the vision for empowering and equipping people for ministry, the outcome will be significant. The description of "Christ followers" will capture the essence of what it means to know, love, and serve Jesus Christ. The educational, worship, and serving ministries of the church will work in concert with each other rather than in competition. The process of identifying and connecting new volunteers will be the task of everyone in leadership, not just the job of a ministry coordinator.

SEVEN WAYS TO BOOST VOLUNTEER ENGAGEMENT

Here are seven fundamental ways to boost your church's volunteer base that are key for all leaders in your church to be aware of and practicing:

1. Invite

When a ministry leader personally invites an individual to serve, the chances of that person saying yes are greatly increased. However, when an announcement is made from the platform or a note placed in the bulletin about volunteer needs, the responses are dismal. Why? Everyone believes someone else is better suited for serving than they are.

Church leaders often assume people have free time and are more than willing to give it to the church. This is an inaccurate assumption in two ways. First, people don't have as much free time as we think. Second, people are going to give their free time to the place where they can make a difference. The standard operating procedure for most churches is to invite people to faith and then persuade them to serve. As mentioned previously, faith and service are interconnected; you can't have one without the other. The problem is churches lack a strategy to connect people with the area of ministry in which they are most suited. The "herd mentality" prompts churches to do a holy "cattle call" for filling empty volunteer slots. This approach invalidates spiritual gifts, specific skills, and personal interests. It takes away the appeal of serving. Potential volunteers hear the cattle call and ask, "If just anyone can do it, why should I spend my limited time doing it?"

This is why the small group environment is so important. This is where people will be best known. Small group leaders need to have their antennas up, listening to the stories people tell and how they talk about the ways they use their time. These small group leaders are then able to share this information with ministry leaders and connect people to the best place to serve.

2. Train

The church is responsible for equipping God's people for ministry, not for providing ministry for the people (Eph. 4:11–13). Though many people are willing to serve, they aren't confident in their abilities. They need to be taught how to deal with people, how to handle safety and security, what the church expects of them, how to invite co-leaders, and so forth. My experience (Don) is most churches don't necessarily need more people to volunteer, they need more leaders who know how to invite others into service. Again, it's about relationships.

Most of us would agree the work taking place inside the church is more significant than the work taking place in many businesses within the community. Yet, the church offers less on-the-job-training than many fast food restaurants. Churches should establish an intentional training program that provides ministry-specific training as well as church-wide vision casting and planning. Well-trained volunteers are more likely to stay engaged than people who have to figure out what to do on their own. Don't seek to fill holes; make serving beneficial for everyone involved.

3. Affirm

Many churches today aren't successful in recruiting, inviting, and retaining volunteers because they make a big deal out of paid staff members while unintentionally downplaying the volunteers. The really important tasks are handled by people on the payroll; other non-glamourous services are left to the volunteers. This causes volunteers to feel unappreciated. It is easy for people to feel this way when, for example, they're caring for 3-year-olds in the back corner of an untraveled hallway. Yet, those volunteers play a significant role in the spiritual development of those children and their parents.

From the parking lot team to the Bible study leaders, make affirming the volunteers a part of your ministry to them. How can you affirm them? Let them know when they have been helpful to someone. Visit them while they are serving and learn from them. Say, "You know, I never would have thought about answering that question like that. You gave a really great answer!" Words like that are certain to boost the spirits of those serving alongside them and create an atmosphere of care and support among the volunteer team. Affirmation is more than just a "thank you." It's a leader's acknowledgement that the volunteer is a co-laborer. In the training, I (Don) focus on affirmation as being about the person's worth and recognition about their service.

4. Give Feedback

People want to hear from those in leadership. They want to know their service is valued and is making a contribution toward the organizational goals and vision. Feedback comes in a variety of forms—personal conversations, emails, telephone calls, personal notes, and so on. Feedback also can come from those being served to express their appreciation to those who serve. Feedback allows people to identify areas in which they need to make adjustments. It also identifies holes in the overall ministry of the church.

Feedback opens opportunities for dialog and discussion while creating a clear leadership structure. Many volunteers resist feedback or changes in their areas of responsibility if they aren't feeling secure in their roles or in Christ. Long-time volunteers often are most resistant to change. But if you use feedback to cultivate a leader-follower culture, you will make future changes more palatable.

5. Evaluate

Professors always anticipate receiving student evaluations because they want to know if they communicated the subject matter clearly. Volunteers have the same desire. They want to know if they are meeting expectations and making a difference among those they are serving.

Create an evaluation form that allows you to provide constructive feedback to volunteers based on the feedback from others and your own observations. Evaluation is different from feedback. Evaluation is about the processes, procedures, training, and communication—often, the volunteer is doing awesome work, but the schedule, processes, procedures, "hoops" they must jump through make their tasks even more difficult—there must be an evaluation loop for them to be able to identify and rectify the problems. Also, provide a way for volunteers to evaluate the staff members overseeing their areas of ministry. This 360-degree evaluation will provide opportunities for communication and interaction that otherwise would be impossible. In subsequent years, refer to previous evaluations and make sure changes are on track.

6. Recognize

Celebrating volunteers always pays big dividends, especially when that celebration takes place publicly. Celebrate volunteers annually but affirm them monthly by doing something that acknowledges their contribution to the ministry of the church. This can be as simple as a personal note or as complex as a "Let Us Serve You" luncheon where paid staff serve the volunteers. Volunteers can be recognized through articles online or in the church newsletter, as well as through videos shown during weekly services. Keep in mind some of those serving would rather die than be recognized publicly. So, during the interview and placement process, ask the volunteer about how they would like to be recognized, keep a record of what they tell you, and recognize them in the ways they have identified, not the way that is easiest for the leader.

7. Reflect

Reflection is one of the most valuable tools in ministry. It allows us to look back on the past while maintaining our focus on the future. Reflection helps us evaluate the journey from the past to the present. It highlights the significant contributions of volunteers. It captures the momentum that will serve as a primary motivator for the future. It's important to help those serving answer the "so what?" question following their service, to be able to connect the message of the church with their service. T.S. Eliot said, "We had the experience but I missed the meaning." Reflection helps those serving focus on the meaning, not evaluate the activity. The second reflection question is "now what?" Reflection encourages those serving to set their personal Ebenezers as benchmarks in their spiritual growth. We must be careful,

however, to glance backward and look forward. When churches spend more time looking back than they do looking forward, they are destined to make some mistakes.

These seven ways form the foundation for a systematic approach to improving the volunteer landscape in your church.

MAKING A VOLUNTEER SYSTEM WORK IN YOUR CHURCH

A systematic approach that addresses these seven way can be defined specifically for your congregation, scaled and implemented to meet your needs, managed through online tools, and measured for effectiveness.

Let's take a closer look at four steps you can take to make a volunteer system work for you:

1. Understand Your Existing Volunteer System

There are no universal solutions; there are only universal principles. Your system will be unique to your church because your church has different needs and resources. The first step in defining the system is determining your congregation's status in implementing these seven processes.

- Are you strong in training but weak in reflecting?
- Are you inviting volunteers but not considering their gifts?
- Do you need to develop a system for collecting feedback?

Once you have determined some of the needs present within your congregation, brainstorm a list of people who might be able to address them.

2. Outline Your Volunteer Engagement Strategy

After you have defined your church's status in each of the seven processes, you'll need to determine a plan for implementation and execution. The larger the church, the more difficult it will be to implement and execute the seven processes for boosting volunteerism. You'll have many people to manage, train, encourage, and disciple—and lots of chances for people to fall through the cracks of church life.

Smaller churches, however, won't benefit from economies of scale—and that may lead to volunteer burnout. Whether your church is large or small, finding a systematic way for implementing the seven processes will ensure your volunteers are serving in their areas of giftedness, receiving all they need to be growing, involved disciples of Jesus Christ.

3. Manage through Online Tools

Many churches seek to implement processes without electronic tools because they fear technology will strip the heart out of the ministry. On the contrary, technology manages information and details to free you up for deeper relationships. Tools such as Church Community Builder can help you track the status and involvement of every individual in your church. You can quickly identify those who are not serving, those who are serving in multiple positions, and those who are involved in leadership training and triage groups.

Because volunteers are so valuable to the ministry of any church, you can keep track of those who have been absent for consecutive weeks. This keeps you aware of ministry opportunities among those who are serving. Again, because authentic faith is inherently connected to serving, a clear picture of the overall health of your church is just a few keystrokes away. Online tools also allow you to communicate with individuals or sub-groups. This becomes more and more important as your church grows.

4. Measure for Effectiveness

Though many people hyper-focus on data analysis, data truly is helpful in determining the effectiveness of every area of ministry, especially the development of volunteers. As attendance increases, the expectation is more people will become part of the volunteer pipeline.

If attendance is increasing but there is no increase in volunteerism, you can conclude that your church is attracting an audience but not authentic followers. These are important pieces of information because they all point to the overall spiritual health of your congregation. Without a standard against which to measure effectiveness, it will be hard to determine just how well your strategies are working. Effectiveness isn't always measured by numbers alone. That's why it is so important to track the historical changes in specific indicators.

After implementing your new volunteer system, your church will begin to reap the benefits of a healthy culture of volunteers. Once this process is set in motion, however, you will need to consider ways to keep it in motion.

KEEPING VOLUNTEERS ENGAGED

If a church doesn't have a strategy for keeping volunteers engaged, there will be a revolving door of volunteers coming and going. Many church leaders are content to recruit replacements for volunteers who are stepping aside. But this can become a full-time job in many ministries! It doesn't have to be this way. It is possible to keep existing volunteers engaged while equipping new volunteers for new aspects of ministry. Otherwise, ministry expansion will be thwarted because replacing volunteers is the best the church can do. So, how do you keep volunteers engaged in their ministries and the church? Here are three ideas:

1. Keep Volunteers in the Communication Loop

Make sure volunteers know more about the ministries of the church than the average website surfer does. Keep your communication short and to the point. Use bulleted statements that identify the big three things for the upcoming week. Use Church Community Builder to create an email list of volunteers and make sure to communicate with them regularly (preferably the same day each week).

2. Give Volunteers Everything They Need to Be Successful

Create a checklist for each volunteer area through Church Community Builder and make sure to provide the necessary information and items. The host ministry team might need guest registration cards, campus maps, and pens. The preschool team needs tissues and disposable gloves. You get the idea. Volunteers who have everything they need will be happier. They, therefore, will serve longer and be more positive about serving and about the church in general.

3. Be Intentional about Retaining Volunteers

Volunteers will grow frustrated when they feel left out of the communication loop or feel disconnected from others in their same life stations. Retaining volunteers requires ministering to them as if they are part of your small group. The fulfillment of their responsibilities is important, but don't forget to care for them.

Make sure you talk with each volunteer and ask how they are doing, what is happening in their life, how you can pray for them, and so on. Keep track of these details in Church Community Builder, accessing it to know how to pray specifically for

each volunteer's needs. As a leader, you will recognize when someone is ready for a break, allowing them to recharge their batteries.

Sometimes the hardest part about launching a volunteer process is keeping it in motion. If you try to do this on your own, chances are volunteers are going to fall through the cracks. Technology can help your system work for you so you're free to keep people at the center of your concern. Life is messy, which is why you need to be available to maintain strong relationships with your volunteers. It's the most certain path to keeping them engaged over an extended period of time.

HEALTHY VOLUNTEERS ARE CONSISTENT WITH A HEALTHY MINISTRY

Volunteers are people with whom you do ministry. You have missed the point if you ask, "How do we get more volunteers?" rather than, "How do we make more disciples?" When a church has a healthy ministry, it will naturally produce healthy volunteers. A church that struggles to identify and empower volunteers probably struggles in the discipleship area as well because discipleship and volunteerism are connected.

So which comes first, discipleship or volunteerism? Both. Healthy volunteers are growing in their relationship with God. People who are growing in their relationship with God naturally desire to serve. This is a new concept for many churches because they traditionally have separated the spiritual growth ministry from the volunteer ministry. In the biblical description of authentic followers of Christ, the two go hand in hand.

To make this happen, church leaders must create a culture in which new volunteers are identified and equipped, existing volunteers are continually trained and engaged, and ministry is expanded and improved without hiring additional staff members. A large church staff is really a sign the church hasn't done a great job of identifying, equipping, empowering, and retaining volunteers. Expanding the ministry can be more effective and affordable when a church understands these truths about volunteers.

As your church implements the seven processes to boost volunteerism, you will also see discipleship-level growth that naturally multiplies. Together, volunteerism and discipleship will work together to produce a healthy ministry that functions for the benefit of the Body and to God's glory.

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