

How to Discourage Your Church's Volunteers

by Karen Kogler

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Imagine your church with no volunteers for one week.

The organist may play the organ, but there are no choir members or other instrumentalists. Everyone eventually finds a worship bulletin, but gathering the offering turns chaotic. People go to the fellowship hall after worship, but there's no coffee or Danish set up. And, during the Sunday-school hour, the adults are forced to join the children because there are no Bible-class leaders (and no Sunday-school teachers, either, for that matter).

During that week, the grass doesn't get mowed, Bible study groups don't meet, and shut-ins receive no audiotape of worship. No committees get together to discuss plans for vacation Bible school, youth-group activities or needed church repairs.

The pastor visits elderly Mrs. Wilkerson in the hospital following her surgery, but no one brings her a casserole when she returns home. Attendance and contribution records don't get updated, and the church secretary falls hopelessly behind in her work because she spends half her time folding bulletins and stuffing flyers into envelopes.

Our congregations—*your and my congregations*—depend on volunteers. That's why it gives one pause to hear that many congregations are increasingly experiencing a shortage of volunteers. People are becoming more and more selective in how they use their time—a commodity that's often more precious than money.

Other factors are contributing to this trend, too. For one thing, people tend to move more often than they used to, which decreases their attachment to a congregation. And baby-boomers and –busters (or so the demographers and sociologists tell us) have weaker loyalties to all institutions, including the church.

Meanwhile, the older generation—those who lived through the Depression and World War II—is generally healthier and more financially secure than their predecessors. Many seniors feel they have already made their sacrifices and put in their time; therefore, they, too, are more selective with their discretionary hours.

Is there anything that we—either as leaders in our congregation or simply as concerned members—can do to raise up more volunteers and keep these people reasonably happy and fulfilled in their work? The answer, I firmly believe, is “Yes.”

Our reasons for serving

Before discussing what techniques we might use to stimulate volunteerism in our congregations, let's first ask, Why do we volunteer at church in the first place?



All of our service, no matter how noble, effective and sacrificial, is as “filthy rags” in God’s eyes if we use it to earn God’s approval (Is. 64:6). But as we receive the free gift of eternal life with God from the nail-scarred hands of Jesus, our gratitude overflows from our hearts to our hands in joyful service.

God’s model for our work together is the human body (Rom. 12:4-5; 1 Cor. 12:12-27). The body’s many parts, each with its own purpose, are all needed and work together as one. None of the members is unnecessary, and none is independent.

So why are so few doing the bulk of the work in most of our churches? Are those not serving less spiritual, less dedicated than those who are? Sometimes spiritual reasons are involved, and these need to be addressed with those people. But let’s look at some common practices by which we may unknowingly discourage people from volunteering to serve.

How to hinder volunteers

1. *Use guilt to motivate.*

“You really ought to take a turn as Sunday-school teacher, Mitch. The rest of us have.”

Guilt works sometimes, so we tend to turn to it. But it doesn’t work over the long haul; people eventually tune you out. And it certainly isn’t Biblical. God doesn’t want service that comes from “shoulds” and “oughts,” but rather from loving, grateful hearts.

2. *Keep secret the details of a task.*

“I said I’d help out with the congregational dinner, and then I find out I’m in charge of the whole thing!”

Just as we expect full disclosure when signing a contract or making a major purchase, so should we never ask for another’s valuable time without giving him or her an honest picture of what is expected.

Some churches now write job descriptions for each task, a single page that includes a summary of the task itself, the qualification needed or helpful for the task, the person to whom the volunteer is responsible, the expected time commitment, how the task fits into the church’s overall mission, and the benefits the volunteer will receive from the position.

3. *Ask the same people.*

Only by stepping outside the familiar circle will we give others a chance to volunteer and avoid burning out the regulars. How do you find the people you don’t know? Ask someone who *is* familiar with them. Ask a young mother, a senior, a businessman, or a teacher if



someone among their acquaintances might enjoy that particular task. Get to know the gifts and abilities of new members.

4. *Look only for willingness, not suitability.*

If all we seek are warm bodies with a weak pulse to fill positions, that may be all we get. Availability and willingness are important, but ability is more important. If God wants a particular task done in His church, He will have brought people to that church with the needed gifts. Take the time and make the effort to find the right person for the job. The work is too important to settle for less.

5. *Act desperate.*

“If you won’t help us out, I just don’t know what we’ll do!” The panicked look, the wheedling voice, even the throwing up of hands in the air might convince the soft-hearted, but a soft heart does not necessarily make the person right for the job. This recruitment technique also doesn’t display trust in the Lord.”

6. *Keep the tasks rigid.*

If it’s hard to fill an area of service, see if it can be adapted. For example, are there people who simply can’t teach Sunday school for a year but might be willing to do it for six (or even three) months? Could the committee meet in the evening rather than during the day to accommodate a woman with a career? Could two or more people share a task previously done by one person? Could it be done differently? Creativity and flexibility pay!

7. *Avoid initial training.*

Bill was an usher for many years. When his company transferred him to another city, he cheerfully offered to usher in his new church. But when he showed up on Sunday, he realized (too late!) that he should have been handing out songsheets with the bulletins, and he didn’t know what to do with the offering. What’s more, Mrs. Murphy gave him quite the look when he didn’t escort her to “her” pew. Embarrassed, Bill decided he wasn’t cut out to be an usher here.

All volunteers need help or training when they begin, no matter how “obvious” the task or how seasoned the worker. Where’s the photocopier? How do I turn in a bill for reimbursement? Can the kids bring doughnuts into the Sunday-school rooms? How do the kitchen appliances work?

8. *Never show appreciation.*

We don’t work in the church to get recognition. But an occasional thank-you does a world of good. It says our efforts are worthwhile, and it strengthens us for further service. The



appreciation doesn't have to be much in terms of money, time or effort. A simple phone call or note or some small gift goes a long way to encourage a fellow volunteer.

9. *Make them feel terrible when they need to quit.*

People have transferred to a different congregation solely to get out from under a crushing load of volunteer responsibilities. Volunteers need to resign for many legitimate reasons—increased family or work responsibilities, a desire to serve in a different area, a desire for change. When we help people take a break from service when they need it, we're more likely to receive the same assistance when we need to do the same.

What the church can do to help

While avoiding negative practices, we can also take positive steps to improve the volunteer service in our congregations.

1. *Remind one another that God has blessed us with gifts and talents and abilities.*

Many Christians have never been told that God has equipped them for ministry. We need to help each other discover and develop our gifts.

2. *Ask for an annual commitment to ministry.*

Consider annually listing the ministries of your church and asking members to mark those that they could do. These commitments, however, should not suffer the fate of traditional "time and talent" sheets, gathering dust somewhere on the off chance that someone might glance through them. Don't ask for commitments unless you plan to follow up on them. If Bob is interested in, say, joining the choir, make sure there's someone to greet him on this first night to welcome him and show him the ropes. If Sally's offer to teach Sunday school is ignored, she's not going to offer again.

3. *Invest in volunteers.*

If church leaders believe that volunteers are an immensely important resource, this belief will be reflected in their language, planning and budgeting. Larger churches may find it worthwhile to staff a position of director of volunteers. Small churches may want to set up a committee for the stewardship of time and talents.

4. *Conduct personal interviews.*

A half-hour spent one-on-one with a trained interviewer is extremely useful in helping potential volunteers discover their gifts and select a ministry, in assimilating new members into ministry, and in describing an available position. How helpful it is when the church asks



its people: What are you good at? What do you enjoy doing? What do you dislike doing?
What would you do if you could?

“In Christ, we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others” (Rom. 12:5). What a multiplicity of benefits arises when God’s people help each other serve where they are gifted!

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