

## **THE CARE AND FEEDING OF CHURCH VOLUNTEERS**

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Lots of Practical Tips!

You've been recruited as your church's nursery coordinator. When you accepted this volunteer assignment, you thought coordinating meant scheduling nursery workers and reminding them to show up.

Little did you know, though, that you were also expected to wash the linens, clean the toys, fill in regularly for nursery worker no-shows, and find your own replacement when you decided to quit. You have the distinct impression that you're alone in this job and that it has been dumped on you. You resent it!

Imagine another scenario: that a church leader has recruited you to provide weekly transportation for three months for a person needing evening counseling appointments. The leader tells you how much driving will be involved and what the time commitment is; she also invites you to call if you encounter any problems or have any questions. Then after a few weeks, she calls you to ask how it is going and thanks you for your willingness to serve in this way. When you call to tell her that the person is asking for additional help—with grocery shopping and housecleaning—she discusses the situation with you and helps you set reasonable boundaries. After your conversation, you feel part of the church's team.

### **VOLUNTEER CARE NEEDS IMPROVEMENT**

No one would argue that churches can do without volunteers. Yet church leaders are often clueless as to how to best recruit and nourish them. In spite of churches' poor volunteer-management approaches, however, many church members continue to volunteer—by God's grace.

Good volunteer management does not happen automatically. If they want to avoid burning out and discouraging both existing and future volunteers, churches must work at taking good care of their volunteers.

Good Christian volunteer management demands that church leaders understand their role and fulfill it carefully, that they avoid common mistakes in volunteer management, and that everyone understands the differing responsibilities of leaders and volunteers.

### **THE ROLE OF CHURCH LEADERS**

Church leaders who work with volunteers should see their job primarily as developing Christian servants. This approach stands in sharp contrast to simply finding warm bodies for unpaid jobs in the church. It instead involves using volunteers as part of a ministry team—coaching and encouraging team members as they use, develop, and refine their particular gifts in Christ's kingdom. Good leaders seek to empower volunteers, not to be served by them. Leaders who succeed in encouraging and supporting volunteers are blessed by seeing church members grow as disciples of Christ.

When recruiting any church volunteer, leaders should examine their own motives. Many times leaders are so desperate to find someone, anyone, to fit the needs of the

church that they plug in any available volunteer. Their focus is on filling the job rather than fulfilling and developing the person.

This often is the result of leaders holding on to programs that are sacred cows rather than allowing programs to discontinue for a while when no gifted volunteers are available. Instead, churches far too often draft gifted, already-busy members to fulfill yet another church ministry, and then all the jobs involved suffer.

People who volunteer in churches want to be faithful, fruitful, and fulfilled by using their gifts in a ministry. Church leaders must recognize that taking the time to match volunteers to jobs and to care for them is a lot less work than constantly finding and training new volunteers.

## **MISTAKES IN VOLUNTEER MANAGEMENT**

Churches make common mistakes in managing their volunteers. Here are a few to avoid:

- **Mismatching.** To place volunteers well, church leaders need to know the spiritual gifts, ministry passions, and temperaments of congregational members. Some church members will be unaware of gifts God has entrusted to them. Church leaders must help these members find those gifts through workshop materials such as *Discover Your Gifts* (CRC Publications). Each person has different needs and motivations; most of us can be extremely motivated in our own areas of giftedness and ministry passion. Some volunteers, for instance, really enjoy using their hands in service projects like fixing, building, cleaning, or painting. Others enjoy volunteering that gets them working in groups or committees.

Large churches should conduct gift inventories and surveys in order to get to know all their members—including new members. Small churches, where leaders often know their members' gifts well, may not need to have formal gift surveys.

Churches that do survey their members need to beware, however: a common complaint from church members is that filling out a survey is a waste of time because afterward no one calls them. If churches decide to use gift surveys, they must have a plan to use willing church members effectively. Many churches have found the *Network* program by Bruce Bugbee helpful in systematically discovering members' gifts, identifying where they desire to use those gifts, and seeing how their temperaments can create unique ministry opportunities.

You can easily spot a properly matched volunteer: that wonderful church school teacher, that great youth-group leader, that person happily serving coffee after church. These are people whose ministry positions never seem to end because the volunteers are so fulfilled and effective in what they are doing.

- Poorly equipping. Volunteer managers often make another mistake: leaving volunteers ill-equipped to complete tasks. All volunteers—and this includes elders and deacons—need support and tools to carry out their responsibilities. Some volunteers depend on the support of regular supervision and need tasks to be quite structured. Others, the entrepreneurs, need basic orientation, and then they create their own approaches to tasks. Many church leaders have increased their volunteer retention through a team approach, finding co-leaders for positions such as church school teachers and youth leaders.

Sometimes a volunteer needs the support of an encouraging word or of being given a prayer partner. One church sends Valentine cards, signed by the church staff, to all its volunteers in appreciation for using their gifts in ministry.

Sometimes volunteers need tools, such as training (all-expenses paid) in leading Coffee Break, church school, or children’s worship, or the ministry training offered by Stephen Ministry. Sometimes the tools are materials or equipment or a book or audiotape. When a church supports its volunteers and equips them, it is much less likely to suffer high volunteer turnover, burnout, and ultimately, dropout.

- Misleading and misinforming. Churches often mislead or misinform members about volunteer tasks. Leaders need to be completely honest about the scope of the task, including the length of commitment required. No volunteer wants to serve a life sentence. If a volunteer is trying an entirely new task, a trial period may help determine whether he or she would like to continue. No position should be either glamorized or downplayed. Saying, “Would you be the children’s worship coordinator? It’s really no big deal!” minimizes both the task and the volunteer. If the task seems unimportant, the prospective volunteer may well say, “If it’s not important, why do it?” The more vague and ambiguous the task, the less likely a church will find the right volunteer.

## ***RESPONSIBILITIES OF CHURCH LEADERS***

If you’re a church leader, you have five key responsibilities in developing and managing volunteers in the church:

1. *Prepare.* Pray for the Spirit’s leading as you begin (or recommit to) developing a leadership program using church volunteers. Know the gifts and interests of church members. Rather than always reacting to a need, develop ministry positions to use your members’ gifts.
2. *Recruit.* For each position, ask those with the appropriate gifts to prayerfully consider the opportunity. Be clear and honest about the task, the necessary responsibilities, and corresponding authority.

3. *Equip.* Give an updated job description and budget information, if necessary. Offer training, equipment, and materials that the worker may need.
4. *Debrief.* Follow up and encourage volunteers regularly. Ask them to tell you their experiences, both positive and negative. Ask for their suggestions and work hard to implement good ideas.
5. *Provide closure.* When volunteers accomplish a task faithfully, thank them and celebrate with them the blessings that have occurred. Encourage volunteers to share their volunteer experiences with others. Remind them that in ministry God expects faithfulness, not necessarily success.

### ***RESPONSIBILITIES OF CHURCH VOLUNTEERS***

Church volunteers should realize that they have permission to question church leaders about a proposed task if it is not clear to them and to take time to prayerfully consider whether to accept the position. If you're a volunteer, here are six issues to remember in clarifying the job:

1. Be clear on the task. Ask for a job description or list of responsibilities, and ask for authority to carry out the task.
2. Know how long the commitment is.
3. Ask what training is needed and offered.
4. Ask to whom you'll report.
5. Pray for the Spirit's guidance in your decision.
6. Remember that saying no is the right response when God is not calling you to a position.

### **IT'S A NEW REALITY**

Gone are the days when a church's staff does all the work. Growing churches develop lay leadership and take a team approach to ministry, using lots of volunteers. Good volunteer management ensures that the church will continue to have the right people to carry out its ministry. Developing the gifts of God's people means appropriately matching, caring for, and nourishing church volunteers. Helping them become all Christ intended them to be is church leadership's awesome responsibility.

#### **Resources for Better Volunteering.**

*Discover Your Gifts: And Learn How to Use Them*, Alvin J. Vander Griend, CRC Publications; 1-800-333-8300.

*Mobilizing Church Volunteers*, Marlene Wilson, Volunteer Management Association; 303-447-0558.

*Network: The Right People in the Right Places for the Right Reasons*, Bruce Bugbee, Network Ministries International; 1-800-588-8833 or [www.networkministries.com](http://www.networkministries.com).

*The Starter Kit for Mobilizing Ministry*, Sarah Jane Rehnborg; 1-800-765-5323.