

Re-engaging the Volunteers

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The church is a volunteer organization. Even the most staff-driven congregations rely on volunteers to make ministry work.

The pandemic has impacted volunteerism profoundly, in ways not yet clear. Volunteerism isn't bouncing back as readily as other aspects of congregational life.

We can take steps to engage our volunteers more effectively now, while we wait to learn more about what the future holds.

Where We Are

In congregations of all sizes, church leaders are trying to coordinate ministry with fewer volunteers. From recruiting ushers to the selection of board members, congregants are reluctant to step up and serve.

The early days of the pandemic provided a natural pause in many volunteer relationships. It was safer to keep the number of people in the building to a minimum. Congregants were overwhelmed with the demands of work, school, and family—all restricted to the home. Churches grew accustomed to working with fewer volunteers.

Now we want our volunteers back, but they are slow to respond. Job transitions in the workforce are at an all-time high as people reevaluate how they will spend their days. It makes sense that they are also scrutinizing their volunteer lives.

Where We Go from Here

We must acknowledge that volunteerism hasn't worked well for some time. We have not done a good job defining role expectations for our volunteer positions and we have subjected people to too many meetings that have little to do with ministry.

The time is ripe to revisit volunteer practices, to make certain we are providing people with well-structured, worthwhile opportunities.

Seven Ways to Revitalize Volunteerism

Evaluate needs and streamline roles. Make certain that every role you define has a meaningful part to play in making ministry happen. You may need to downsize your board and committee structure. You may need to rewrite your bylaws and policy statements to support a leaner structure. People have no patience for tasks that serve no useful purpose. If you are unable to fill a particular role, is the position really needed?

Embrace technology. Not all ministry needs to take place in the church building. Let people do their ministry for the church the way they have learned to work for their employers.

Promote flexibility. Don't limit volunteer opportunities based on physical availability during narrow time slots. Much ministry can be accomplished whenever the volunteer has time to get the job done. Allow people to use their available time wisely.

Move toward episodic micro-volunteering. People are less interested in joining committees and boards with ambiguous workloads. They are more inclined to say yes to a specific task that falls within their wheelhouse—a task that they can complete on their own timeframe, working with other individuals who are equally invested in the task.

Clarify the expected outcomes of volunteer assignments. Create volunteer position charters. What is the purpose of this role? How does it contribute to the mission of the congregation? What are the boundaries of the role and the expectations of its occupant? How will the volunteer grow by serving in this capacity? How will the volunteer be supervised and evaluated? How will the volunteer know that their work made a difference?

Help people pursue passion. Too many volunteer jobs are just plain boring. Too many meetings. Too many restrictions based on "how we've always done it." Too many instances of being unsupported and overwhelmed by the need, because all the work fell on too few shoulders.

Instead of starting with a position that the church wants filled, begin with the volunteer. Determine what they are passionate about, where they feel compelled to make a difference, and then craft opportunities that honor the passion while also supporting the mission and priorities of the congregation.

Five Universal Values

Construct volunteer roles to embody these values. Then appeal to these values as you enlist volunteers:

A chance to be tested. People like to be challenged. Instead of dumbing down a volunteer role so that “this won’t be too much of a burden,” consider building up role expectations. Craft an assignment that will be challenging and meaningful for a volunteer.

A chance to participate in a social experiment. Design volunteer roles to serve the social experiment your congregation is engaging. Is your focus on eradicating racism, hunger, or homelessness? Make it clear how this opportunity serves that commitment.

A chance to do something well. The mission of your congregation is important and the pursuit of it requires excellence. Your volunteer opportunities should elicit the pursuit of excellence.

A chance to do something good. People want to feel that goodness is at the core of who they are and what they do. Make certain that your volunteer roles embody goodness.

A chance to change the way things are. The church is at a crossroads. Adaptation is needed to ensure the survival of our faith communities. Charge your volunteers with the important work of adaptation and then support them in their change efforts.

Volunteers will always be the life force of the congregation. **The success of the future church depends in part on our ability to re-imagine volunteerism.** Don’t wait for clarity about the future to emerge. Begin the important work of reinvention now.