

The Care & Feeding of Volunteers by Douglas W. Johnson ©1978

Chapter Six Training

The church's program exists because of volunteers. They express their witness to the gospel as they participate in various jobs in the name of the church. The pastor and staff of a congregation, by encouraging or limiting volunteers, determine the vitality and outreach of that church. When people are allowed to use their skills and talents creatively in the church, the congregation can become a witnessing community.

The major responsibility of a pastor in working with volunteers is to equip each one so that he or she can do an exceptional job at whatever task he or she accepts. Indeed, the church has this obligation: to provide the training essential for volunteers so that they may witness effectively. These persons must be able to do their task in the best possible manner. Their effectiveness and witness is a test of the training process for volunteers in that church.

The word "training" has several meanings. In the church, it has been associated with skills as well as with feelings and attitudes. The focus of the discussion in this chapter is discrete; it considers training to be the process a church uses to help volunteers acquire the skills and background necessary to perform each task in the church he or she chooses to do.

Training

The process assumes that there is someone who can provide the training. Such an individual is a trainer, a person who instructs others or assists them in acquiring the desired skills. In local congregations the trainer may be the pastor or director of education or a member with background and training. When a congregation does not have such a person, a trainer may be secured from a conference, association, or national denominational board or agency. Most of these have staff members who can help in training volunteers, especially in education, stewardship, and evangelism. It may be that a congregation decides that it will not use its own resources or those of the denomination but will choose to engage an outside consultant. Such a person must be familiar with the skills needed to function well through the church.

Regardless of who does the training, it is essential, and it must be based on certain fundamentals. A few of the more important ones are lifted up for consideration in this chapter, others have been dealt with in previous chapters.

Every Volunteer Needs Training

A dearly held assumption of some ministers is that once a person has worked in the church he or she knows enough without having to attend additional training or orientation sessions. These ministers look at training in a very narrow sense. They believe it is applying whatever experience a person has gained in other church jobs to the task he or she is about to undertake. While this transfer of experience is basic to training, there is more to being an effective volunteer. Training includes relating previous experience to current tasks, but it also involves understanding the nature and functioning of the church, its purposes and goals, the manner in which each job fits into the total program. For example, a person who has taught first-graders in the church school can transfer only a small part of that

experience to a new job of serving on the worship committee. Training involves reorientation and commitment as well as skills.

A woman volunteered to be the treasurer of her Sunday school in a small, rural congregation in the Midwest. She had no experience whatever in keeping track of income or expenses for an organization. She had no idea how to keep records so that a report could be put together easily.

She told the pastor her problem when he made his monthly visit. They worked at it together. The training took a relatively short time. They devised a process she could follow to keep track of the income and the expenses so she could total the sums and report to the board at its regular meetings. These few minutes saved her hours over the year. Not only that, she felt competent and self-confident with her new-found skills. The pastor, by taking a few minutes to help with this problem, had helped her become more important in her own eyes as well as gain new respect within the church.

A faulty assumption of the people in her church was that anyone could count money and record how it was spent. The assumption was generally correct. The difficulty was that it takes time to maintain records suitable for reporting in a church. It is one thing to keep financial records for a family, but it is quite different to maintain accurate and up-to-date books for a church. Experience with the family budget may have been helpful to her, but it did not provide the training she needed.

This illustration should not lead one to believe that training applies only to those involved with finances or persons assuming their first job in the church. Not in the least. Training is needed by each chairperson of each committee, by persons serving as committee members, by those selected to be part of a planning group in the church, by an individual on a selection committee for a new pastor

or other staff member, and by persons who serve in all other church jobs. The training should develop a state of mind as well as skills.

It is no secret to pastors that some volunteers who have had experience in the church need more training than do neophytes. The reason is obvious. These experienced persons have found ways to do their tasks with little regard to the consequences of the attitudes or performance on the total program of the church. In some instances, such persons are loyal and dedicated individuals who give great amounts of time. Yet their personal manner is not expressing a Christian witness so much as it mirrors self-imposed duty.

The church is a unique institution which has its own rules and procedures. It is a voluntary society. It is governed not by the professionals but by the laity. It does not operate to make a monetary profit. It is not an organization that remains silent and aloof on controversial issues. It is concerned with all age groups. It educates, socializes, and theologizes. It is unique.

When someone begins to become involved in the church, it is important that that person become acquainted with the way in which things are done. It is necessary to learn the operating style of the congregation and the pastor. It is critical to know the way in which voluntary organizations function under the law of the land as well as the law of the church. In short, the desire to do something worthwhile must be informed, channeled, and nurtured.

Orientation and review of the church and its purpose are parts of the training process. These need to be repeated no matter how long an individual has been a member of a congregation. In addition, the changing character of the church demands continuous updating for volunteers. Three pressures of change require attention.

1. Changes keep happening in the organization and in the

goals of a congregation. A church is not a static institution. It is alive, and all living organisms change. While some congregations may have the movement of a turtle, there is movement. Other congregations make changes quickly. No matter what the speed or scope of the changes, the point is that churches change. People who are working in changing institutions need continually to be aware of the implications of those changes for their particular tasks. Training is a means of doing this.

2. People change jobs in the church. Indeed, many churches insist on a limited tenure system that requires people to move out of jobs after a certain period. When people change from one committee or activity to another, they need to learn the new vocabulary, some different technique, and new procedures for reporting. This requires effort and time. That is why training helps.

3. Skills need to be upgraded. New techniques are being invented and tested continually. Many of these can make jobs easier or more rewarding. Some innovations have to do with communication or record-keeping. Others are advancements in the ways humans relate to each other. Regardless of the type of innovation, information about new ways of doing tasks ought to be explained, practiced, and incorporated into the volunteer's efforts in the church.

Customize the Training

Everyone may have been created equal, but each one is certainly different. There are differences between persons in rates of comprehension, in abilities to accomplish tasks, in the amounts of discipline they can exercise on themselves, and in the limits to their desire to continue to work in the church. These differences are evident in the rate at which trainees absorb whatever skills are being taught.

Public schoolteachers know that allowances must be made for individual differences in aptitude. For some

reason, when teachers are charged with training volunteers in the church, they seem to overlook this fundamental. They feel that church people are either very dull or quite bright. Thus, they overinstruct or skip parts of the job that are critical to effective performance. Thus, the training and the work of the volunteer are both impaired.

It is impossible to take a large amount of time to train any single individual, or even a group. The pressures of time on both the trainer and the trainee make it difficult. On the other hand, to spend insufficient time at the start of a job will mean more time later to make corrections in the job. This makeup is much more time-consuming than providing prejob instruction.

1. Training as a Two-part Process

It is because of time and individual differences that training needs to be customized. While this is not completely possible, it can be done by breaking training into two distinct parts. The first consists of giving a group of trainees general instructions and information. The second is a period for more personalized attention. This latter part may include large doses of on-the-job experience for those who need much help and/or assurance.

The training program, including both parts, will take about one evening. It can be done for all volunteers on the same evening. The general orientation to the church and its programs will take the first hour. The second hour will be devoted to instructions for groups of persons doing the same jobs.

A two-part training event will require more than one leader. A trainer for each task will need to be available although the more personalized training can be staggered. That is, after the first hour, some groups may have refreshments and spend some time in conversation while other groups learn about their specific jobs. This process can

be repeated throughout the second hour. It provides ample opportunity for fellowship as well as for skill training.

When more than a single trainer is needed, the pastor or the person in charge of the training will meet with the leaders in advance. In this time together they will prepare in detail for the training session.

The first part of the training is designed so that every volunteer will receive a similar set of information. This includes a discussion of the place of the tasks or tasks in the life and work of the church, the quality expected from volunteers, reporting responsibilities, and time commitments. If there is a policy for reimbursing volunteers for out-of-pocket expenditures, this is included.

The second part of the training session will deal with the specific details of each particular job. Even so, it cannot provide all of the information each volunteer needs. The more detailed understanding of each task will take place when the volunteer actually begins the task.

In the instance of a woman who came to the church to assist with typing, the pastor took the time to instruct and show her what she needed at that moment to do her job. This will be done in the second part of the training session, but a review will be helpful when the volunteer comes that first day. Such a session will vary in length but usually will run about half an hour. It should not take an hour. Its focus is getting acquainted with the procedures in the church for this job, the location of supplies, the availability of resources or equipment, and those with whom one will work.

2. Interpersonal Relations

Training deals with more than skill instruction. It is a time to test interpersonal relations. The church depends upon its volunteers not only to do jobs but also to create images for the public and other members. During training sessions, a trainer can spot potential trouble in a person's manner that

could make him or her less than effective in a particular job. The trainer can make suggestions about other tasks that might better suit the personality and style of that volunteer.

Any suggestions about changing assignments or holding off on an assignment must be done gently and in private. The volunteer ought not to lose prestige or personal worth during a training session or while engaged in a job. The integrity of the person is more important than a job. This integrity must be protected and nurtured even if it means privately encouraging someone not to volunteer.

3. Providing a Practicum

People ought to be able to practice their task before they are charged with full responsibility for it. This is the basis for the apprenticeship in crafts or the internship in medicine or the practice-teacher requirement in education. In each of these, the person works in the actual job situation, but does it alongside a more experienced individual for a time. It is a learning and a testing time.

When a pastor insists on this process, there will be some who become angry or will even leave. Do not be discouraged. If the task is important enough for people to give time to do, it is important enough to do well. It is the pastor's responsibility to help each volunteer learn the proper skills for his or her task. This is best done by being immersed in the job with the support and assistance of another more experienced person. The length of the practicum will vary with the individual but generally should be limited to three times.

4. Don't Overlook the Little Things

A trainer should never make an assumption about a high level of experience or knowledge in volunteers. Err on the side of giving details. It is much easier to speed up a training process than to increase the content once it has begun.

Care and Feeding of Volunteers

A secretary who is instructing a volunteer in typing ought to review the various parts of the machine as well as the kinds of supplies that are needed. It may seem unnecessary to the secretary to point out the on and off switch to an electric typewriter or how a person sets margins, but these are the little things that are too embarrassing to ask about. When the secretary includes them, the volunteer can learn without exposing a lack of experience on the machine used in the church office.

In training, as in most other things, it is the little items that are easily overlooked but which can cause the greatest frustration. These little things include how to use correction fluid when typing on a stencil or where to place the cards after using them in a visit, or where the key to the supply closet is kept. There are a hundred other things that have become automatic to an experienced person but are a mystery to a new volunteer. Volunteers must be fully informed about their jobs, especially the little things that affect their tasks.

Working schedules of the church staff is an important bit of information for volunteers. For example, if the office closes at 11:30 A.M. and remains closed until 1:00 P.M., this is important to know. If there is a change in hours according to the day of the week or if there are evening hours, the volunteers should be informed. This information must be repeated often. It ought not to be assumed that a volunteer will know or remember the times of staff availability.

Having said all this, I must still emphasize that each task will have its uniqueness. This is the beauty of working in the church. One can choose from among many alternatives in seeking to express mission. Thus, during that second hour of training and the subsequent practicum, each job should be dealt with individually. The training experiences will be tailored to the job. The little items will be taken care of before they become stumbling blocks of frustration.

Training

5. Follow-up Training

Follow-up, on-the-job assistance may be used to compensate for individual differences in volunteers. This must be in the form of assistance in particular trouble spots. It should not become a time in which the pastor or church staff member personally takes over the job. In other words, it should not be the type of follow-up used by the minister who could not allow volunteers to contribute their skills to the church. It ought to be an enabling kind of effort. This means that the pastor or whoever is responsible must be sensitive to the abilities and personal motivations of the volunteer. Taking over a volunteer's task is easy, but that defeats the purpose of developing a style of church life encouraging participation. It limits the potential of the church to be a witnessing community.