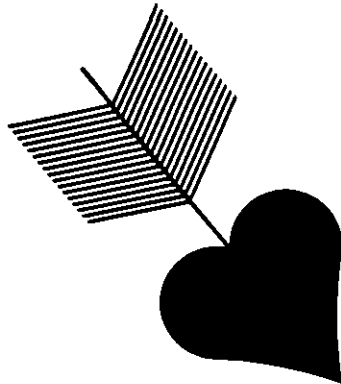


'SHARE THE HEART'

An Innovative Way to Involve Church Members in the Community

By Kathleen M. Brown



We tend to think of churches as a good source of volunteers. After all, most churches teach that one can serve God through helping one's neighbor. But most church members are like everyone else in our society: They have too much to do in too little time. For many, the hours they have available for volunteer work go to the church; others already have their available hours filled with other non-work, non-family activities.

But many church members truly *want* to help; they simply feel overwhelmed by the need and their own lack of time and money to do anything about it. At least that's what we discovered at the Community Congregational Church in Tiburon, California. The tremendous response to our Share the Heart project, sponsored by the church's Outreach Commission, proved to us that there is tremendous potential among our congregation if we tap it in the right way.

Our project idea, which we borrowed and adapted from a Catholic church's "Christmas in July" project in a nearby county, was to write a letter to human service agencies in our county. We invited them to send us requests for *one-time* volunteer jobs of four hours or less or *one-time* material requests of up to \$30. We displayed these requests, written on 3x5 cards taped to construction paper hearts, on our sanctuary walls for the first two Sundays in February.

Congregation members who attended all three of our services on those Sundays were urged to look around before or after the service and choose one or more re-

quests they would like to fill. They then wrote their name and phone number on the request. After the second Sunday, we collected the cards and mailed them to each requesting agency. It was then the agency's job to call the volunteer and arrange for the donation of time or money to be carried out.

To our delight, the response from both agencies and church members was excellent. Over 35 of the 53 agencies receiving our invitation responded with one or more requests—one agency with over 20! Volunteer requests included things like yard work at treatment centers, carpentry, typing, making curtains, preparing mailings, serving lunch at a free food program, entertaining patients at a convalescent home, walking horses at a riding school for handicapped children, and so on.

Material requests included paint, material for curtains, toys, a volt meter, a paper cutter, kitchen equipment, a stationery tray for a desk drawer and other unique items. Some material requests were for items costing more than \$30, but often these could be filled by people who had such a used item lying around the house. Other people just contributed \$30 toward the purchase of the requested item or were willing to donate the entire amount.

The response from the congregation was truly exciting. Of the approximately 170 requests, 150 were taken off the wall. The remaining seven material requests

were filled by one parishioner who called the church after the project ended. The remaining volunteer time requests were published in the church's weekly newsletter so other interested people would have another chance.

Even more exciting than the numbers were the church members' enthusiastic verbal responses. Many thanked the Outreach Commission for providing them with a *manageable* way to help in their community. It was through these verbal responses that we learned how frustrated people often feel about their lack of ability to do something to solve community problems. These limited projects certainly wouldn't save the world, but they did give people a tangible way to contribute to their community's health.

Of course, we hope that some of these one-time donations of time or money will lead to longer commitments from the church members to the organizations, and that will undoubtedly happen with some people. Others will simply make their one-time contribution and feel they've done all they can for now. In either case, an important process of giving has been started.

The key to success is the limitation of the request: four hours of volunteer time or \$30 for a material request. Even very busy people can find four hours, and many people can stretch their wallets to find \$30. The lesson for all of us is that making the request simple and specific will bring better results. One-time requests can also be door-openers for on-going volunteer jobs and annual monetary donations. Share the Heart let the agency get a foot in the door; careful cultivation by the agency might bring longer term involvement.

If you would like more information on our project, you can write to the Outreach Commission, Community Congregational Church, 145 Rock Hill Dr., Tiburon, CA 94920. We'd love to see this good idea spread! ♥

Kathy Brown is a consultant and trainer in volunteer program management and author of the book, Keys to Making a Volunteer Program Work. Her last contribution to VAL, "Thoughts on the Supervision of Volunteers," appeared in the spring 1984 issue.