

## Reaching Out: Helping Church Members Volunteer in the Greater Community

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One night after work my six-year-old son happened to overhear me telling my husband about my day, which had included a woman who had stopped by my office to chat because she was having a problem with angels flying around her apartment. Jonathan was immediately concerned that I was in over my head—"I don't think you should handle that, Mommy," he said with a very concerned look on his face, ". . . that's a job for Pastors or Ghostbusters!"

Although we are often confused about "who" should do "what" both inside and outside of the church, it is at least apparent to most communities and most church leadership that community involvement on the part of church members is increasingly important. Although most seem to agree on that basic premise, the difficulty in actually making that linkage happen is often frustrating to those working in the volunteer community.

There are two basic questions involved, depending on which side of the church wall one happens to be standing—"How can I encourage our members to share their time and talent with the greater community?" and "How can I reach church members and interest them in my agency/program/organization?" Before one even attempts to answer either question, however, it is necessary to take a close look at churches in terms of:

1. Theology of Stewardship
2. Community
3. Mission

Understanding the theology of stewardship held by any given church is central to the encouragement of volunteerism outside the church walls. The theology of stewardship determines how church members, pastors and lay leadership view the use of each others' time, abilities and energy. From "inside" the church we need to ask if we truly value the gifts that each individual is born with (and how deliberate we are about the wise use of those gifts) or if we are primarily concerned with finding a name to fill every opening on our roster of church volunteer opportunities. If a church is continuously caught up in filling slots, it will develop a very negative attitude toward "sharing" any of its potential "turn-takers" or "slot-fillers" with the outside community.

It is easy for a church to slip into the habit of hoarding human resources. In the struggle to recruit enough Sunday School teachers, find enough ushers, or come up with a list of people to do a bulk mailing, it is often hard, if not impossible to encourage whomever does the volunteer coordination even to think about helping church members expand their volunteer efforts beyond the church walls. And yet the thoughtful stewardship of time and talent must be a conscious, deliberate effort to help people discover and fully use their abilities—abilities that often cry out for use outside of the church itself.

While abilities are often first recognized and nurtured in a warm, supportive church setting, skill and leadership development may naturally move a person

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on to other responsibilities and roles in the wider community, if the church encourages such growth and volunteerism. From both "inside" and "outside" the church we can advocate for the full use of members' abilities, even if that means that the church needs to give them some time off from church responsibilities so that they have the time and energy to give to community causes. The act of recognizing that those community volunteer efforts are in fact the church active in the world, gives those efforts the legitimacy and stature that they deserve.

From "outside" the church, agencies and organizations need to be aware of individual church stances on the theology of stewardship as those churches are sought out and approached for volunteers.

Along with determining church views on stewardship as it relates to volunteerism, it is important to investigate the actual community of the church. What is the geographical community like? What is the socio-economic community like? Does the church have a strong neighborhood base or do people commute from other areas to attend on Sunday morning? Where do members live, work, spend their time?

Most non-profit agency executives are extremely careful to investigate foundations or businesses prior to submitting funding proposals. Unfortunately, the same care is seldom taken before approaching potential volunteer populations. The range of interests and concerns in any given church can be surprising—an urban congregation, for example, may have strong ties to the farm community through members' backgrounds or relatives; a suburban church might feel compelled to support inner-city food pantries.

A church community can be very neighborhood-oriented or as far-flung as a global community—people sharing a sense of community through shared beliefs and concerns. What functions as a particular congregation's community will help determine what social causes, organizations, programs and agencies are most likely to be able to attract volunteers from that church.

Hand-in-hand with the sense of community is the third variable, the mission or mission statement. All churches have missions—not all are carefully worded statements, not all are even known by all church members—but each church has a reason for existing and a purpose for being in a particular place. How a church chooses to live out its mission will be yet another factor in how and where it encourages its members to volunteer.

Doing the detective work and uncovering church stewardship theology, sense of community and mission can certainly be time consuming and yet establishes the necessary foundation for the encouragement of volunteerism beyond the church walls.

From this foundation it is possible to move on to more task-oriented advice on helping church members volunteer in the greater community, and it is perhaps easiest to look at the issue from the two different perspectives—working from "inside" the church and from the "outside," while recognizing that many people will find themselves in both positions.

"How can I encourage our members to share their time and talent with the greater community?" is the often-heard question from those working "inside" the church. The following list of ideas is a starting point for answering that question.

1. Keep CURRENT information about "outside" volunteer opportunities visible and available. Information needs to be more accessible than "Volunteers wanted" ads placed sporadically in Sunday bulletins.

2. Volunteer recognition is just as important in the church as in any other volunteer organization. Not only do people who volunteer their time for or at the church need appropriate recognition, but people who volunteer outside the church need to know that the church values the volunteer work that they do. People may sit in the same pew together for years and not be aware of each others' volunteer activities—recognition also is an educational recruitment tool.

3. Keep an open mind about "who" can do "what." (For example, don't box the church youth into traditional "youth-type"

volunteering—raking, window-washing, etc.)

4. Partnerships—same denomination and ecumenical—can be the best way to tackle concerns or issues. Often, projects that are too big for one group to tackle by itself simply get put on the shelf and not tackled at all.

5. Choices are always good. The more ways that there are to serve, the more people who will serve. Sometimes churches have "pet" projects and may try to steer members in one direction. An example of this would be a church with a meal program that only encouraged members to volunteer with the meal program. This approach again denies the fact that not everyone can or should volunteer at a meal site. How much better it would be for all concerned if the church encouraged a wide variety of volunteer opportunities and invited non-members with the skills and inclination to volunteer at the meal program.

6. Encourage career volunteering—churches have a tendency to stick people in volunteer positions indefinitely. A person will not feel free to experiment with "outside" volunteer opportunities if he or she hasn't felt free to move or progress on a path of volunteer opportunities within the church.

7. Groups of churches can get together to do information sharing—"volunteer fairs," for example. Local Volunteer Centers are important resources for churches to remember.

8. Can churches be as flexible as businesses that give employees time to do volunteer work? The answer has to be yes—churches need to acknowledge that there are only so many hours in a week and they won't lose active members by allowing those members the time to do other kinds of volunteer work (work that again, is, when we remember to think of it that way, the work of the church).

9. Gimmicks have their place—sometimes it takes a fresh approach or a gimmick to catch peoples' imagination. Bus or walking tours of non-profit agencies, local "Mission Sundays," invitations to try out different volunteer opportunities around town—these are all examples of

ways to market outside volunteer opportunities inside the church.

Being part of a church that is trying to encourage its members to broaden their community volunteer efforts is very satisfying and of course, challenging. It is equally as challenging to be on the other side of the issue, posing the question "How can I reach church members and interest them in my agency/program/organization?" Again, the following are some suggestions that can form a starting point for working on that question.

1. Do the important preliminary homework (investigating the theology of stewardship, the community, the mission) and then try visiting the church on a Sunday. If you are attempting to work with a large number of churches this may not be possible, but it is worth the time if you are serious about developing a good working relationship. You will have the opportunity to see and hear what the church is all about on a Sunday—you will come away with a clearer picture of who the members are and what their interests and concerns are.

2. Keep in mind that there are basically four ways to recruit volunteers from the church:

- A. Group/Short Term—A group of volunteers is recruited to tackle a specific short term project. This is probably the easiest way to initially involve new people.
- B. Group/Long Term—A group is recruited to participate in a more continuous manner. A larger group may be needed for this type of commitment and this is slightly harder to recruit for than the short term project.
- C. Individual/Short Term—Individual volunteers are recruited for projects with specific time limits. (A volunteer is recruited to help a new mother with child care for two weeks.) This is progressively more difficult to recruit for than A. or B.
- D. Individual/Long Term—Individual volunteers are recruited for longer commit-

ments, perhaps agreeing to volunteer for a year after being trained. While this can certainly be the most fulfilling kind of volunteer opportunity, it is the most difficult to recruit for.

3. Be sensitive to the church year.

4. If possible, offer family volunteer opportunities. If a current job can be done by one volunteer, consider if it could also be done by a parent-child team.

5. Be careful in presenting your request for volunteer involvement that you do not inadvertently belittle the church's present involvements. Most churches are already doing something somewhere—the key is to simply offer another opportunity to serve, not negate what has already been done.

6. Work with the church is recognizing volunteers at church. Recognizing a volunteer's hard work and ability at that volunteer's church can be a very meaningful and effective way to say "thank you" to the volunteer and also recruit more interested church members who probably did not have a clue about where their fellow member volunteered.

7. Use appropriate marketing tools. Agencies seem to think that putting written material or brochures in the Sunday bulletin is magic—church members will be swamping the agency with phone calls on Monday morning. Unfortunately things do not work that way! There are Sundays when church members are virtually hit with a "paper blizzard." Keep in mind that any way that has been found to be an effective way to tell the agency story will probably also be effective in the church setting, including presentations, videos, slide shows, and others.

8. As with any volunteer situation, clarity of the job description is of the utmost importance. People must thoroughly understand what it is they are being asked to do.

9. Stay in touch. If a recruitment effort is attempted at a church and only one person volunteers, it is still important to keep that church informed about the program or agency. Churches don't or can't often move quickly on issues—what may be perceived as low interest on the part

of the church may simply be a need for more time for the church to study an issue or request. Just as a church may enjoy hearing from a sponsored missionary on a regular basis, the church should also be kept informed and updated on agencies or organizations with which it becomes involved.

Although the effort involved in bringing together church members and community needs often seems monumental, the benefits to all concerned can be truly monumental. Helping the church be alive and active in the community through the work of individual volunteers is exciting, whether one is on the inside or the outside of the church wall. We may always be slightly confused about "who" should be doing "what" in our communities, but through working together we are at least attempting to ensure that people's abilities are used and community needs are met.