



# VOLUNTEERS IN THE CHURCH OF TOMORROW

If present trends continue, the church of tomorrow will have a smaller staff. It will also have more direct involvement from volunteer leadership.

By Margie Morris

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A good boss makes people realize they have more ability than they think they have, so that they consistently do better than they thought they could.  
—Charles Wilson

But I am among you as one who serves.  
—Luke 22:27 (NIV)

Cows would have a better perspective if they could see the world from both sides of the fence. I know, because I've grazed in the pastures as a volunteer and roamed the fields as a church staff member. From either angle, I see tremendous changes occurring.

If present trends continue, the church of tomorrow will have a smaller staff. It will also have more direct involvement from volunteer leadership. That means we must

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begin preparing now for the gradual shifting of power and influence that has traditionally remained in the clergy's domain. Volunteers will have to accept and make better use of the responsibilities given them. And church professionals will have to give up some control.

Don't misunderstand me. Most pastors have plenty to do without engaging in power struggles over volunteer programs! But the "doer" instinct has been cultivated in our clergy. I suspect it begins in divinity school and is enhanced by congregations who treasure the close contact with their ministers. Other church professionals share that instinct. I know I did. Until I became really, really tired.

Only then did I realize how many of my responsibilities could be shared with volunteers. It took a gargantuan effort to let go of some of the jobs I not only performed, but created. Giving up control was hard, but in the long run, it was better for the church and better for me.

The issue of control is not often a blatant tug-of-war. It's sometimes so subtle that we fail to recognize it. For instance, a member of the church staff may feel some resentment at being saddled with the job of poring over color samples for the new paint in the choir room. But often, subtle leadership patterns may have made it im-

possible for anyone else to make the decision.

Let's look at a further example. Suppose the worship committee wants to help the congregation participate more fully in the worship service. They decide to include the pew Bible page number alongside the Scripture reference in the worship bulletin.

Since the pastor is present at this committee meeting and says nothing to the contrary, the committee assumes that its decision will be implemented. It isn't.

The pastor does not want to offend committee members, but she has a fundamental philosophical objection to what she sees as "spoon-feeding" churchgoers. She hopes that if the page number is not listed, the congregation will be motivated to learn how better to use the Bible.

The conflict here has nothing to do with which position is "right." The issue is one of power. The fact that forthright communication never occurred further complicates the problem.

When church staff members regularly override decisions made by volunteers, they send a message to the congregation: "You may as well refer all matters to the church staff for approval or decisions to start with, because they are going to have the final say, anyway."

Often, the larger the church staff, the greater the conflict. The mindset in some churches is that members are paying for the leadership and service of experts who are expected to create, develop, implement and sustain all things significant. When things go haywire, members can blame the professionals. But there's no staff in the world that can guide a thriving, growing church without the energetic leadership that only the laity can provide.

Our theology tells us that *every church member is a minister*. There are some roles that only the clergy can perform. But there are many others that can challenge the full range of the congregation's expertise. That means that as a staff member or volunteer leader, I will sometimes allow someone else to perform a job or service that:

- (a) I am perfectly capable of doing,
- (b) I'm quite good at, and/or
- (c) I enjoy doing.

In their book, *Volunteer Youth Workers*, authors Stone and Miller write, "If a team is to function, we must let them get into the game."

### How Can We Function as a Team?

Let's start with an example from the Education Department. As the director, I can recruit Sunday School teachers . . . keep the supply room stocked . . . provide training . . . plan recognition events . . . prepare mission projects . . . schedule fellowship events . . . write notes to visitors . . . send birthday cards . . . design and publish a monthly newsletter . . . arrange field trips . . . choreograph the Christmas pageant . . . make cookies for the choir . . . change the bulletin boards each quarter . . . keep the scrapbook updated . . . be in charge of acolytes . . . teach Confirmation classes . . . send publicity notices to the newspapers . . . create new and exciting programs . . . and die young.

A healthier alternative would be to develop a "Resource Bank" of talented people who would donate their services for special occasions or on a short-term basis. I might coordinate the following positions for the Education Department's volunteer team:

- photographer
- historian
- culinary artist
- field trip guide
- pageant director
- Confirmation leader
- acolyte director
- mission leader

- secretary
- chair, Choir Boosters
- newsletter editor/publisher
- party coordinator
- bulletin board designer
- stock clerk
- publicity chair
- special event coordinator
- etc.

If my efforts are then supported by an active volunteer ministries program, the Education Department can do more, be more and have more fun. If all ideas and activities must be the work of one individual—volunteer or staff—then the program thrives only as long as the person in charge does. And at the hectic pace in many churches, that's not long.

### **There's no staff in the world that can guide a thriving, growing church without the energetic leadership that only the laity can provide.**

As the director of the program outlined above, my willingness to let go of some control would be a significant factor. The tricky part is that I know that some volunteers will do their jobs better than I could have done them. Some will do them every bit as well. A few may not meet my expectations or get the job done at all. (This last is less likely to happen if the volunteer program has done its job of discovering gifts, interviewing and placing volunteers in jobs that are right for them.)

What often happens when the ball does get dropped, however, is that professional church members feel compelled to pick it up. Floundering projects make everyone nervous. But if I continually rescue inefficient volunteers, or if I step in every time a program falters, I bring control back into the professional court.

"If a team is to function, we must let them get into the game." Nobody wants to be a token player. If our volunteer recruitment efforts focus on finding the best person to do a job that he or she wants to do, then we will have few qualms about entrusting that person with leadership. We can step back and let the volunteer make decisions, knowing that the right to decide is a basic part of the job.

### **How Can Authority Be Used Wisely?**

You can use your influence to encourage, affirm and claim the work of the volunteer in the church and the community. Support those who serve both publicly and privately. Elevate ministries to a place of importance in your church.

Many church leaders advocate a regular and systematic recognition of volunteers during times of worship and fellowship. Others make it a point to stay informed about who is serving where, so that they can stop by the workplace to say hello or can send a note of encouragement.

We spoke earlier in this book about the value of spotting potential. Church leaders with a capacity to see the best in people motivate volunteers to take risks and grow. They have faith in the abilities of others and show it by allowing volunteers to lead the church ministries.

Allow risk taking. Some of the most successful programs start out as radical concepts. One town took a chance. They took troubled teens, with histories of legal violations, and placed them with other young people living in a home for the physically and mentally disabled. And it worked.

The project made the teens feel needed and loved—some for the first time in their lives. The handicapped youths responded better to these new caregivers than they did to teachers who were trained to work with them. Everybody benefited.

But first, someone had to say, "Let's do it."

Trust that by enabling others to succeed, you enhance your own leadership. The "boss" who celebrates the accomplishments of other staff members or volunteers brings a joyful enthusiasm to ministry. If we are to move forward, the clergy and church leaders must cheer volunteers on—every step of the way.

### **Why Is Information Powerful?**

The availability of information directly affects leadership. Appropriate channels of communication are vital for the exchange of information from staff to volunteers and vice versa.

If a brochure arrives announcing a seminar on marketing volunteer programs, will the staff volunteer coordinator notify committee chairs and project leaders? Does the church secretary make his or her clip art files available to volunteers? Is the resource library unlocked on Sunday mornings and during meetings?

Information often equals power. Relin-

quishing control of it sometimes comes down to the question of whether I, as a leader, am willing to allow another to know as much about a subject as I do. More often, it's a question of simply remembering to disperse information to those who might benefit. Sharing information is one important way to empower disciples.

The best leaders—clergy or lay—delight in the success of others. No one corners the market on good ideas when leaders and volunteers support and encourage each other.

### **What Are Some Ways to Focus on Volunteers?**

Have you noticed that when a pastor or staff person enters a committee meeting or planning session, the focus in the room shifts slightly toward that person? It may be almost imperceptible. Heads may incline slightly in a new direction. Chairs may be scooted back to ensure the newcomer a clear line of sight. Questions may be directed toward that person, rather than addressed to the chairperson or group leader.

Sometimes, when a church professional enters a meeting in progress, the atmosphere itself changes. There may be less freedom of expression, less spontaneity. There may be subtle responses within the group to the staff person's mood.

It's not that the professionals are intentionally overbearing—not at all. Title and position alone are often enough to affect group dynamics.

The same might hold true to a lesser degree for chairpersons sitting in on subcommittee meetings—the group leader ceases to be in charge, as if by some unspoken code.

If, as leaders, our attendance at certain meetings is mandatory, we need to find ways to take a back seat throughout proceedings chaired by someone else.

Many meetings do not require clergy or staff presence at all. There are other, more efficient ways to keep up with what's going on in all areas of the church.

It's always a judgment call as to whether clergy or staff presence is needed in any particular meeting. But many options exist between close supervision and a total "hands-off" approach. Pastors and other staff members will need to decide how much control to exercise in any given situation. It is to be hoped that the work of the church can rest in the hands of carefully chosen leaders. But there will be times when closer supervision is required. Most

church professionals work hard to maintain a delicate balance.

As lay people, it's important for us to recognize that the "success" of the church directly affects a pastor's career. The clergy have a tremendous investment in our collective ministries, and in us as individuals, as well. We help them do their jobs by doing ours.

**Church administrators hold the key that opens the door to volunteer involvement. Leaders must be managers, enablers, cheerleaders and innovators. They must know when their voices need to be heard and when to remain silent. Above all, leaders must be seen as those who serve.**

### **Who Are the Likable Leaders?**

What kinds of traits inspire volunteers? Probably the same ones that you yourself appreciate in leaders who have helped you. A group of one hundred volunteers created the lists below:

#### **What We Like**

accessibility  
honesty  
organization  
sense of humor  
accepting responsibility for own mistakes  
flexibility  
a good listener  
shows concern and interest  
team player  
delegator

#### **What We Dislike**

intimidation  
unfairness  
cynical attitude  
moodiness  
won't share information  
demeaning remarks  
critical

patronizing  
fosters discontent  
says yes without meaning it

Volunteers in the church, probably more than anywhere else, care what supervisory personnel think about them and the work they do. STAFF OPINIONS MATTER! Congregations develop deep attachments to their pastors. They seek their approval, but, more importantly, they desire their respect. The confidence that leaders place in volunteers' ability to do the jobs entrusted to them communicates high regard.

Leaders can show their interest in volunteers by inviting them to staff meetings to explain a project, give a progress report or provide input in a question under discussion. Leaders can ask for help in evaluating programs and planning for the future. Leaders can express the personal appreciation for a volunteer's service. And leaders can celebrate every area of volunteer ministries in the church and the community.

Church professionals have the ability to influence attitudes and impact climates. They help by encouraging innovation. They help by lending enthusiasm to creative ideas and new directions. They help by assisting others pave the way for acceptance and success of volunteer programs. Those programs must have staff support to succeed.

### **How Can We Turn Maintenance into Mission?**

On a scale of one to ten, where would you place the importance of your current volunteer program in the minds of the congregation? Do they see it as a cumbersome but necessary part of keeping the church going?

If so, you might want to ask yourself some further questions. How does the present leadership facilitate volunteer action? How widespread are opportunities for serving beyond the local church? How much fun is the congregation having?

Church administrators hold the key that opens the door to volunteer involvement. Leaders must be managers, enablers, cheerleaders and innovators. They must know when their voices need to be heard and when to remain silent. Above all, leaders must be seen as those who serve.

Granting others the option of service is allowing them to make a difference. Volunteers bring the Gospel to life. Even if they make mistakes. Even if every effort is not a colossal success. Even if you or I would have done things differently. □