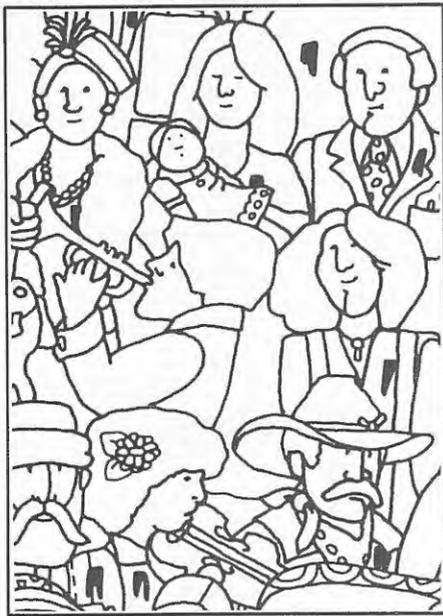


INVOLVING SPECIAL GROUPS



CHURCH VOLUNTEERS: Unleashing The Potential

By Val Adolph

When a new staff member joined our volunteer department, we gradually came to realize that her religious faith was extremely important to her. Her faith was the guiding and sustaining focus of her life. She attended her church regularly and frequently. Yet, when the subject of volunteering came up, she said that she did not give any volunteer service to her church. It seemed unbelievable that this bright, competent and committed woman, who had volunteered within a number of other organizations, would not be volunteering within her church.

As she worked with us, learning on the job the principles of volunteer administration, we discussed why people, even those with a strong religious commitment, might be reluctant to volunteer within their church. We also shared our discussions and questions with people from a wide cross-section of both liberal and fundamental religious groups within the Judeo-Christian tradition. We defined six basic issues, each one clothed in the terminology of different denominations and seen

from a variety of perspectives:

1. Lack of clearly understood objectives or "We don't really know what the church wants." Ideally, each church should establish objectives with the participation of its members and make sure that all its members understand the objectives as well as what must be done to achieve them.

Church members have the same kinds of needs as other people. Church leaders who recognize this know they have a great resource of time and talent that can be used to benefit the church, ministry and individual.

Objectives might relate to the routine activities of running the church—e.g., maintaining accurate accounting records or keeping the interior and exterior of the church building in good condition. They would also relate to the religious activities of the church—e.g., maintaining or perhaps expanding church education activities or a visitation program. Objectives would cover the development of new programs and also address problems within the church, such as the need to enlarge the church because of increasing membership.

2. Local objectives that conflict with regional or national objectives. In many denominations, delegates from local churches attend regional and national meetings where they establish policies, objectives and priorities. Nevertheless, it is common for the "head office" to expect to receive a certain amount of money to streamline administrative procedures or to support foreign missions and for people in the local congregations to object. Volumes of energy are poured into indignation—"Why should we pay for a computer for headquarters when we need funds to buy materials for the Sunday School?"

3. Lack of agreement over priorities within the congregation. Should the available energy and money go toward increasing the membership or toward enlarging the church building, which is al-

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ready too small? How much effort and money should we expend on alleviating the social ills that are apparent in our community? Unfortunately, the fewer the number of volunteers and the less available the funds, the more acrimonious the discussion and the greater the likelihood that not much will get done at all.

4. Lack of clearly defined jobs for potential volunteers. Once objectives have been established and priorities agreed upon, the next step is to break these down into the tasks that need to be done. Asking someone to "help with church maintenance" is like asking them to write a blank check. They don't know what they are letting themselves in for and therefore are likely to resist. There should be a list of the tasks that are part of each objective—in this case, polishing, vacuuming, grass cutting, etc. This allows people to make their own choice of activity and be more confident about the nature and extent of the commitment they have made.

5. Coordinating volunteers is just one more job for a clergyman who is already overworked. It is a tragedy that the one thing that could prevent burnout for the clergy is looked upon as nothing more than a contributory factor to that burnout. If the congregation has developed objectives and priorities, and if one individual or a small group has broken these down into specific tasks and obtained the cooperation of each member of the congregation in accomplishing them, then the clergyman can go back to being the spiritual leader and leave the window washing and the driving of the Sunday School bus to others.

6. The entrenchment of the faithful few. Mr. X is in his twenty-third year as church treasurer, Mrs. Y always runs the bazaar and Mr. Z has been Sunday School superintendent as long as anyone can remember. They frequently complain about being overworked and may threaten to quit, but there never seems to be anyone else who would undertake the job—certainly not when the previous incumbent is still around to pass judgement on their performance.

This establishment of turfdom happens quietly and insidiously over a period of years. It is hard to correct this situation once it is in effect unless the incumbent is sensitive enough to realize when the time has come to insist on resigning. It is possible, however, to take action ahead of time and establish a policy of having a limited

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time period, say three or four years, for any volunteer to remain in a leadership position. Many societies and nonprofit organizations have similar policies relating to the senior positions within their organizations.

In these difficult economic times, more and more people are looking to churches for support—not just spiritual support but practical assistance as well. An increasing number of churches are becoming involved in social action programs. In some areas, the desirability of this is still being debated, but while the debate continues more individual church members find it impossible to ignore the poverty and injustice that they see around them. They can serve with other agencies or organizations, of course, but many would prefer to offer help as a direct expression of their religious faith and, if possible, in the name of their church.

The trend toward decreasing governmental funding to social services seems likely to continue for some time in both the United States and Canada. This trend means that nongovernment agencies, including churches, will increasingly be called upon to fill the gaps in services to those in our society who are disadvantaged. The congregations who respond to the challenges of conscience that are pre-

sented daily are going to need every volunteer they can get.

They will also need a leader with the skills of motivation, recruitment and effective utilization and retention of volunteers—skills with which coordinators of volunteers are familiar but which not often are found in churches.

It is a paradox that volunteer agencies, starting with a cause but with very few volunteers, have used coordinators of volunteers to recruit the volunteers they require. They now have volunteers to fulfill their mandate and volunteer coordinators, whose skills go far beyond recruitment. The churches, starting with many people, usually saw no need to get into organized volunteer administration. They still have the people, but they lack the volunteer leadership and so they lack the volunteers.

Many churches also lack implementing the concept that using people is mutually beneficial to the volunteer and to the cause for which he/she is working. Within the volunteer world, we are familiar with this concept and know that its use is not manipulative.

But within many churches there remains the idea that asking for volunteers is asking people to do a favor without any reward. Only occasionally is there recognition of the fact that carefully chosen volunteering can meet the needs of both the volunteer and the cause. The needs identified by Maslow or Hertzberg are not limited to people who volunteer in secular organizations.

Church members have the same kinds of needs as other people. Church leaders who recognize this know that they have a great resource of time and talent that can be used to benefit both the church, the ministry and the individual. Not to recognize it is to leave to chance whether or not each individual's needs will be met and his/her energy and talent used in a positive way.

It is trading on delicate ground to even mention the theology of volunteering. Different denominations and even the individuals within them view the ministry of the individual in widely differing ways. In some areas, the priesthood of all the people is celebrated; in other areas, the mere mention of this implies the usurping of the role of the ordained leader. The theology of volunteering is a matter for the denomination, the congregation and the individual to determine—although this determination can take a very long time. The church, in the meantime, is full of people

whose talents are not fully used.

On the one hand, there are underfunded missions, social programs that can't get off the ground and the faithful few, including the clergyman, scrambling to try to get everything done. On the other hand, there are church members whose skills are unrecognized and whose needs are not met. We who are administrators of volunteer programs do not find it unusual to encounter a potential volunteer who has a need to socialize more, to grow within his/her career or in a new direction, or to increase self esteem. Perhaps churches feel they have failed if their members, despite regular attendance, still have these needs. However, there are many people who can meet their needs and express their faith as much as ministering to others as by being ministered unto.

There is, within the church, the opportunity to help people grow within every facet of their lives. Not all the leaders of the church, whether clergy or lay, have recognized this potential and taken steps to develop and use it. Only a few churches have paid or unpaid volunteer administrators or groups of people who together undertake that role. The literature of volunteerism is full of ideas for recruiting, motivating, training, etc., yet these ideas do not seem to have permeated very many congregations.

So there are churches full of people-power, but no practical way of directing and coordinating that power. The lack—the missing link—is the ability to harness the human resources. Only occasionally in the past has there been a linking of churches with those who administer volunteer programs. It seems possible that this will change, that the pressures on the churches will be sufficient to make them look around for ways to develop more effectively their people resources.

This will take a willingness on the part of the clergy to see their people as many-faceted individuals, not just as Sabbath pew sitters. It will take sensitivity not to stereotype people—not to assume that a woman coming in new to this church naturally wants to teach Sunday School or serve tea. It will take clergymen prepared to yield the leadership in certain situations. It will take the time to break major activities into smaller tasks for several volunteers working as a team, rather than lumping the tasks together and giving them all to one paid staff person (or rather than having the clergyman and his wife do them all). It will take a readiness to risk asking, "Do we want this objective

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enough to work on it together," rather than announcing, "We have decided that this is an important objective and we will be asking for your help."

An increase in the number of volunteers in a church means increasing the amount of organization and support available to them. It means taking time to prepare job descriptions, to develop an inventory of the skills and interests of church members. It means interviewing and taking care to make the best possible match between the skills and needs of the volunteer and the jobs available.

One of the most important implications of involving "most members of the church" is recognizing that it will involve also those members who might not come immediately to mind as volunteers—the elderly and the handicapped, for example. These are the people who are generally placed in the category of receiving service, not in giving it. These people need the opportunity to give and the church is in an excellent position to identify their abilities so that they, too, can share. For many of these people, the inability to drive is their most limiting handicap. If the church can overcome that (perhaps by arranging transportation or by taking meetings to

them), then many of their abilities become more apparent.

From each congregation it is possible to develop a rich and varied volunteer program that will help the church meet each of its objectives. If the leader of the program takes advantage of the full spectrum of the people, carefully matching jobs to people and providing training and necessary support and resources, then the people involved can take pride in their work and greater pride in their church membership. As their involvement increases, they no longer just attend on the Sabbath and make their weekly offering. Instead, they feel part of their church. They feel free to make suggestions, to contribute ideas and to discuss the direction in which the church is or might be moving. As their involvement increases, the division between the spiritual and the secular aspects of life decreases.

But the volunteer program within the church requires constant nurturing. Are the volunteer/job matches working out as well as we thought they would? What is the feedback from the new volunteers in the Sunday School? Is it just coincidence that two members of the bazaar committee recently resigned? The retention of volunteers and the design and development of evaluation systems is as important within church volunteer programs as it is in any volunteer program.

Church volunteer programs have a great deal in common with other volunteer programs—their one great advantage being that church leaders do not have to go out and beat the bushes to find volunteers. They are all right there in the pews once a week. Yet, the reluctance to provide them with opportunities for service remains. After almost two years, the only volunteering available in my colleague's church is still teas and Sunday School teaching for the women and board membership for the men. Her attempts to discuss setting up a volunteer program with her clergyman ended in frustration when he said he was really too busy to spend much time on that topic. She realizes that he may be burning out from trying to do everything himself.

The principles and practices of volunteer administration could be put to use in that church and in many others to support the clergy and to enlarge the church's scope of service in whatever way its members think appropriate. There need not be conflict here, but two disciplines working in conjunction so that everyone has the opportunity to use their gifts fully to express their faith in the service of others.