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creating a great volunteering environment

In Ephesians we read that God appointed people to be 'the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up' (Ephesians 4:11-12). As a church leader I see that my role is to manage and support the volunteers who serve in my church, so that the church will be built up.

On my travels around the country training church leaders it has become clear that most leaders see this as an important part of their role. Yet, almost all those I have spoken to say that due to busyness, the intentional support and management of volunteers tends to get put to the bottom of the to-do list.

Many church leaders also say that they struggle to get people to offer themselves for the various ministries within the church. I believe that these two things go together; if we give time to developing good structures that will value and support volunteers then people will be more willing to come forward to serve.

So what can we practically do to make sure that people feel valued and supported in their service in the body of Christ?

1. Get the thinking right

Often when a church employs a paid worker for a specific area of ministry, volunteers step back. I think this is partly to do with the fact that there is a misunderstanding of what paid and voluntary ministry is about. Paid workers are there to support the work of volunteers 'to equip his people for works of service'. Therefore, it is really important that a church leader prepares the church for a paid worker and explains their role.

Volunteers are not there to support the ministry of the paid worker. They are there to work out the ministry that God has given them and to exercise that ministry in a team with others who also have a calling to that area. In this sense 'volunteers' may not be the most helpful term. It implies that there are some within church life who go the 'extra mile' and 'volunteer'. Whereas, if we understand the church as the body of Christ, all those who belong have gifts and skills to offer to help build the body. The paid worker is simply there to release these gifts and skills.

2. Communicate vision

There are many avenues for volunteering nowadays. It helps to think through why one of your church members would choose to volunteer at your church. During the London Olympics the 'Games makers' were the volunteers who got a lot of media coverage because of their tireless and enthusiastic input over the event. The International Olympic Committee made it very



clear through their vision that the volunteers were not just sweeping the floors, clearing up rubbish or pointing people in the right direction – they were ‘inspiring a generation’. So what is the inspiring vision that will captivate people to want to contribute in your church?

In my experience it is the way the leader communicates the vision that actually makes the difference. So ask yourself ‘Why would someone choose to volunteer at this church?’ and then communicate the vision accordingly. If people feel they are just filling a gap that anyone else could fill then they are less likely to offer their services.

3. Communicate value

How do you feel valued in your church? Is it by verbal encouragement or perhaps by an email or note from a congregation member thanking you for your input? We all feel valued in different ways, so find out how your volunteers feel most valued and implement a strategy for developing this process within the church. This will be caught if the leadership models it. We need to explain that volunteering is hard work, but the job would not get done without their input. We want volunteers to see volunteering as a commitment rather than a contract.

4. Offer lots of different opportunities

Have a wide range of realistic opportunities that people can volunteer for. It is important that nobody in the congregation is excluded, so find out what the gifts and abilities are of the individuals and look for an opportunity for them to serve. I used to lead an after-school club in my church (which was quite a small church, so there were not many people to volunteer). There was an elderly lady in a wheelchair in the congregation who wanted to help at the club, but could not see that there was a place for her. She thought she would, in her words ‘get in the way’. After talking with her it became obvious that one of her gifts was administration, so she came along and did the registration and birthday cards for the children. From feeling that she had nothing to offer, she became a key team member in helping the children feel loved and accepted.

5. Listen to volunteers

I know this may sound obvious, but when we are really busy it is easy just to take volunteers for granted. It is really important to give volunteers a voice in the development of strategy and policymaking. This will help them to ‘buy in’ to the ministry. Listen to what makes them feel good about volunteering and what makes them unhappy. In my experience volunteers generally do not complain if they are unhappy, they just walk away.

So as church leaders who are creating a great volunteering environment, it helps to:

- Teach about the importance of volunteering to build up the body of Christ.
- Connect to their ministry by finding out what motivates them to volunteer.
- Train them to be even better in their volunteering role.
- Sustain them in ministry by valuing them and showing appreciation.

A way forward

I find it helpful to remember four Cs when leading volunteers:

- **Create** an environment that they will enjoy.
- **Community** is the glue for retention of volunteers – help them to feel they belong.
- **Celebrate** all the ways that you see God using the volunteer teams.
- **Commend** them for their involvement – we need to create an inspirational environment.

Perhaps it would be a good idea to reflect on the points above with the rest of the church leadership team and identify a realistic way forward for your church. Teamwork is the key here, as the church leader cannot do everything listed above on their own, and of course some of those in the team will be volunteers!

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For reflection

- How do you currently inspire, support, and encourage your volunteers?
- Which of the four Cs would it be good to focus on at this time?
- Identify one volunteer to encourage this week. How will you do this and when?

