
GROWTH POINTS

With Gary L. McIntosh, D.Min., Ph.D.

Motivating New Volunteers

The Case of the Puzzled Pastor

“I just don’t get it,” pastor Randy Gallo commented, while holding the cell phone closer to his ear. “During the announcements this morning, I clearly laid out a challenge to our people to get involved in some way. I described how it was their duty to serve, and then presented statistics that demonstrated a clear need for several of our ministries. I even talked about how good it would feel to accomplish something for Christ.” There was silence for a moment as he listened to what the other person was saying. Then he continued, “Yes, I gave a passionate plea to get involved in serving. I asked people to come and talk to me after the worship service if they’d like to volunteer.” Pastor Gallo paused again to listen to his caller. “You guessed it. No one talked to me about serving. I felt like some people were even avoiding me. I’ve done everything I know of to motivate people to serve, but it’s not working. I just don’t get it.”

Pastor Gallo’s puzzlement is common among pastors and church leaders. Every effort to recruit and motivate new volunteers is met with silence, if not outright cold shoulders. People are so busy they don’t have

time to serve, at least at church. They have time for work, friends, working around their houses, and, of course, their children’s activities, but little time for church ministry. Fortunately, there are some keys to help.

First, begin with prayer. At one point in his ministry, Jesus observed the fact that people were distressed without a shepherd. Instead of sending his disciples to meet the people’s need, he called them to prayer. “Beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest” (Matt. 9:38), he told them. This is where you must begin, asking God to raise up workers, leaders, and volunteers so you can fulfill his mission through your church.

Second, build a solid foundation. Recruiting begins with building a biblical theology of giftedness. Teach others that no one has all the gifts necessary to build a church. Let them know that everyone has at least one spiritual gift to use in serving the body (1 Pet. 4:10). Encourage them to discover their gifts, and to start using them.

Are you searching for a leadership coach? Email Dr. Gary L. McIntosh at cgnet@earthlink.net for full details.

Third, analyze your process. Ask questions. “Has the church erected conscious or unconscious barriers that discourage people from volunteering?” Do people understand the need? Is there a clarity about what is to be done? Is there a support system in place? What is God saying to you through this vacancy? Work hard to discover what possible volunteers are saying beneath the surface when they refuse to participate. For example, are they rejecting the role because they don’t like the leader? Or are they too busy? Or are they misunderstanding what the role entails? Talk through the opportunity with them. If you let them talk long enough, and don’t stop at their initial rejection, their true reason will become clear. When you find out the real reasons behind the rejection, you’ll be able to address them.

Fourth, focus on people rather than programs. Examine the church looking at the various parts the Holy Spirit has given. Then imagine how the church might function if the various parts of the body served based on their gifts. Gradually start redeploying the people who are already volunteering, according to their spiritual gifts. As you do, people will become more resistant to burnout, confident that they are doing God’s will, and fruitful in ministry.

Fifth, trust people with ministry. If you’re going to see results from your recruitment, you have to put your

reputation, and the church’s, on the line. New recruits may not do ministry as well as you or other leaders in the church, but if you don’t release control you’ll miss the life-giving power that comes from others involved in serving. Additionally you’ll have to give up feelings of perfection. Yes, you’ll want to do ministry so it brings honor to God, but volunteers can’t live under the tyranny of perfection.

Sixth, establish reasonable qualifications. Don’t expect volunteers to be elder qualified to get started. All churches desire mature volunteers who are walking closely with the Lord. But, the reality is churches set the requirements to serve so high that hardly anyone can reach them. Remember the qualifications listed in 1 Timothy and Titus are for elders and deacons! Not for beginning servants.

Seventh, Get people involved early! It’s a little risky, but not doing it poses greater risk. If newcomers sit too long, you actually are teaching them NOT to serve. It’s better to recruit newcomers into service quickly—by their third or fourth visit if possible. Ask for their help putting Bible’s out on tables, fixing coffee, setting up chairs, making name tags, distributing programs/bulletins, or anything that says, “We want you to serve.” Letting newcomers assume some small degree of responsibility says two things: you are valuable and needed.

Which of these ideas might help you recruit and motivate new volunteers? Which will you begin to use?

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