

TORONTO UNITED CHURCH COUNCIL

Connecting Resources with Ministry

Church Development Discussion Papers

TITLE: Affirming Church Volunteers

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Volunteers are a resource with great potential in any organization, including our churches, if their contribution is managed and understood in ways which bring benefits to all concerned. Volunteering empowers individuals and enriches society in a rapidly changing world. As Ralph Waldo Emerson observed: "It is one of the most beautiful compensations in life that no person can sincerely try to help another without helping him [or her] self".

It is essential for any organization aiming to sustain an effective volunteer program that there be an understanding of what motivates a volunteer. It is also important for volunteers to know and understand the goals of the organization to whom they freely offer their services. The church context, with its many opportunities (and need) for volunteers, is no different.

Many churches have not identified the numerous roles taken by their volunteers as potential elements of a volunteer program. Maybe they consider their activities too small-scale or short-term to be formally structured. Maybe staff leadership has limited time for serious management of volunteers.

However, whether the volunteer-force is massive or minuscule, highly organized or more ad hoc, some attention to good management principles will reap abundant rewards for both the volunteer and the church.

Let's examine what research findings have indicated as three important strategies which provide the key to maintaining an excellent and well-integrated volunteer program which results in achieving organizational goals.

1. Alignment of mission and work

Volunteer involvement is often self-initiated – although in the church we usually make needs for service known in our congregations. People, whether paid or volunteer, prefer to engage in work they enjoy. But they are more likely to stay, and also work more cooperatively, if they are also committed to the mission of the organization they serve. So it is important that motives and activities mesh appropriately.

As leaders of volunteers, knowing why volunteers are involved is crucial in matching interests, knowledge and skills with organizational needs. We also need to know what maintains volunteer commitment, so we can plan current and future strategies for recruitment, placement and retention.

2. Identification of expectations and needs

All workers, whether volunteer or paid, need to know what they want to achieve, so roles are respected and people feel committed and confident.

Expectations of volunteers will probably include:

- wanting to work with people of similar aims;
- having clear expectations of their paid and voluntary colleagues;
- expecting to develop and use existing skills which will contribute to results.

On the other hand, effective supervising paid workers will usually:

- have a clear idea of what they want to achieve;
- need to be confident recruitment and training strategies will enable volunteers to adequately perform their job;
- welcome volunteers who complement their own efforts.

Understanding volunteer needs involves effective communication processes. For example, volunteers need to know who is responsible for what, how decisions are made, how they can put their ideas forward and what organizational and support structures are in place. Flexibility and understanding are very important for volunteers who work irregularly. Information and support structures usually in place for paid staff are often neglected – but just as important – for volunteers (e.g. opportunities for individual, collective and project feedback).

3. Good program management

A key management principle is that recognition of the benefits of cooperation and total staff endorsement of volunteers' involvement are required to achieve organizational goals. Likewise reciprocal respect is essential regarding attitudes of paid staff toward volunteers and volunteers to paid staff. This promotes equal status and cooperation, while attitudes such as paternalism, stereotyping, extra time demands and resentment have detrimental effects.

Effective management and support practices require:

- respect of volunteers' outside commitments and time demands;
- respect of different motives and expectations of paid and volunteer staff, and accessible and open communication channels where ideas and dissatisfactions can be expressed;
- acceptance of the inevitability of high volunteer staff turnover, so the organization does not suffer and volunteers don't feel guilty;
- recognition that haphazard recruitment, matching, orientation and training procedures lead to strained relationships and poor performance;
- that management strategies must be aligned with organizational goals and personnel needs, whether paid or voluntary.

Effective coordination requires a proficient coordinator of volunteers who:

- takes responsibility for promotion, recruitment, allocation of work, orientation, support and organizing of volunteer training;
- ensures volunteer contributions are recognized and used to best advantage in relation to organizational needs and volunteer goals;
- has a good working relationship with volunteer staff, policy makers and paid staff who work with volunteers.

There needs to be a productive partnership between volunteer members of boards, committees of management and paid staff. Conflict on issues of power, responsibility and decision-making revolve around lack of:

- information sharing and appreciation of each other's perspectives;
- clarity in relation to responsibilities;
- appropriate linking between person and job requirements.

On the other hand, a productive partnership can promote conflict resolution through:

- bringing difficulties into the open for discussion;
- having a willingness to consider other viewpoints;
- obtaining more information/skills as the situation demands;
- giving thought to policy guidelines regarding value of both paid and volunteer staff.

Policy and practical reviews show that guidelines developed in consultation with all parties ensure consideration of all aspects of volunteering. Together they can raise issues not previously considered (e.g. annual leave for volunteers!) and allow contentious matters to be resolved.

In the "real world", changing circumstances necessitate policies be implemented and constantly reviewed. In the church, too, ongoing attention needs to be given to how various parts of the Body of Christ fit together to fulfill the purposes for which all of us are called to serve.

This article was adapted from a presentation given by Jane Brewer, a volunteer-program trainer for LinC, to a conference for World Vision Australia volunteers.

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