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How to Encourage Volunteers in the Church

S. Joseph Kidder

Andrews University, kiddersj@andrews.edu

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HOW TO ENCOURAGE VOLUNTEERS IN THE CHURCH

In the previous two articles, we dealt with how to recruit and train volunteers. The success of your church's mission depends on people who follow Jesus and are passionate about His mission in the church and in the world.

Now that you've recruited leaders for your ministry, the best part begins: encouraging them and building relationships with them to help them grow in their faith and spiritual gifts.

Here are a few ways to keep your volunteers and make them feel needed and fulfilled:

Give them encouragement. Disciples of Jesus serve willingly, but a "Well done, good and faithful servant" goes a long way toward encouraging workers. Send personal notes thanking them. Make a phone call simply to ask, "How's the ministry going? Thank you for what you do." Recognize workers publicly. Sponsor a yearly banquet to say "thank you." Appreciated workers can be great recruiters for the next crop of workers. As a pastor, I spend much of every Monday making phone calls or writing encouraging notes to volunteers who did something to bless the lives of others. Say "thank you" often. Whether it's face-to-face, in a text message, on social media, or in a handwritten note, thank your volunteer team.

After finishing a very successful Vacation Bible School program, the church I pastored decided to give an all-expenses-paid weekend to Linda, the program leader. The church offered to take care of the children so Linda and her husband Mark could enjoy themselves. On the Monday after the weekend, Mark, who was not an Adventist, came to my office to thank the church for the wonderful time they had. With tears in his eyes, he told me that this was the kind of church he wanted to join. After some Bible studies, Mark was baptized. That is the power of appreciation and love.

Connect them with others. Help them meet other volunteers and develop relationships. Provide an opportunity for volunteers to get together before or after service, host volunteer events during the week, or provide a way for them to connect electronically. In my research, I have noticed that effective and growing Adventist churches offer opportunities for their ministry teams to meet together at least once a

month. This gives them time to pray with each other, share ideas, and come up with new ministries to help the church be better at fulfilling its mission.

Pray for them. Give your team an opportunity to submit prayer requests weekly, and gather your staff and other leaders to pray for them. Although Paul was a traveling church planter—not a "settled pastor"—we see him constantly praying for local church leaders and members by name, asking God to work mightily through them. It appears that Paul prayed for the churches as much as he preached and planted them.

Amid the business of life and ministry today, praying for your church is one of the best uses of an elder's time. Though it may feel counter-productive at times, the pastor and elders who neglect this function, together with their church, will pay the high price of an unhealthy and spiritually lethargic congregation.

I found about forty instances of the apostle Paul praying for the church. He often uplifted the churches by saying, "I thank the Lord in every remembrance of you" as he prayed for their salvation, for victory over sin and to be filled with grace and the presence of Jesus, and that they would experience continual growth in knowledge and grace. He prayed night and day that God's purposes would be fulfilled in them by their faithfulness in advancing His kingdom. The heart of the apostle Paul is revealed in his prayers for the church. We pray about the things that are near and dear to our hearts. Paul was bonded to the people and to his work as he prayed often for the salvation of others and for God's kingdom to grow and expand.

See more in them than they see in themselves. Lead them to do more than they ever thought possible. Speak truth into their lives and encourage them to tackle something that scares them. As they continue to grow in their leadership, empower them to do more. Stephen was elected to be a deacon in charge of distributing food. He ended up preaching one of the most powerful sermons in the book of Acts.

Resolve team conflicts quickly. As your volunteer team grows, there will be friction and misunderstandings. You may be tempted to let things go in the interest of maintaining harmony, but that's not what's best for your team culture. Ad-

dress issues directly but lovingly. Deal with friction in God's way: through love, understanding, and forgiveness.

One of the quickest ways to discourage someone from serving is neglecting to foster a sense of comradeship. Seek to quickly resolve conflicts among volunteers. This not only keeps your team healthy, but also makes recruiting easier. A bad team reputation makes recruiting much harder, and leads to high volunteer turnover.

Show the eternal value of serving. We often do not show clearly that serving is about changing lives for eternity. Teaching children at Sabbath school is about leading kids to the throne of grace. Being an elder is really like being a pastor who shepherds the flock. Every ministry should be viewed with eyes of eternal value and significance.

Record a behind-the-scenes video. Show people what it's really like to serve at your church. You don't need expensive camera gear. Chances are you can find a volunteer with a knack for video production who would love to spearhead this project. Use the completed video during service, on your volunteering page, and on social media to help recruit new volunteers.

Set volunteers up for success. No one likes jumping through hoops. If someone has to wait for months until the next volunteer training meeting, they're likely to lose interest. Successful churches give many training events throughout the year. One church I know offers training every month for two hours. The first hour is devoted to spiritual growth and testimony, and the second hour is devoted to specific training

geared for almost every ministry the church has. If you make the onboarding process easy, they'll be excited and equipped to serve.

An untrained volunteer won't do you any good. In fact, they probably won't last very long. By taking the time to equip your volunteers, they'll be much more confident in their ability to do what you ask of them.

Honor all volunteers during service annually. Setting aside time to honor all your volunteers during a church service once a year not only helps reduce volunteer turnover by making your current volunteers feel appreciated, but will also give everyone else a glimpse into who is serving. People are more likely to serve if they know someone else who is currently serving.

Highlight current volunteer stories once per month. Highlighting the story of one of your current volunteers is a great way to encourage new volunteers to get involved. This story can be shared from the platform on Sabbath, in a pre-recorded video, or could be a blog or social media post. This emphasizes the power of testimony. Having a family tell about their ministry is very effective in inspiring others to do the same.

God bless you and your ministry as you endeavor to recruit and keep new volunteers at your church. ED

Joseph Kidder is professor of Christian Ministry and Discipleship at the SDA Theological Seminary in Berrien Springs, MI, USA.

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w@in:solutionsalltechgroup.com