

The 7 Myths of Volunteerism

Debunk these myths to help your volunteers reach their full potential.

by Bill Hybels

Every church has, at some time or another, complained about a lack of volunteers. Excuses are given as to why volunteers aren't showing up and a mad scramble usually ensues to figure out how to get the work of the church done. But most of the conceptions that we have about volunteers are misconceptions. Some of the reasons our churches give for not making great strides in recruiting volunteers are not good reasons ... they're myths. Here are the seven most common myths about volunteers.

Myth #1

There aren't enough volunteers to go around.

Almost everywhere I turn when I meet with pastors and leaders, they're bemoaning the fact that they don't have enough volunteers for their ministries. But there's always a reason why they're not serving. I don't know what it is in your church. We know some of the reasons in our church.

But here's an idea to consider: Why don't you identify those people and ask them to come to a pizza party at the pastor's home? Say, "Hey, we've asked you to come tonight to pose a question. We're trying to raise the value of volunteerism in our church and we know you attend, but we're not sure that you serve anywhere. Why don't you serve?" You're going to hear some very interesting things. Some will say: "You know, I served for a while, and then no one called me to serve again so I thought you didn't need me;" "I served for a while, but the ministry team leader was not a good guy, so I stopped serving and no one's called me since;" "I served for a while because I was told that I was needed, I got there, and I really wasn't needed, so I stopped serving."

There are going to be lots of reasons. We can moan, sob, and groan about a lack of volunteers in our churches. It's just a myth. There are a lot of people who are potential servants in your church. You have to identify why they're not serving, get on the solution side, and invite them back into serving.

There are 500,000 non-churched people within a 30-minute drive of our campus at Willow Creek. If we're not making significant progress in drafting the people who already attend our church, who aren't willing to serve, then I've got to think beyond that and say, "Well, there are 500,000 other people out there. They all represent becoming potential volunteers. Obviously, there are a few challenges along the way to drafting them. But the people are there. We have to meet them, lead them to Christ, disciple them, convince them they have a spiritual gift, and invite them! If you're a leader in a local church, part of what you need to do is lift the vision, set the strategy, and start praying like crazy that you'll start to meet and lead to Christ ever-increasing numbers of people who will eventually become volunteers in your church.

Myth #2

Volunteers are only capable of doing the busy work of the church.

By this I refer to the myth that volunteers are only capable of doing repetitive tasks that the paid staff doesn't really want to mess with. That they're only capable of doing the tasks that are low in strategic import. At Willow, the decision-making positions with the greatest strategic import are often done almost exclusively by volunteers. To think that volunteers can only do busy work isn't true theologically, it doesn't agree with the experiences of the New Testament church, and it certainly doesn't agree with the experiences of our church.

Our elders, for instance, are responsible for the overall spiritual oversight of our church. They hire and fire the senior pastor, they exert church discipline and doctrinal evaluation and they're all volunteers. Our board of directors moves around tens of millions of dollars. They're involved with construction, legal matters, etc. They're all volunteers.

In every church, there are high-capacity volunteers, there are medium-capacity volunteers, and then there are lower-capacity volunteers. (When I say lower-capacity, I'm not talking about someone's IQ or social skills. I am just talking about giftedness, availability, life experience, stage of life, and commitment to Christ). Some people in your church will only step up and get involved if you offer them a high-capacity volunteer opportunity. We have to make sure that our churches have a wide portfolio of high-capacity volunteer positions, mid-capacity volunteer positions, and lower-capacity volunteer positions, and then we've got to match the people with the positions.

Myth #3

Volunteers are free help.

I remember when we decided to do food service on our campus. It was a big decision. We knew that when we were going to provide food service that we were going to have to pay a small staff for a few key people. But we envisioned hundreds of volunteers helping out in that ministry. When a couple of our board members were putting the business plan together for our food-service ministry, one of our staff leaders plugged in a number. And that was questioned at the board meeting. The answer came back that the money was for a full-time salary and benefit package to hire a great person to recruit volunteers to work in our food-service ministry and to nurture and train and care for those volunteers who would step forward and serve. And the board member said, "Wait, I thought volunteers were always free help." The other guy said, "Volunteers offer enormous amounts of help around here, but they are never free."

Volunteers need and deserve to be given competent leadership, sensitive shepherding, ongoing development, training, and tools to do their job. They're supposed to be nurtured and coached by the staff into their full-redemptive potential. That's going to require some staff. At Willow, we give some of our high capacity volunteers their own office, their own phone, and computer. They come to staff meetings. They don't get a paycheck for it, but we certainly give them the tools and the equipment that they need to do what God has called them to do. They do an enormous amount of work for us. But they really aren't free.

Myth #4

Most volunteers want to serve in one role for a lifetime.

Let me reveal a nasty little secret about pastors and paid staff. When a pastor or staff recruit a volunteer and train them and help them figure out their spiritual gifts and finally place them in a critical role in some ministry of the church, the paid staff are just hoping against hope that they have filled that ministry position from now until the Lord's return.

Now, this is understandable, because in most churches, staff are working really hard and when volunteers start jumping from one ministry to the next, that requires staff time. But here's the truth from the volunteer side: Very few volunteers hit the jackpot the very first time they serve somewhere. Most of the time, when a volunteer steps forward and starts to serve, they start to learn more about their gifts, more about their capacities, more about what they like and what they don't like. And it's not uncommon at all for about three to six months into a serving experience, for a volunteer to start self-assessing.

In some dysfunctional church environments, a pastor will stand up and say, "Let's talk about commitment. Let's talk about keeping your word. Let's talk about loyalty." And the volunteer is thinking, "I am committed, I'm loyal, I'm faithful. I might just be in the wrong role." In healthy, high-functioning churches, staff and volunteers stay in a consistent dialogue about how it's going with the volunteer and whether the work still seems like a good fit.

If a volunteer has pounded one nail for 10 years, if he/she decides to explore another ministry, welcome the exploration. Invite them into it. They might decide to go back to what they were doing, or they might find a whole new lease on life and serve God with greater enthusiasm in the new role.

Myth #5

Volunteers are not interested in training or development.

Volunteers, generally speaking, love getting a little better at stuff. They would like to be a little sharper, their tools to be razor-edged. They would like to be developed. My opinion is that there should be training as well as on-going training whenever a volunteer steps into the position.

Myth #6

Volunteers need encouragement from heaven but they really don't need much encouragement from anyone on Earth.

We ought to clean up structures so that staff know exactly who their volunteer team members are, and we should be creating cultures of inspiration. It doesn't require a graduate degree from Harvard, it doesn't cost any more money, it doesn't even take very much time for you to go around thanking and blessing volunteers. It really doesn't. I tell our staff all the time, "You have to think of yourself as a thanking machine. If you're not thanking volunteers every day and blessing them and encouraging them, you're missing a tremendous opportunity to fire up someone who really deserves being fired up."

Volunteers have real jobs and they have marriages and kids and a lawn to

mow and cars to wash. Sometimes when volunteers come our way, their tanks are low. They've been beat up at work and they sat in traffic and now they're coming over to the church to give another couple hours of service because they love God and love the vision of the church. And it's no small thing to a volunteer when you just say, "Hey, Tom, thanks for being here." If you want to lead a volunteer revolution, it has to be in the context of an inspired culture, and once you get that going, it's an unstoppable force!

Myth #7

Volunteerism is a one-way deal—all output, no returns, no rewards.

Quite commonly, a senior pastor will say to me, "Bill, our people are busy, they work hard in the market place, they're raising kids, they're doing stuff in the community. I just couldn't ask them to do more than that." And something starts boiling in me. Because what those pastors are really telling me is that they don't want to ask their people to put serving towels over their arms and step up to volunteering for the cause of Christ in the local church because they fear it will diminish the quality of their lives. It will add one more stress to already stressed-out people. It will put yet another burden on the backs of people who are already hunched over from carrying too many burdens; I can't tell you how much I disagree with that position.

Volunteerism done right, volunteerism done biblically, wisely, and in the power of the Holy Spirit will not diminish the quality of a person's life. It will do precisely the opposite! Volunteerism done right will dramatically and often radically, positively transform a person's life. Inviting a person into servanthood in the cause of Christ is often one of the kindest, most life giving, joy-producing, spiritually-enriching opportunities you can offer somebody. Volunteerism done right will add immeasurably to the quality of the people in your congregation's lives. Volunteerism done right will grow people's faith, deepen their trust, stretch their skills, enrich their relationships, increase their joy, and last, but hardly least, it will set them up for the commendation every sincere Christ follower wants to hear at the end of their time here on planet Earth: "Well done, son. Well done, daughter. You loved me, you served people, you used your gifts, you made a difference in this fallen world. Way to go!" Is there anything better than that?

From Willow magazine, Volume 12, Issue 1 (Winter 2005). Willow Creek Association ©2005. Used with permission.

More Related Training Tools



Volunteer Development Training Theme

This theme helps ministry leaders make the most of their volunteer staff. It

teaches leaders how to motivate, train and encourage people as they serve in volunteer ministry.



Preventing Volunteer Burnout

3 biblical models for effective, lasting ministry.

by Robert Morgan

Josh was one of the most zealous workers we'd seen at church, but I realized he was three steps beyond

Read more.

"weary in well doing" when I read
his letter:

Read more.