

Volunteers - Finding Them, Equipping Them and Keeping Them

The word volunteer is something of a misnomer. People of faith do not volunteer. They are found. People of faith respond to an irresistible call from God. This call echoes in a life of service by Christians who take their baptism seriously. My wife and I recently reflected on the inscription in our wedding bands, "We for our part love, because God first loved us." (1 Jn. 4:19). This sums up the source of our call, the reason for our hope, the purpose for our marriage and the motivation for a shared ministry in the Church that we love. We were prepared. We were found. We were equipped. And we have been kept faithful. I believe that the same can be said of all service in the church – we are found, equipped, and kept faithful by God through one another.

1. Get Prepared

Read the story of Moses' first experience with volunteers (Numbers 11:10-15). In this account Moses is overwhelmed with work. (Recall that earlier, Moses had ignored the advice of his father-in-law, who counseled him to get help). So Moses is starting to rue the day that he signed on with God. And so the great deliverer cries out for his own deliverance. God responds quite simply (Numbers 11:16-17) by instructing Moses to bring forward people who have the proper motivation and the necessary talents to be commissioned *in God's service*. That was the core problem for Moses. He thought that it was *his* mission, *his* organization and *his* people. Moses failed to see that it did not belong to him. The organization belongs to God. The people belong to God. And the mission belongs to God. Consider your own situation. Any similarities? Get prepared by answering the following questions for yourself:

- Why do I want volunteers?
- How do I let volunteers know that this work belongs to God and not me?
- How will volunteers benefit from performing this service?
- Is the work enjoyable or meaningful?
- Do I honor the gifts and motivation of the volunteer?

Effective leaders know how important these questions are because we have learned from Moses' first experience that no one is really a *volunteer*. Just as the elders were chosen in Moses' day, we are chosen today. We too are given gifts by God, for God's purpose and authorized by God. We are not *volunteers*. We were baptized into the mission and ministry of the Christ's body - priest, prophet and king. Ours is a calling to God's service. This is an essential starting point for making a credible invitation. Anyone still unsure about the importance of this as a starting point, needs only to talk with their own *volunteers*. Ask them about why they do what they do. Consider the following questions:

- Why do you do what you do for the parish?
- What would you write down to guide the search for your own replacement?
- Why would someone want to do this service?
- What are the benefits to you or to the community?
- Can you describe the qualifications and training that are necessary to succeed and enjoy this work?
- Can you identify what kind of supervision and support is necessary to thrive in this service?
- How long should the term of service be?

This is why we call this a volunteer MINISTRY. In reality, we are inviting people to respond to their baptismal call. Now you are prepared to find them.

2. Find Them

Finding volunteers and calling them to ministry can be easy, so long as we realize that some of the points of contact have changed. That is why the least effective way to call people to ministry is putting an announcement in the bulletin. At one time it was enough, but no longer. However the maxim - publicize broadly, and invite personally, still works. Other means of finding volunteers can be divided into these two strategies – broad and personal recruitment.

Broad recruitment includes: interest surveys, general offers in parish registration packets, opportunity brochures, and website, bulletin or pulpit announcements, want ads, stewardship Sunday or a ministry fair, presentations to parish organizations or partnerships with local schools. Consider building a social network online for your program or activity (e.g. Facebook group for an event) and invite your *fans* or supporters to spread the word. Some parishes publish a ministry booklet that lists volunteer positions including a description: qualifications, benefits to the volunteer and the community, training provided, and time commitment. Broad recruitment is not enough and it almost always leads to a personal invitation and an interview.

Personal recruitment includes: seeking recommendations either from trusted volunteers or participants in the program of concern, creating a recruitment team who has no other responsibility than to act as the talent scouts of the parish. Partner with organizations with which you share common cause (e.g. a youth group might partner with the local Young Life chapter, Boys and Girls Club or other town youth serving agencies). If all goes well it is time for a conversation and possibly an invitation.

Avoid selling big titles and programs and instead be as specific as possible around the interests and abilities of people that you seek. Focus on the task at hand. Asking people if they want to feed three hundred people, get up in front of three hundred people to give a talk, or spend time with teens, can be quite threatening. It is easier to inquire about who likes to cook or drive or who has experienced God in their lives in a powerful way. People are much more likely to admit to this. Once you have a list of people who can cook, drive, or tell their story, you can invite them to see what you are doing and explore whether or not it is a fit, making sure that they know how many people they may be cooking for, how many may be listening to their talk or that they enjoy the company of their passengers (e.g. 7th grade boys). It is even easier if you maintain a list for such regular needs (e.g. speakers, drivers, cooks) from which to draw when the needs arise.

Appeal to the heart. Most volunteers today want to invest their time in something about which they feel passionate. In fact, Jonathan and Thomas McKee suggest in their book, *The New Breed: Understanding and Equipping the 21st Century Volunteer* that we consider courting volunteers. Just as one would not propose marriage on the first date, we can be just as patient with volunteers as Jesus was. Start by inviting a potential volunteer out "to get acquainted". Let them see the program for themselves. A courting approach was just used quite effectively to hook me through an introductory offer for my own daughter for "try" a tae kwon do class in an after-school program. In courting, we do not wait too long before calling them back (within the week) to see what they think and discuss coming back to see more. In the second date, let them talk about themselves - their interests and talents. Let them know why you asked them out.

The third date is the time to ask them to step forward and get involved in a small way. Then they can also get better acquainted with the people, objectives and workings of the program. Let their interest, friendships and motivation grow from there. Only when the volunteer finds a niche, is it time to talk commitment. Be patient. No one benefits if the commitment is rushed. Remember that for many parish ministries we have a responsibility to insure for a safe environment. This stage of the courtship process is a good time to obtain the necessary background check and let the volunteer know how seriously you care about protecting those who are vulnerable. This is the beginning of equipping volunteers.

3. Equip Them

Most people whom we call *volunteers* did not actually *volunteer*. Most people involved in parish ministry are called forward. They did not step forward. One way of understanding ministry is that it is a process of being equipped for service. To be equipped is to be **E**ncouraged, **Q**ualified, **U**nderstood, **I**nstructed and supported with **P**rayer.

Encouraging includes letting a potential volunteer see the ministry for themselves. Jesus invited his disciples to *come and see*. Jesus let potential disciples see what made him tick. Jesus shared his sense of God's purpose and helped the disciples explore their own motivation and interests. Share what you see in them - abilities or motivation, and how these match the needs and opportunities at your parish.

Qualifying people to serve can be accomplished in several ways that include workshops in your parish or parish cluster (e.g. how to pray and lead prayer, meeting skills, delegation and time management, or working with difficult people) which can be open to the entire parish or parish cluster. Depending on the situation and the volunteer, other popular strategies can include: individualized learning plans, book clubs and guest speakers. Avoid re-inventing the wheel (use seminary programs and other diocesan resources).

Understanding the competencies and learning needs of the volunteer is best accomplished through mentoring. The mentoring process is a partnership between the mentor and the apprentice, in which the mentor starts by doing while the apprentice observes. Over time the mentor does less and the apprentice does more until the roles are reversed. I heard someone refer to this once as: I do, you watch..., I do, you help..., We do..., You do, I help..., You do, I watch... You do, and I find another apprentice to watch. The mentoring approach perpetuates a ministry mentality. Ideally, everyone in ministry should have a mentor (Paul had Gamaliel), a colleague (Paul had Silas), and an apprentice (Paul had Timothy).

Instructing volunteers can happen in many ways. Instructing in the context of a mentoring relationship is most effective because it allows the apprentice to determine their own learning needs - content and the extent of training, as the need arises. This maintains an internal locus of motivation for learning. Mentors continue to meet regularly with volunteers to observe them as they serve, and monitor their level of confidence and competence in the assigned role while providing increasing amounts of freedom, recognition and responsibility as appropriate.

Today we make significant use of google groups, facebook and other social networks to create learning communities for volunteer instruction and support. These communities work best when there is a full range of expertise represented in the participant community. The coordinator is well-advised to start with clear instructions and to model and monitor the exchanges for good feedback techniques. Learning communities are no replacement for direct supervision. It is especially important to be available for someone whenever the volunteer is having trouble. In most cases the mentor should meet with them privately to avoid embarrassing them.

Prayer is the glue that holds the church together. (1 Peter 2:3-4). We are *living stones* and as such must acknowledge the failings and differences of opinion that arise in ministry. In his own situation, Moses discovered (Numbers 11:14-15), that prayer is the source of our strength and the greatest resource in problem solving. Effective leaders pray for their volunteers and let them know that they pray for them. Effective leaders invite volunteers to prayer.

4. Keep Them

Keeping volunteers takes us back to one of the first questions: Do we let volunteers know about the benefits of their service? Can the volunteer name these benefits? Particular support strategies include: commission volunteers and thank them – publicly, thank their families (the ones whose approval the volunteer needs to continue), make the service experience rewarding and enjoyable, give a gift with purpose at Christmas (e.g. an inspirational book or cd), remember important personal dates (e.g. birthdays, anniversaries and illnesses), give regular feedback and address questions or issues

immediately, host a pre-event enrichment experience with light food and prayer or faith-sharing, or plan an annual family-outing day for volunteers, hold a Pentecost recognition dinner, tap into relevant diocesan conferences and workshops (with parish paying cost), and be available.

Supervision is an essential ingredient for keeping volunteers because it insures a positive and rewarding service experience for volunteers. When meeting to evaluate performance, encourage the volunteer to take the lead in the conversation. Encourage them supervise the evaluation using the following steps:

Ask the volunteer to...

Step 1: evaluate the position description (clarify volunteer expectations)

Step 2: evaluate the sufficiency of preparation (evaluate support for volunteer)

Step 3: evaluate the adequacy and style of supervision (clarify supervisor expectations)

Step 4: evaluate their confidence and competence to do the service (evaluate support for volunteer)

Step 5: evaluate what they can improve and what they can do to make it more rewarding

Because most volunteers are sufficiently self-critical, the more constructive role for the supervisor is to serve as a sounding board, affirming the contributions of the volunteer, offering a larger view (*super-vision*) and provide support resources for continued growth. In most cases, performance problems can be traced back to insufficient clarity of expectations, or inadequate preparation and ongoing training. People want to be accountable and they appreciate the confidence that is placed in them by a leader who trusts them enough to evaluate and invite growth. When a problem is expected, it is advisable to have an objective observer in the meeting. Another way to supervise in a less threatening way is to hold a comprehensive evaluation of the program and involve other leaders and participants. This allows all those directly involved to have the opportunity to address the issues in a cooperative way. In any case, effective supervision affirms the volunteer for their contributions, invites them to grow from their experience, keep doing what they do well or consider something which they may do better.

For more insights on working with volunteers in ministry, consider the following resources:

The New Breed: Understanding & Equipping the 21st Century Volunteer by Jonathan McKee and Thomas McKee (Group Books in Loveland, CO, 2008) www.group.com

How to Mobilize Church Volunteers by Marlene Wilson (Augsburg Publ. 1983) www.augsburgfortress.org

Equipping the Saints: Mobilizing the Saints edited by Michael Christensen with Carl Savage (Abingdon Press 2000) www.abingdonpress.com

Volunteers: How to Get Them, How to Keep Them by Helen Little (Panacea Press 1999) www.panaceapress.com

By Dennis Mahaney, Office of Parish Life

Contact the Office of Parish Life for more ideas about how to enrich the efforts of volunteers in your parish, parishlife@buffalodiocese.org or call 716-847-5531.