

1,000 fewer hours

By [Adam J. Copeland](#)

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One line I read a few weeks ago about congregational life together has stuck with me in a big way. I've brought it up, in one way or another, several times already. In a *Christian Century* article, "[More People, Looser Ties](#)" David Eagle drops the sentence, "Think of it this way: a congregation with 100 married couples today has **1,000 fewer hours of potential volunteer labor** to tap than it did in 1970."

One thousand fewer hours. (Eagle doesn't specify, but I assume that's measured over a year?) The article examines the difference in staffing and culture of megachurches over time, but I couldn't get past that statistic. One thousand fewer hours.

The reasons for the decrease in potential volunteer labor (though, I don't actually [like calling it volunteer](#)) are many, but perhaps primary is the increase in couples in which both partners are working. I'd also guess that changing expectations for families plays a role as well: if kids are in three sports and play two instruments, there's less time to be at church; if parents are expected to produce Pinterest-perfect birthdays, there's less time for leisure; if couples are expected to respond to work e-mails at all times of the day and weekend, there's less time for quality relationships outside of work.

Last weekend, I presented talks at two congregations. In each, I was surprised at the concepts that seemed to connect. In one presentation that focused primarily on financial stewardship and changing paradigms of religious giving, an older church member took the microphone and spoke with much more passion than your average Minnesotan about her desire for **a renewed emphasis on stewardship of time**. From what I could gather, her not-so-subtle subtext was a desire to see younger members join in activities as in days gone by.

The other unexpected connection related to my brief introduction of Henry Jenkins's notion of **participatory culture**. I included the following quote from [Confronting the Challenge of Participatory Culture](#):

A participatory culture is a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices. A participatory culture is also one in which members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least they care what other people think about what they have created).

When it comes to congregations, I wondered out loud that embracing participatory culture might emphasize things like inviting people to use their gifts in ways that may be new to the congregation rather than slotting them into what the church already offers; appreciating the importance of thoughtfully strengthening loose ties; developing “mentoring” relationships with existing members; welcoming contributions—especially creative ones—from non-members and/or those curious about connecting with the congregation.

In many congregations I know, the rubber hits the road around these issues when it comes to women's groups (e.g. [Presbyterian Women](#), [Women of the ELCA](#)) that historically relied on “volunteer time” from non-employed women. But we'd be wise also to consider the implications more broadly. Here's a mini-theory of mine.

It's often said that in most congregations, an “80/20 rule” is in place regarding financial gifts—20 percent of the congregation provides for about 80 percent of the budget. I'm curious as to whether that rule, which is usually considered in financial terms, may also be thought of in terms of volunteer hours. **In your church, do 20 percent of members (or less) provide 80 percent (or more) of the volunteer hours?** If so, what does this say about the changing nature of Christian communities and participation? I'm not sure, but I'll keep thinking on it. One hour at a time.

*Originally posted at [Copeland's blog](#)*