

8 ways to recruit, engage, and keep volunteers

Churches need volunteers. Those volunteers need something in return.

by [Donna Schaper](#) in the [July 18, 2018](#) issue



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Marketplace recently reported that the average volunteer's efforts are worth \$25.64 an hour. Those of us who are pastors aren't surprised. While volunteer recruitment is an increasingly important skill in many fields, it has always been key to religious institutional experience. And according to the group Partners for Sacred Places, congregations have an "economic halo effect" when it comes to the value they return to their communities. That's value that money can't and didn't buy. We pastors spend our days and nights inviting people to do things that may offer a kind of heaven on earth, but no earthly reward.

How do we improve our capacity to recruit, engage, and keep volunteers? Here are eight ideas.

1. Thank people. Not in a perfunctory way. Do it out loud, in public. Make somebody look good every day.

2. Ritualize the recognition of volunteers. At the beginning and end of people's term of service, have a ceremony. Bless the outgoing board. Bless the incoming board, too.

3. Tell stories. Use your newsletter to name people and their work. Who shoveled all that snow on the day of the big storm? Who polishes the silver?

4. Pay some people. Don't overuse volunteers. Nobody should have to pay for greeters or ushers—even though they play the most important role in any church, the gateway at the front door. But we should pay for difficult tasks, like the bulletin, or the newsletter, or the counting and categorizing of donations. Be careful to distinguish between when you want a gift of someone's time (from a volunteer who may not be so good at the job) and when you want to hire.

5. Watch out for volunteer burnout. Keep your eye on people's genuine motivation and gratification for doing whatever the work is—and keep your eye on the door. The past board president or the moderator of last term is one of the wisest people of all; they know what is going on. Try to keep them around as “elders” to teach others.

6. Have term limits. Have them for everybody. Watch out for volunteers who have been sitting on the same job forever. Create a culture that expects people to rotate in and out of jobs. Make it an honor to be invited to do a job.

7. Have volunteers recruit their own replacements. It's the best kind of volunteer recruitment. My congregant Abigail did this recently. She was on the board and on two other committees, and she had coordinated coffee hour volunteers for three years—that means delivering about 350 cups of coffee with milk for me alone. Enough was enough. But rather than simply hanging up her towel, Abigail tossed it to LinDa (with a capital “D” indeed).

8. Match volunteers' passions to the church's needs. LinDa not only said yes to Abigail, she said yes in a personal context. LinDa is Cambodian and knows the

Khmer Rouge only too well. Asked to coordinate coffee hour, here is what she wrote in response:

Thank you to Abigail for allowing me to be an active member of the church, in ways that unbeknownst to her are so meaningful to me. When I was looking for churches, the ones that really attracted me were the ones with this idea of sharing food and drink together. Not just on Agape but as the heart of the community.

I have a vivid memory as a child under the Khmer Rouge, where my mother woke me up at 3 a.m. to feed me a boiled egg mixed with rice. She did not turn the light on and lied to me that all I ate was just rice. Because she had stolen that egg for her kids. She took a great risk, and she knew that kids' honesty can be deadly if someone asked what we ate. I knew I ate more than just rice. But I remember the feeling of my mother's joy of sharing this stolen egg with us.

Sharing food is important to me. I did not mean to share this story as a downer but wanted to let you know that coordinating people bringing food was meant to be. . . . I almost said no because of my bad accent and the need to make announcements.

LinDa shows what we want most in any volunteer: a spiritual connection to the work. Thanks to LinDa's mother for giving her such an appreciation for food that she wants to do coffee hours. May the day come when every volunteer is willing to make announcements, even with a "bad accent," because they received a gift once that they want to pass on. Heaven on earth? Not really. But churches exist to get closer all the time.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Work money can't buy."