

# The Waking of a Giant: Church-Related Volunteerism

Marlene Wilson

Did you know that there is an organization in this country with a membership of over 133 million people<sup>1</sup>...many of them potential volunteers for human service programs? Alice Lepert aptly labeled this group "the half-awake giant" in an article in Voluntary Action Leadership in 1978.<sup>2</sup> This giant is the church and the focus of this article is to examine ways to bestir this dozing giant.

Let me share some personal observations and experiences with you both as a professional volunteer administrator and consultant and as a deeply committed Church person.

Several years ago I became the director of a newly organized Voluntary Action Center and Information and Referral Agency in Boulder, Colorado. Since we worked with over ninety different community agencies, I soon became acutely aware of community needs. At this same time, I was an active member of a large Protestant congregation that seemed acutely unaware of community needs (not an unusual state of affairs unfortunately). My challenge was clearly to determine how to help a church see the incredible opportunities for the ministry of serving others which abounded all around us.

What followed was an agonizingly slow, but eventually very successful awakening of one congregation. Some of the strategies we used were as follows:

1. Advocated for and got approved monies for local benevolence to be included in the congregation's annual budget.

2. Formed a Social Action Committee to oversee this fund.

3. The Committee met monthly and became educated regarding community needs through requests for aid and visiting the Voluntary Action Center.

4. Specific requests for volunteers and other assistance were included in the church's weekly bulletins and monthly newsletter. (The congregation now knew the needs and began to respond as individuals.)

5. The congregation's local benevolence budget increased from \$100 to \$3,000 in two years.

6. The Social Action Committee decided to adopt a congregational volunteer project for the year. After committee members visited four major social service agencies, they recommended the Juvenile Court Volunteer Program.

7. The Juvenile Judge gave a presentation outlining the court's volunteer needs to the congregation. The congregation then voted to "adopt" the program for a year. We agreed to provide all the needed volunteers for three programs.

- a. Daily visits to both the boys and girls jails.

- b. Tutoring once a week for all juveniles assigned to that program by the judge (to be done at the church on a one-to-one basis).

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c. Administering a battery of tests to all juvenile offenders prior to sentencing.

8. The Social Action Committee recruited a Chairman for this project and leaders for each of the three subcommittees (Jail Visitation, Tutoring, and Testing).

a. This new group recruited and scheduled all needed volunteers.

b. The Juvenile Court Volunteer Director interviewed, matched, trained, supervised, and evaluated the volunteers.

This partnership worked so well that the congregation re-adopted the program for three consecutive years, much to the amazement of the skeptics in both the justice system (who couldn't believe they could count on Church volunteers) and the Church (who believed people would never get involved with "that sort of thing").

#### INVOLVING OTHER CHURCHES

During this same period of time, I received invitations (or sought them) to give presentations about our Volunteer Center and volunteerism in this community at most of the seventy-five churches in Boulder. The audiences varied, as some were women's groups, some men's breakfasts, some youth meetings and occasionally I was invited to give a Sunday morning sermon. The opportunity to share information about community needs with so many people was exciting and I eagerly tackled the challenge. Almost invariably, the response was initially very encouraging and enthusiastic--but as the months slipped by, frustration began to set in. It seemed I had developed a huge "cheering section" (all rooting for the great work volunteers were doing in the community) but very few new players for the team. In other words, I'd fallen into the trap of thinking informational and inspirational speeches were automatically also recruitment speeches.

Moving the people to personal commitment to become involved was still lacking. That's where the on-going Committee at my own church made such a difference. The follow-up, support, and ongoing education was lacking in these "one-shot" speeches, so we began to work with other churches to form such committees and it helped.

It was several years later that I learned another very valuable lesson relating to working with church volunteers. A common complaint of many agencies was that the pastors of the local churches frequently seemed reluctant to publicize their agency's volunteer needs within the congregations. This seeming disinterest created both confusion and frustration for the agency Volunteer Directors. How could they recruit this sleeping giant (the church) if they couldn't even get to it?

This problem was discussed at many gatherings of agency volunteer leaders over the years, but there seemed to be very little real progress in overcoming this block. And then in 1977, Ivan Scheier, myself, and several others had an opportunity to walk into the lion's den and ask the lions themselves. We did a one-week seminar at Iliff Seminary in Denver for a group of 25-30 clergymen from several different denominations--the topic was volunteerism and the church. It was during this very intense and productive week that we began to get glimmers of the cause of the pastors' reluctance to recruit members for community volunteer programs.

Most of their own internal congregational volunteer programs (religious education, youth, evangelism, etc.) were hurting for volunteers. It seemed fewer and fewer members were doing more and more of those jobs--and the pastors were fearful they would lose those faithful few to other programs if they publicized community needs. In a nutshell--they were having their own volunteer recruitment problems and they were

concerned. The law of supply and demand was at work and they were stymied as to how to deal with it. This was a very painful revelation for them to make, but it finally gave us the missing piece to the puzzle. We had known volunteerism needed the church...but now we knew the church needed what the field of volunteerism had to offer--know-how about administering effective volunteer programs.

Thus began a new and productive era of fruitful mutual exchange. Volunteer Directors and consultants have been invited to do workshops and seminars for religiously-oriented groups of all kinds on the topics of managing volunteers, enabling leadership styles, job descriptions, interviewing, volunteer/staff relationships, etc. And the interest in these subjects seems totally ecumenical in scope, as I have personally responded to such requests from Catholics, the Jewish community and most major Protestant denominations. Often the sessions are inter-denominational and it is heart-warming to experience the mutuality of concerns for people that far outweigh any difference in theology at these events.

Another evidence of a closer and more productive liaison between church and community is the ever-increasing numbers of church and synagogue representatives attending the training events sponsored by agency groups, i.e., DOVIAs (Director of Volunteers in Agencies), AVA (Association for Volunteer Administration) VACs (Voluntary Action Centers) and others. This is perhaps one of the most effective means of establishing viable collaboration. Isolation has been one of the major causes of lack of involvement and we now see the giant moving in our midst...a most encouraging sign.

Also we are finding that as congregations become more effective in meeting their internal volunteers' needs, they are more open and ready to share their people with community agencies. A growing number of

churches are even adding Volunteer Directors to their staffs to help with this effort. (They have various titles, i.e., Director or Coordinator of Volunteer Ministries, Lay Ministry Coordinator, Volunteer Director, etc.)

#### DESERVING CHURCH VOLUNTEERS

Now let's turn our attention from the church and look at the other side of the equation--community volunteer programs seeking volunteers. An equally essential task (along with recruiting more church volunteers) is to be sure your programs deserve them and are ready to receive them.

This may sound a bit harsh, but today's realities are these: most volunteers are working; many are single parents; many have economic concerns and incredibly busy schedules. This demands that we have our act together sufficiently so we utilize volunteers' time, energy, and commitment well. We must not waste it! In a time of cutbacks and economizing, we must become ever more sensitive and effective managers of the precious resource of volunteers.

One of the incongruencies I see occurring at this very critical stage of economic cutbacks and increasing community needs is the short-sighted decision by many agencies to lay off Volunteer Directors. When the hue and cry nationally is to get citizens instead of the government involved in solving local problems, administrators are eliminating the "citizen involvement experts"--the only people who really know how to make volunteerism (another name for citizen involvement) work well. In my estimation, there has not been a time in our nation's history when we have needed trained, effective, and dedicated administrators of volunteer programs as desperately as we need them now. We must advocate strongly and well for these enablers of those who help others. (One need only ask, is the job of managing a household easier or more difficult in times of scarce resources?)

In my estimation, the principles involved in establishing and maintaining a sound volunteer program are fairly universal (whether it be criminal justice, neighborhood self-help, YMCA, or church programs). There are certain essential management functions we must tend to, or we will find ourselves in trouble and the program floundering.

Questions any organization needs to answer before trying to recruit church volunteers (or any other volunteers) are these:

1. *Have we designed a plan for our volunteer program this year with clear goals, objectives, and action plans?*

2. *Has our paid staff (if we have any) been involved in designing written job descriptions that outline the duties, skills, and the time commitment required for each different type of volunteer involvement?*

3. *Have we set up interview processes, so each potential volunteer can learn more about our organization and we can learn about their skills, needs, and interests? Is matching the right volunteer to the right job a priority?*

4. *Have we designed appropriate training opportunities to help our volunteers succeed?*

5. *Is our staff and volunteer leadership committed to providing enabling supervision and meaningful recognition for all volunteers?*

If these steps have not been taken, then it is no wonder people have not responded positively. If they have been taken, let me share some other tips for successful recruiting.

- Find out if any of your present volunteers are members of the church you want to reach, and then recruit them to help tell your story.

- Be creative in your appeal. Use slides, client interviews, and graphics as well as verbal information. Tell your story in an

interesting and emotionally appealing fashion to as many groups within the church as possible.

- Be specific about your needs and how they as volunteers can help.

- Avoid the "oughts and shoulds" approach.

- Have sign-up sheets or registration forms available after your presentation so people can respond immediately.

- Hold a "Volunteer Opportunity Fair" in collaboration with other agencies who need volunteers and invite all the churches in the area. Make the event informative, creative, and fun!

- Write short, informational "blurbs" about your needs that can be inserted easily in bulletins and newsletters. Direct to the person in charge of those newsletters and bulletins, not the pastor. Make the notices short, snappy, and specific.

- Ask for time on the agenda of the Social Ministries, Social Action, or Social Concerns Committees. Tell your story in person whenever possible.

- Have options. Suggest a variety of individual volunteer jobs and group projects. People like alternatives. And do your homework so your suggestions are appropriate for that group.

- Be enthusiastic!!<sup>3</sup>

It's important to remember that effective volunteer programs don't just happen. They are carefully planned and managed. The essential ingredients of a successful volunteer program are:

1. A belief on the part of agency administration and staff members that volunteers are both needed and wanted in their organization.

2. A qualified paid director of volunteers to oversee the planning, implementation, and evaluation of the volunteer program.

3. An understanding of the rapidly changing realities of volunteerism--changes in the makeup of the volunteer work force, and so on.

4. A commitment of needed funds to operate an effective office of volunteers.

5. An attitude of acceptance of volunteers as unpaid staff members.

6. Proper management and supervision of the volunteers.

7. The acceptance of volunteers as valuable and accountable team members who can enrich and extend the services of paid staff members.

#### SUMMARY

If leaders of community volunteer programs are seriously interested in nudging the sleeping giant of the church into a more meaningful partnership, then there is work to be done on both sides. The church must have greater access to the resources of the field of volunteer administration to enable it to equip its millions of members for more fulfilling, productive, and effective volunteer involvement in both the "gathered and scattered" arenas of ministry, and the agencies must diligently prepare their volunteer programs to receive these and other volunteers so they might not waste this precious human resource.

Is it worth all this work? I adamantly believe it is, for I agree with John Gardner when he said in his book Excellence:

*Free people must set their own goals. There is no one to tell them what to do; they must do it for themselves. They must be quick to apprehend the kinds of effort and performance their society needs and they must demand that kind of effort and performance of themselves and of their fellows. They must cherish what Whitehead called "the ha-*

*bitual vision of greatness." If they have the wisdom and courage to demand much of themselves--as individuals and as society--they may look forward to long-continued vitality. But a free society that is passive, inert, and preoccupied with its own diversion and comforts will not last long. And freedom won't save it...As Chesterton put it, "The world will never be safe for Democracy--it is a dangerous trade...but whoever supposed that it would be easy?"*

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#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>1981 Yearbook of America and Canadian Churches, compiled by the National Council of Churches.

<sup>2</sup>Alice Lepert, "Volunteering by Religious Groups: The Half-Awake Giant," Voluntary Action Leadership, Winter 1978.

<sup>3</sup>Marlene Wilson, How to Mobilize Church Volunteers, 1983, Volunteer Management Associates, 279 So. Cedar Brook Rd., Boulder, CO 80302, pp. 120-1.

<sup>4</sup>John Gardner, Excellence, Perennial Library, Harper and Row, 1961, pp. 194-195.