

CHURCH VOLUNTEER ADMINISTRATION: Similarities and Differences

By Janet Richards

In an article which appeared recently in VOLUNTARY ACTION LEADERSHIP, Alice Leppert refers to voluntarism in the church as a 'half-awake giant', with churches and their members emerging as change-agents in community affairs. Ms. Leppert also mentions that "there is a volume of activity within the typical congregation which rightfully can be called volunteering". I would like to speak to that contention. Based on two years as a Coordinator of Volunteers in a church and many more years as an active church member, I have readily observed that there is a notably unrecognized need for coordinating the services freely rendered by the membership in the programs of the church.

Considering the fact that the number of paid staff in most churches ranges from two to seven or eight and the number of volunteers involved in any week could easily run from 50 to several hundred, perhaps it

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is time to consider the church as an agency, just as one would consider a hospital, a library, the Red Cross or any of the hosts of other agencies in the community which use volunteers. *The contribution of its members to the life of the church deserves the same fine quality of administration that those other agencies are being encouraged to provide for their volunteers. Churches have survived a long time with their present systems of volunteer involvement. Perhaps the time has come to look at those systems and question whether there is a way to improve them.*

While there are a number of ways in which administering a volunteer program in a church is different, there are many ways in which it is very much the same as in any other agency. With the church's great dependence on a volunteer work force to keep its programs going, the same principles of good administration very much apply. So often churches have been guilty of calling on the same core of members to do the bulk of the work. With a Volunteer Coordinator on staff, the responsibilities can be spread out among many people. Moreover, the

intentional matching of the tasks to be done and the resources in persons is sharpened and focused.

In my own church of 3000 members, there are 900 jobs where volunteers carry responsibilities in areas such as being choir members, Sunday School teachers, ushers, acolytes, Altar guild, Church Council, executive committees of various church organizations, persons to count offerings, special greeters on Sunday mornings, etc. After a year with a Coordinator of Volunteers on staff, at least 200 more members were involved in the church's internal volunteer programs. For example, the same persons were previously expected to count the offerings for both services, which means being on hand 4 to 5 hours. The Coordinator of Volunteers recruited enough people to make separate teams for each service for each Sunday in the month, thus doubling the number of persons involved in that one responsibility alone. The captains for those counting teams had previously been Church Council people. The Coordinator of Volunteers, with approval from Church Council, recruited other individuals to serve as captains - once more expanding the responsibility among a larger portion of the congregation. This also relieved Church Council to invest more time and energy in the managing of church affairs. (A side benefit is that this involvement of even more members provided a wider field of potential for recruiting Finance Committee people.)

Adhering to the principle of recruiting for a specific period of time, with the continuation in that responsibility being renegotiable periodically, the Coordinator of Volunteers surveyed several different groups to give them an opportunity to be relieved of duties which may have become a burden to them. This meant exposure to the possibility of having to do a mass recruiting if many of these volunteers chose to 'get out'. The opposite happened, however. In one group, out of sixty phone calls, only four asked to be relieved of duty; three said they'd stay with it for another six months; and the balance willingly signed on for another full year. The response seemed to reflect an appreciation for the businesslike approach of negotiation.

Another principle that has been made very clear in this situation is that volunteers have a right to expect assignments equivalent to their abilities. This means letting people know that it is perfectly okay to say "no" when asked to do something they really are not interested in or capable of doing. Many people feel obligated to say "yes" when the church asks anything of them. They also feel very guilty if they cannot do what is asked, even when the reason is legitimate. By promising to call again - and then doing so - the Coordinator of Volunteers has helped people realize that it is perfectly acceptable to be honest about accepting or rejecting an assignment.

One of the tools from the business world which has been applied to volunteering is that of training. In the church setting, volunteers have been recruited for responsibilities with little thought of providing training. Public school teachers often are asked to teach Sunday School; therefore, no training is thought to be necessary. Businessmen are asked to serve on the governing body of the church and it is believed that they will bring their several skills from business into the managing of the church's affairs. The assumption that neither of these groups needs or wants training needs to be checked out. Also, when laymen are asked to be canvassers in the church's annual pledge campaign, what are the skills they bring? Usually their major qualification is a commitment to the work of the church. But communication, interviewing or sales skills are minimal. These canvassers, given training for the job they have agreed to do, achieve a far greater degree of self-satisfaction for themselves, while being even more effective for the church. Opportunities for training to do the work of the church need to be available and varied.

The task of a Volunteer Coordinator in a church has some unique features. The most obvious is the fact that, unlike almost any other setting, the clients and the volunteers are one and the same. Among other things, this means that volunteers are their own bosses, in that the church