

## Volunteers are Not Free! by Karen Kogler

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Are volunteers “free labor”? Of course they are. By definition, volunteers perform a task without receiving payment for it. So we find it easy to think of volunteers as free labor, the opposite of staff who are paid to work. If a volunteer updates addresses in the computer, it’s free; if the paid secretary does it, it’s not free.

But costs come in other forms than dollars and cents, even for paid workers. Smart employers, realizing business success is directly related to retaining good employees, make sure workers have a desirable benefit package, a good working environment, the right tools for the job, initial and ongoing training, opportunity for advancement, some flexibility to deal with personal and family crises and so on. Employees often rate some of these items higher than salary in job satisfaction surveys.

But church volunteers serve primarily for love of their Savior and their church. They are not seeking payment, benefits, freebies, or other compensation. Most would say they don’t want acknowledgement or even a thank you!

But when any of us—salaried or volunteer; at church, work or home--perform a task for someone else, we do have certain requirements, which cost that person or organization something. If a church ignores these costs when it comes to their volunteers, in the long run they hamper the volunteer (often losing them as a volunteer in the process) and diminish the return received by the church, hindering their mission. What are these needs and what do they cost?

- Job description – When someone asks a volunteer to do a task, the picture of the task in their mind might be quite different from the picture in the volunteer’s mind. If the volunteer finds out later that things are far different than they thought they’d be, most will look for a quick exit and be hesitant to accept future tasks. A discussion with a clear and accurate written job description clarifies the picture.
- Good match – Some people serve wherever needed because they want to be helpful. Some have trouble saying “no,” and will do just about anything they’re asked to. Both types are frequently asked to do just about anything! But we all do better and receive more pleasure and satisfaction when a job matches our abilities, interests and even our personality. An introvert might love to sit in an out-of-the-way corner doing data entry, while it would be torture for an extrovert.
- Training and equipment – We all want to do a job right. Training gives us the methods and tools for doing the work, and lets us know what the expectations are. It allows us to try it, find out if we have the right idea, and ask questions. Along

with training, volunteers need proper equipment and the knowledge of how their task fits in with others being done at church. If I'm an usher, I need to know where to put the extra bulletins at the end of the service, what I can do that helps the custodian, and those who use the sanctuary on Monday, etc.

- **Support** – Well begun is half the story. Will I be left on my own for the duration? What if I have a problem or a question? When someone intentionally checks in with a volunteer periodically, simply by making sure to ask, “How’s it going?” it becomes much more likely that small problems will be uncovered and solved, especially those that a volunteer is reluctant to bring up. Left unmentioned, those problems are often reasons a volunteer quits. And no one ever knows why.
- **Relationships** – Few tasks are done entirely alone; at minimum, there’s the person who asked the volunteer to do the task. And even introverts need and want good relationships with people. Any task associated with unpleasant people, or people who abandon you, is going to be avoided. On the other hand, tasks are much more enjoyable when associated with people you want to be with.
- **Significance**—We all need to know that what we are doing matters, that it makes a difference. Why give time and energy to something with no significance? Reminding church volunteers of the significance of their task, how it fits in with the church’s mission, and how it benefits others, touches the core of the volunteer and why they are working. Many people go through life without being told that their contributions are important.

The costs involved in meeting these six needs are measured in time, energy and intention rather than dollars and cents, but they are real costs nevertheless.

Pastors reading this may well be thinking, “Oh, great. On top of everything else, I now need to write job descriptions, train, support and give lots of feel-good time to every volunteer in the church!” Sounds like a sure recipe for burn out, and it is. But does the pastor need to fill these needs for every volunteer? In describing the church as the body of Christ, St. Paul reminds us, “its parts should have equal concern for one another” (I Cor. 12:25b) and “each member belongs to all the others.” (Romans 12:5b) God has created some parts of the body with the special gifts needed to help other volunteers.

All the tasks done in a church are ultimately more about people than tasks. Church tasks boil down to caring for fellow believers and for people not yet in a relationship with Jesus Christ. In addition, every volunteer task is done by a person for whom Christ cared enough to die. “You are not your own; you were bought with a price.” (I Cor. 6:19-20) Jesus Christ paid the supreme price for each of us; our relationship with Him cost Him His life. Our response to that ultimate love involves love of each other, even with its attendant costs, especially as we work together in the church to share that love to people unaware of it.