

Recruiting? Or Equipping? by Karen Kogler

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Volunteers seem to be in short supply in today's church. Most discussions about volunteers focus on recruitment— we need more ushers (Sunday School teachers, board members, and so on). How can we get more volunteers?

Pastors and other church staff wish for more volunteers. Volunteers wish others would volunteer and share the load. Everyone wishes they could clone those golden volunteers, people who serve faithfully, tirelessly, and uncomplainingly.

The Bible clearly teaches that God gives His people gifts to use in His service. The familiar passages in Romans 12 and I Corinthians 12, in which Paul compares the people in the church to the parts of a human body, teach that each part carries out a necessary function. Acts 6 shows us how helpers were selected to distribute food fairly to widows supported by the church. In the Matthew 25 parable of the talents, Jesus indicated an expectation that all would use and develop the Master's gifts.

It's not just a New Testament idea. Moses, in Exodus 18, is advised to share his responsibilities with other qualified people, and in Exodus 31, God names the people to whom he has given the abilities to make articles for the Tabernacle.

If God has gifted each of His people, and wants them to use their gifts in service, what's the problem? Perhaps a key is the attitude of the church toward its volunteers.

Recruiting is looking for someone to fill a need. The focus is the need, the task to be done. Willingness is the primary qualification. Of course we want the volunteer to be able to do the task well, but if the need is great, availability is more important than ability. We don't even mind using a little pressure, or a little guilt, to encourage someone to accept. After all, it's for the Lord. They should be willing to do whatever the Lord wants.

And it works. Someone eventually says yes. But what are the results of our recruitment?

We often end up with round pegs in square holes. Those who are pressured into a position are more likely to be unreliable and to bow out as soon as possible. Some go into hiding, even changing churches, to avoid getting caught in the future. And many of those golden volunteers burn out.

Ephesians 4:11-12 suggests a different attitude on the part of the church toward its volunteers. "It was he (Jesus) who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up." Preparing, or equipping, God's people for service, is a far cry from recruiting.

In a church serious about equipping its people for service, people are reminded that they are the church, that we all have been created by God "to do good works which God prepared in advance

for us to do.” (Ephesians 2:10) An equipping church continually challenges and assists its people to not only discover their gifts, but to wrestle with how God wants them to use those gifts in service, at home, at work, in the church and in the community.

In equipping, the person is more important than the task. Serving is more than getting work done. Serving connects believers to each other and to those who don't yet know Jesus as Savior. Relationships trump tasks.

Equipping doesn't quit when a person has selected a ministry in which to serve, as recruiting does. Equipping continues by providing initial training for the ministry chosen, and then ongoing support. It notices if something is not working well and takes steps to make things right, without waiting for the volunteer to “complain.” It also is willing to speak the truth in love, addressing problems early rather than late.

Equipping includes helping people find new talents and abilities, challenging people when you believe they are capable of more than they know, and walking alongside them through that growing process. It means being proactive when someone leaves a ministry, caring enough to find out why.

Yes, the church will still need to fill openings in the nursery, the lawn crew and so on. But seeking individuals for ministry openings is done more carefully, less frantically, and without guilt or pressure. The church knows that if God wants a task done, he will have sent someone with the ability, the desire and the time to do it, and it knows that “no” may well be the correct response to an invitation to serve.

Take note. Equipping is harder than recruiting. It takes more time, and it does not come naturally to us. It involves building a comprehensive system to prepare people for service, to connect them to a ministry, and to equip and support them in service. Even more important, it involves the continual developing of a church “culture” that supports an equipping ministry.

Pastors, remember that all these things “the church” does for its people are not necessarily done by you. The church, as the body of believers, has the gifts to care for, prepare, connect, equip and support each other. But leadership is crucial to success. Pastors, staff and other leaders must not only “talk the talk” but also “walk the walk.”

But as you see the joy and satisfaction equipped people experience in service, and as their service grows their faith—what an exciting walk that is! ■