

Good Old Volunteers

by Lynda Stein

How to find, bless and keep your church volunteers

The program was the best it had been and could not go any further without adding more to it. They needed more money. The music minister met with the senior pastor and had his growth budget approved then called a "Creative Team" meeting. Night after night the team hashed through scriptures, chopping up dialogue, adding songs striking them until they turned a small very script into a full-length musical extravaganza—complete with animals, flying angels and a live orchestra.

Four weeks into rehearsal the people who had volunteered to build the set decided to take a vacation and the man who had donated the lighting console sold it. The director dropped out to work on another show. Finally the production secretary who knew everything about the production went out on sick-leave.

The music minister was left without enough people to make his program happen. The money has been allotted, the time set aside—it was feeling more and more like he would be managing a local burger joint by the end of the week.

What's a person to do? Welcome to my famous find, bless and more importantly keep a "good old volunteer" system. I say "good old volunteers" because they should be good and old. By "old" I mean the same people helping from year to year—people who want to be a part of your program so badly that they will give up vacations, sick-leave and anything else to be available at your beckon call.

How do we make our programs interesting and enjoyable enough to help people want to come back year after year? What are we doing or not doing to send them away or make them stay? After working with volunteers and being a volunteer for years I have learned what to do and what not to do in order to hear them say at the last performance: "What are we doing next and when is it going to be?" To me that is music to my ears as most church work centers and cycles around volunteers. Let us start with the basics.

Volunteers Are Volunteering

This is the No. 1 rule. People who volunteer are just that *volunteers*. They do not get paid. Some of the best volunteers will give up extra hours at work, do their children's laundry, grocery shop in the middle of the night and go to their jobs with dark circles under their eyes for weeks to get your program off the ground.

After years of working with them I have determined that they sense a "still small voice" calling when they are giving time to a God-given cause. In summation—people are donating time for more reasons than to help us see our vision fulfilled. When I think of this, it helps balance my calling and make the volunteers important.

Winging It Vs. Planning It

This second rule runs a close second to the first. Winging it is doing something without the people or project plan. NASA does not send a rocket in the air without years of research and planning. What would happen if they did? Crash and burn. They build prototypes, do formulas and plan for the worst until they find the best way to make it happen knowing that it may not work. Unless you feel strongly that God is calling you to "wing it," then plan it.

Sometimes time is the hardest element to come by in church work. You feel that you or your volunteers just don't have time to plan, so God will have to carry us. He will sometimes. But what about your volunteers: Is it worth overextending the good people you have, possibly changing their opinion of the church and God as a result of "winging it"? In my experience, people are all right with this for a while but it tends to wear on them after awhile.

Qualified People—Reality

It is also important you know you have enough qualified people to pull your program off. I know this concept may

sound almost obvious and insulting. However, when in the middle of a creative moment, we may not be able to really know or see how much work and skill our good ideas call for.

I have seen this happen: A director wants something and can visually see it in their mind, but can not communicate it. A supportive volunteer tries to make it happen and it takes longer than the time they have to give. The idea gets dropped, money is gone and the volunteer goes away frustrated. Think twice—once to create and once to be realistic about the building of your great idea.

Don't Forget This Is A Church Project

Directors tend to forget sometimes that they are working in a church and not in a theater or public concert hall. I say this in the simplest way I can. Because I know at any time in church work, our reasons for being there at any level can go out the door in a blink. We are there for the sheep, which like sheep will follow us to the good—and sometimes if we are not careful—to the bad.

As we create the activity of “producing a show,” we open the door to bring people to the Lord. I have watched it work—shows are great breeding grounds for salvation opportunities. People come out of the woodwork to be a part of programs and theatrical experiences. This is the best reason I know to stay focused on God first and then our creative goals. Below is just a small selection of the many people whose lives were changed due to leaders paying attention to the calling within the creative work.

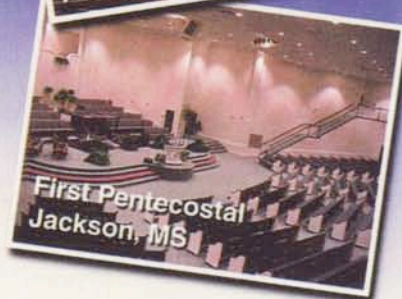
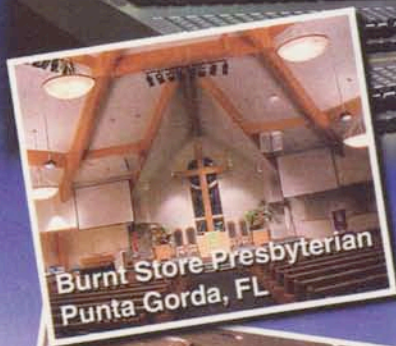
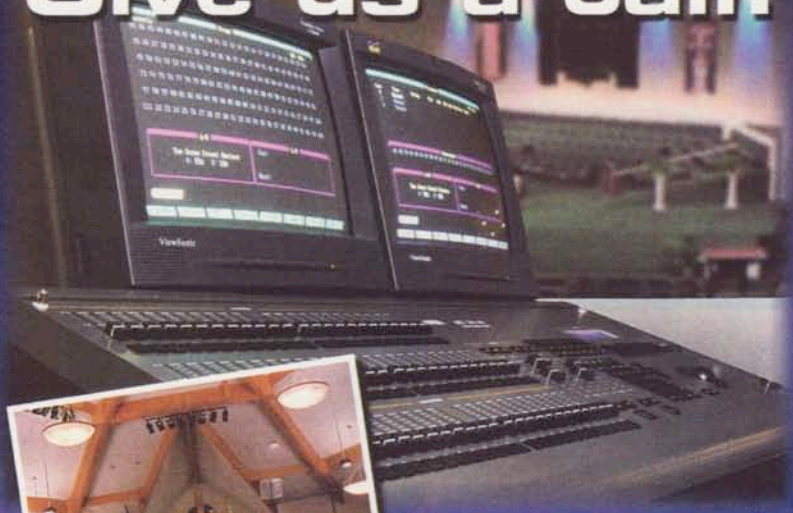
An actor, who struggled with drinking and thought he was doing us a favor by being in our show, accepted the Lord in a storage room before rehearsal one night. A girl gave her life to Christ while asking questions about the meaning of

“Godspell” a secular musical about the life of Christ. Finally, the young adult who was brought to Christ through two of our younger cast members.

Be Prepared

Everybody on the staff and your regular volunteers should be prepared to mentor and/or share the gospel at any time. Our volunteers need us for personal,

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social or spiritual purposes—we need them for production reasons. They look to us to mentor, teach, direct and guide them to a better understanding of the gospel. We look to them to bring expertise and complete the tasks of hanging lights, painting a set, sewing costumes or coordinating our programs. They are there to do a job—we are there to remind them why we are working on the project guiding them to God if necessary. In my first meetings with church staff and/or lead volunteers I usually talk about discipleship and evangelism opportunities that pop up all through the rehearsal and production process. Yes, we are there to produce good theater and/or music programs. But we are also there to guide people to God and not just the ones who come see our presentation.

Volunteers Look To You For Guidance

I can promise, if you don't already know this, 86-89 volunteers will come to you when you are recovering from a late-night production meeting or have had a challenging day at work. Their cars break down, their children will run away from home (I know, extreme), their lights get turned off for no reason. They will run to you looking for guidance when you do not have a minute to think. The pressure is on us to take a deep breath and be there when our sheep are looking to be pointed to God.

Honor, Motivate & Value Volunteers

Yes, their time is donated to the cause of Christ, but they do not have to do any of it. When you think about it, we know we need them, but some of our volunteers are still figuring out whether they need God and us. Of course we can pay to have someone do the work, but we cannot pay to bring him or her to a decision for Christ or to keep him or her in church. That comes through relationship, activity and God. How we treat and value them, what we say about them to their face, another co-worker and behind closed doors makes or breaks the work God can do for them. Love thy neighbor as thyself comes to mind. Not an easy task when a show is close to opening.

Every year the same family donated their farm animals to the Christmas program. The parents would get their children out of school early, rent an extra trailer to haul feed and bring a goat, donkey, pony and sheep to the church. One year, a new director welcomed their presence but really did not care for the animals. Instead of communicating her desire to not use them the director sat in the back of the church and made jokes about the animals and the people donating them. The perceptive and gracious animal keepers went to find out what they could do improve. The director did not have time to speak to them and through other people the animal keepers learned they were cut from the show! Following that experience, they continued to attend church, but not with a heart to give anything more than a tithe.

Leadership Needed

So many church leaders are so free to be openly critical about the people who volunteer. They will make fun of their singing voices, acting skills and artistic abilities. I have seen it, experienced it and overheard church workers mock those that give. Is the church a professional theater? Do we have the right to behave in a manor that does not honor a person's heart and time?

There are ways to gently place someone in a new position if they are not cutting it or graciously lead him or her to better performance skills. Also, remember they are volunteering. If you want professionals, hire them. Talking to your friends about the "rough around the edge" talents of your volunteers is not a way to reach anyone for Christ or encourage anyone to grow in the Lord. We cannot make everyone happy and always say warm fuzzies about them, but we can be gracious, gentle and respectful of people's time, growing talents and efforts.

Extra Grace Required

Some sheep are high on the extra grace required (EGR) list. They can be very difficult. I know I have worked with them. Difficult to be nice to them? Yes! Know that the difficult people are not unintelligent. They may not know they are being difficult. However they can sense when you are not shooting straight with them. They also know they have a choice and don't have to stay and give their time. Value these people even when they make you grind your teeth in the middle of the night. With some patience they may turn out to be your best volunteers and impressive Christian leaders.

High level EGRs—There are those who you may want to leave. They bring the cast down; they steal all the energy from the rehearsals and require way too much grace. They argue, complain, gossip and challenge you. Firm, gracious and gentle are the guiding words I use when dealing with EGRs. These people are your thorn. Remember when handling them, God loves them equal to his love for you and they are usually the sheep that need us most.

Give Volunteers A Break

Some wonderful servants need to be given permission to take a break from their volunteer post. Often the best people will find a place to serve, get overly protective of their area and create an exclusive "Christian Club" or cliché. Honestly this is not a bad thing, just difficult when we want to evangelize or bring in people to help raise the bar on the quality of work being done.

When I first introduced the idea of inviting outside people to broaden our borders, I did not realize how cliquish my support team had become. As much as I assured them of the great jobs they were doing, I felt we were being called to grow and open our doors to the

community. I thought they would be excited but they resisted. I could not believe how they behaved. Over and over I reassured them that they would not lose their positions and be placed as leaders and mentors to the new people, they thought I was trying to replace them. They had become so ingrained in the "Club" aspect of our group they forgot what we were supposed to be doing...reaching the lost. It was a challenge I was not prepared to face.

So to keep the vision in a position to grow, I began to institute a "take a break system," which allowed the regular "good old volunteers" to take a break and our creative team time to experiment with new leaders and ideas without offending anyone. Each volunteer was required to take a break following every second program, which allowed the "good old volunteers" to go on vacation and get some family time. The system stretched our faith as leaders because it forced us to replace key roles seasonally, but it most always blessed us. People came back refreshed and ready to serve.

The pastor was overwhelmed with the loss of so many people. Appeal after appeal was brought before the congregation and finally he realized...he did not have enough people to make it happen. So, he scaled down and produced what he could with what he had. To his surprise, the program was a hit!

At the cast party, he saw the relationships that had been established...and how much the volunteers had enjoyed what they had done. Three families joined the church and 10 had

been saved as the result of this little program. "Of course," he thought. "It was not about a huge show...it was about God." ❖

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