

## Diocese of Ontario

**VOLUNTEER MANAGEMENT****Volunteers Integral to Congregational Life**

The time, energy and talent of volunteers are the backbone of many congregations. Often, the issue of lay ministry arises through the challenge of finding people to serve - on committees to fulfill the congregation's mission, in education and service programs, and in support of worship. The problem is not unique to religious organizations; other nonprofits experience similar recruitment challenges. Indeed, this understanding of lay ministry borrows much from volunteer management in nonprofit organizations.

**New Expectations**

Anyone who works with volunteers knows that the landscape has changed in the past fifteen years. People bring different expectations to their service. They have fewer hours to offer and expect more from the hours they do give. In some cases, performing service is no longer an end in itself (as a duty or responsibility)—people expect to see the results and be appreciated for their effort. They want their contribution to make a difference.

Simply being asked to serve, especially by clergy, used to be enough to motivate volunteers. Now volunteers are recruited, may require special training or are asked to sign contracts, waivers, or commitment certificates. They are most satisfied and best meet organizational needs when responsibilities, roles and tasks are clearly defined. They may require more information (and wooing) than in previous generations. Since the stakes are higher, volunteers may be more reluctant to make firm or long-term commitments.

Often, the volunteer sees himself or herself as a contributing member of the organization. Service is not given to the institution from the outside, but is offered from within by the member. With a stronger sense of ownership in the institution, member volunteers may expect more from their experience.

**New Ways of Doing Things**

Many nonprofits have developed sophisticated volunteer programs, often hiring mid- to senior-level employees with primary responsibility for managing volunteers. Software programs and free online materials geared to nonprofits are easing the complications and improving the effectiveness of these programs. Even congregations lacking the resources to hire managers have access to this expertise.

The positive side of these changes is that today's volunteers are willing to share the responsibility for creating and maintaining programs instead of simply filling open slots. Well managed, these volunteers are less likely to tire of their work, can be encouraged to work autonomously and can augment paid staff positions in significant ways. The sense of ownership volunteers feel in their work can lead to a deep commitment. Well managed, this commitment can be a valuable asset.

**Saying Thank You**

In some cases, the traditional practice of recognizing and thanking people has changed to reflect the stronger sense of ownership people have for their service. Especially in settings such as smaller

congregations where gifts of time or talent are an expected responsibility of membership, appreciation is not a thank-you per se, but rather of a celebration of the community.

### **A Management or Christ-centered Mind-set?**

Some lay ministry experts distinguish between the volunteer-management mindset and the Christ-centered mind-set. The volunteer mindset is fixed on church needs and finding the people to fill them, often without consideration of individual gifts or talents. The Christ-centered mind-set begins with skills and passions and encourages each person to serve "when God has equipped him or her to do so," be it in the church or not. A Christ-centered church trusts that there are people with skills and passions to meet the needs of the congregation. Supporting these people honors gift-based ministry and fulfills the Great Commission.

### **Implications for Congregational Leaders**

Volunteers want to use their gifts serving in rewarding ministry. Their energy can invigorate clergy and staff. Volunteer management takes time, but it is time well invested if expectations are thought through and clearly articulated. Our culture has influenced volunteer service, essentially "professionalizing" it for better or for worse. There is a possibility that over-managing volunteers can leave them feeling alienated, especially if new systems or expectations are introduced. For some, too much management makes church feel less like church.

Burnout is a common complaint among both clergy and volunteers. Good practices such as clearly defining roles and procedures, recruiting for a specific project, fostering open lines of communication and ongoing evaluation of your volunteer ministries can help. Well-defined lengths of service are also important as leadership renewal can stimulate new initiatives and fresh perspectives. Apprentice programs and special leadership training workshops can acquaint volunteers with congregational norms and bring them up to speed quickly. Finally, Church leadership can be sensitive to family and civic realities - not only the big cultural issues but the everyday things as well like starting and ending meetings on time. In addition, offering a variety of volunteer opportunities with varying timelines will address generational differences in volunteering and help to engage more volunteers in the life of the Church.

### **Where do we go from here?**

The first step is for congregational leadership to make Effective Volunteer Management a key priority in its long-range plan. From there, assistance and one-on-one support in evaluating and nurturing your congregation's volunteer program can be obtained through the Diocesan Centre. For any and all concerns relevant to the stewardship of time and talent in your congregation, please contact Doug Cowley, Chair of the Stewardship & Congregational Development Committee at [dcowley@ontario.anglican.ca](mailto:dcowley@ontario.anglican.ca).