

Six insights for leading lay volunteers

January 2, 2014 - Thom Rainer – Church Central

One of the greatest blessings in churches today and throughout history is the number of men and women who gladly (often sacrificially) give of their time and energy to do ministry. Indeed, churches across the world would not function as they do without the giving spirit of lay volunteers. Paid staff members alone are not sufficient to do all the work of ministry in any church.



Simultaneously, one of the greatest challenges for church leaders is the recruiting and retention of these volunteers. Yet I have had several conversations with church leaders who have seen significant successes and blessings with the mobilization of laity in their churches. I am particularly grateful for the insights given to me by Jess Rainer of Grace Church in Hendersonville, Tenn., and Eric Geiger, who recently served at Christ Fellowship in Miami.

These two men and several other church leaders shared similar stories about their challenges and victories in lay mobilization. In this post, I share with you six insights I gleaned from several leaders who have been successful in recruiting and retaining lay volunteers.

The necessary elements

1. Training is critical. In one of our recent studies, almost all the pastors surveyed affirmed the importance of training lay volunteers. Sadly, the same study showed that only about one-fourth of those pastors had any strategy for training volunteers. Training creates ownership that results in motivated and giving volunteers. In November LifeWay Christian Resources launched **Ministry Grid**, an online training tool that is especially useful for bivocational pastors.

2. Affirmation should be ongoing. Most lay volunteers don't get involved in church ministries for the attention or the affirmation. But when leaders affirm their work, it communicates to the volunteers that their efforts in ministry is important. People want to know they are involved in something that makes a difference. Affirmation gives them that very message.

3. The relationship between the laity and paid church staff should always be a partnership. Church leaders should continuously communicate that all work of ministry is a co-laborship. There is no organizational hierarchy where the laity submits to the church staff. One group does ministry as a calling and vocation. The other group does ministry as a calling and unpaid service. Both are vital in the life of the church.

4. The form of communication with laity is critical. As much as possible, vocational church leaders should spend face-to-face time with lay volunteers. They should learn how those volunteers like to communicate. For some, a text message is fine. For others, they want to hear a live voice. But all of them need some personal interaction with the paid church leaders.

5. Start lay volunteers with bite-size responsibilities. Don't overwhelm them with a task or ministry that appears daunting. See how they respond to smaller, well-defined tasks at first. From that point, leaders can discern if the volunteers can take on more ministry responsibilities.

6. Communicate with clarity and specificity. Many lay volunteers quit out of frustration because they think their assignments are neither clear nor specific. Don't assume volunteers have the same level of insights or knowledge as those whose daily work and responsibility is at the local church. It is better to over-explain and to be redundant than to assume the volunteer has significant prior knowledge about the ministry assignment.

!