

## VOLUNTEERS IN THE CHURCH – HOW SHOULD THEY BE TREATED?

Countless thousands of dollars and person-hour savings notwithstanding, formal churches are able to keep their doors open, utilities operating, and programs executed primarily because of the vast contributions of *volunteers*; i.e. non-paid persons. Volunteers, for example, teach and/or serve as leaders and officers in Sunday school classes and/or other Bible courses; tend to babies and other children during church services; serve on various standing and ad hoc committees; serve as greeters and ushers; serve as coaches and officials in recreational activities; serve as lay leaders in specific ministry arenas; serve in youth-related activities as chaperones; carry food trays to and from tables and/or help serve food during scheduled meals; *et al.*

Perplexing for volunteers – and challenging for the church - are the different ways they may be regarded and treated by church salaried staff (hereinafter referred to as *staff*). When individuals voluntarily commit to a job to be performed within the church, they are entitled to no less respect and dignity than is staff. What might be some of the specific things, then, to which volunteers are entitled? Following are five inarguably important **examples**: (Note: *The examples are not by any means exhaustive*):

- **Respect** in accordance with the dignity to which each of God's children is entitled; e.g. (see Galatians 5:22-23):
  - Being told the truth - always
  - Being listened to - passionately
  - Receiving the upmost in courtesy
  - Being recognized for their commitment and contributions
- Timely, relevant, and complete **communications** from staff; e.g.
  - Receiving acknowledgement re: e-mail, phone messages, and/or written communications as **promptly** as possible
  - Receiving feedback and other communications that are **clearly relevant** to inquiries and other messages directed to an individual staff member
  - Receiving information concerning changes in church protocol, programming, new directions, *et al* as close in time as practicable to decisions that have been made
- **Advocacy** from staff – both upward and downward in the church's formal hierarchy - on behalf of the role, responsibilities, and objectives for which an individual has volunteered; e.g.
  - Assuring that the church's formal leadership, including the top level of the church hierarchy, remains clearly aware of and understands where and how volunteers are functioning, particularly in those instances where volunteers have committed to major roles and responsibilities.
  - Courteously explaining to volunteers in a timely manner why a specific request for assistance –whatever it might be – cannot or will not be granted

- Demonstrating spiritual courage by “going to bat” for a volunteer when the volunteer has made a recommendation or issued a request for something that may in one or more ways deviate from original expectations, and for which the managing staff member may privately concur, but for some inexplicable reason refrains from proper advocacy
- Occasional **base-touching** from staff members with volunteers responsible for the role and responsibilities for which to which they have committed; e.g.
  - “How are things going?; or Might I assist you in any way?; or Do you have any current needs in order to do what needs to be done?; etc” are simple questions that at least demonstrate a staff member has some modicum of interest in what the volunteer is doing
  - Waiting until a “wheel starts squeaking” is clearly not in the best interest of the wheel or the vehicle which depends on its desired function
- **Assurance that all volunteers fully and clearly understand** the nature and expectations of the role and responsibilities to which they have committed; e.g.
  - Staff members should make diligent efforts to assure that volunteers completely understand not only all of the *what’s*, *why’s*, and *when’s* of the role they are being asked to perform, but also should provide coherent explanations about *how* what it is they are expected to do “fits” with and contributes to the other parts (a.k.a. *systems view*) of the church organization.
  - Staff members should also determine whether individual volunteers need to be trained for the role to which they have committed and then strive to assure that relevant and beneficial training is provided.

One of the most damaging things that can and often does occur pertinent to staff-to-volunteer relationships is when a volunteer develops the perception that she/he is being **taken for granted**. This very thing ordinarily happens when the five preceding *examples* are not adequately managed by church staff. When a volunteer, who has accepted and committed to a critical church role, develops the feeling that she/he is regarded in a lesser light than staff, being taken for granted is a belief that naturally follows. Unfortunately, being taken for granted may be construed by some as a demonstration of less than sincere interest or concern on the part of staff.

Just as the individual parts of any system must function in harmony in order for the system to be effective, any church, as an organized system, must strive to assure that its separate departments, positions, and daily work all consistently work in harmony toward fulfilling the mission, or purpose of the organization. Dispirited volunteers will find it difficult at best to contribute to the overall desired harmonious function of the *church-as-system*. It is of vital importance that church staff understand and fulfill the critical role for which they are responsible in contributing to the effective maintenance of relationships, roles, and responsibilities among staff and volunteers. Great organizations are built and maintained by individuals skilled in relationship building, as

well as in systems building and maintenance. Plainly and simply stated, church staff who fail to recognize this indisputable fact cannot contribute in significant ways to the health (general well-being) of the organization. Accordingly, many staff and congregants never quite understand why the organization doesn't grow or in other ways falls short of achieving as many may aspire.

Of central importance to every church organization is either a conscious or unconscious decision on the part of leadership and management to direct the organization in an *upward* or a *downward* motion. Whether by leadership ignorance or general default, organizations easily can fall into *downward spirals*, and downward spirals are quite difficult to slow down, halt and reverse. Stopping a downward motion requires much dedication, energy, and strategic effort on the parts of everyone in the church organization. Leading a church into an *upward spiral* and continuing that motion is far more difficult than negligently leading one into a *downward spiral* (see illustration below), and requires firm, long-term commitment from staff and volunteers.

(↓) Downward spiral	→	<b>Easy</b> to fall into	→	<b>Difficult</b> to reverse
Upward spiral (↑)	→	<b>Difficult</b> to develop	→	<b>Easy</b> to fall from

Volunteers are irrefutably important to the upward spiral success of the church. It would seem to make sense, therefore, that church leadership would strive to assure the development and maintenance of a strong sense of *community* (mutual trust, shared ownership of decisions, respect, etc.) among staff and volunteers. To not do so essentially makes the decision to move the organization downward an indefensible direction in the eyes of most staff, volunteers, and congregants.

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