

Essay Title: Successful Recruiting

Audio Essay Series: Disc 1, Track 6

Author: Don Skinner

Date of Release: June 23, 2005

DOES ANY CONGREGATION EVER HAVE ENOUGH VOLUNTEERS? Most of us struggle to find enough. It can be one of the most frustrating parts of being a lay leader. But there are ways to make finding and keeping volunteers less of a problem.

Start by asking them the right way. Face to face. I know, I know, the easy way is to just run a newsletter announcement seeking volunteers. But have you noticed that not many people actually respond to that method? People respond better in person. If you ask in person you can explain to them why they'd be good at the job and how it benefits the congregation—and benefits them. But before you ask, be prepared with a written job description, including the amount of time involved.

It matters how you ask. Encourage a prospective volunteer to look upon the job as ministry, rather than just a job to be done. Says the Rev. Mark Gallagher of Michael Servetus UU Fellowship, Vancouver, Wash., “Instead of trying to get people to do all the things that need to be done, get in the frame of mind that what we're here for is to minister to and serve each other. People need to be invited into ministries of leadership and service.”

Don't dictate to a volunteer how the job should be done, but do inform the volunteer as to how it was done previously. Allow room for them to do the job their way. And make sure they understand how the job will affect other members.

If possible arrange for volunteers to work with other people rather than alone. That will help them meet new people and become more connected to the life of the church. And they'll have more fun.

Can't find a volunteer for a job? Ask yourself if you really need to do it. Or hire someone to do it. Former District Executive Roger Comstock advises, “If you're having trouble filling the job it is likely because the job has become too big. Figure out a way to break it up into smaller pieces.”

Cultivate cochairs for committees. Always have a committee chair in training. Also, provide money in the budget to send people to leadership school and to General Assembly and district events. More than one church member has begun to volunteer after becoming inspired at General Assembly or a district event.

Take volunteers seriously. When John Blevins was chair of the nominating committee at All Souls UU Church, Kansas City, Missouri, he initiated the practice of interviewing candidates. “We kept it congenial,” he says, “But it was very effective in helping candidates take the job more seriously and we actually got to know people better, rather than just finding a person who was willing to say yes. I felt it also raised the level of appreciation for the job in the eyes of the congregation, just by their being aware that interviews were being done.”

Continued

Start Early. Don't wait til you HAVE to have someone tomorrow. Plant the seed then come back again and again to cultivate it. And keep a file of those folks who say "Not this year." Ask them again in two or three years. If someone says no, find out if it's the position, other people, or a lack of comfort with the role. Sometimes training is available at the church or at a nonprofit in the area. Says Margaret Sanders, former UUA trustee from Florida, "I once sent a church member to a nominating committee training seminar at the Voluntary Action Center and then she agreed, with enthusiasm, to chair our nominating committee."

Start small. Ask someone to usher, perhaps, or do a short, one-time job rather than start out as Membership Chair. If there's someone they're close friends with, ask both of them to do it together.

Respect volunteers' time. Start and end meetings on time. Make sure every meeting is necessary and well planned. When you give a volunteer a task make sure they have the resources they need or know where to find them and can find their way through the church bureaucracy. And don't walk away and leave them to flounder. Keep in touch and make sure they're finding their way. Be prepared to rescue them if the need rescuing. In that case, give them something smaller to do.

It's also very important to thank volunteers. Thank them in person. Thank them with little note cards. Thank them on Sunday morning. Thank them in the newsletter. At one congregation all volunteers are called forward on a spring Sunday and, as a list of achievements is read off, they are handed paper flowers to pin on a bulletin board, creating a floral tribute to individual and collective beauty. At another, volunteers get "Good Egg" awards (hard boiled and colored) on Easter Sunday.

One congregation has a Volunteer Support Committee. It coordinates volunteer recruitment and makes sure volunteers get noticed and thanked. Other congregations have individual volunteer coordinators, people who help match friends and members with available jobs.

The time to plant the seed of volunteerism is when people join the church. Impress on them that they will be expected to do something for the church and that by helping they will be engaging in a ministry that will deepen their connection with the congregation. Do not wait too long before asking them to do something. They will expect to be asked and if they are not, they may think the congregation doesn't need them. And the congregation DOES need them. Volunteers make everything else possible.

This Audio Essay series was created by the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, for the purpose of supporting its valued lay leaders. Copying and sharing these essay texts, downloadable audio files, and the companion LayLeader Drive Time Essays compact disc is welcomed and encouraged. • Comments or suggestions? We welcome your ideas about this Audio Essay series and your lay leader questions. Please send them to Don Skinner, the editor of InterConnections, a resource for lay leaders. Email: dskinner@uua.org