

Essay Title: Need More Volunteers?

Audio Essay: Disc 2 track 3

Does any congregation ever have enough volunteers? Most of us struggle with that. 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. Sure, the easy way is to just run a newsletter announcement seeking volunteers, but 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 them. But before you ask, be prepared with a written job description, including the amount of time involved.

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 co-chairs 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 in 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.”

Start early. Don’t wait until 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, a 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.”

It’s also important to thank volunteers in as many ways as possible — in person, on Sunday morning, in the newsletter, with personal notes, etc.

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 in Vancouver, Washington, “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.”

For more information and resources, go to: *uua.org* and click on *Leaders*

Resources

Go to: *uua.org/leaders/leaders’ library* and do a keyword search for “volunteers” for more articles on volunteerism.

The UUA bookstore, *uua.org/bookstore*, has several titles about volunteering.

Also useful is an essay titled, “Giving the Ministry Away,” by the Rev. Barbara Wells in the book *Salted with Fire: Unitarian Universalist Strategies for Sharing Faith and Growing Congregations*, edited by the Rev. Scott Alexander.

Another useful book is *All Are Chosen: Stories of Lay Ministry and Leadership*, edited by Margaret Beard and Roger Comstock.

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