

# Staffing the Large Congregation

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For many years there has been a debate among church consultants about just how many staff members churches need. To be fair, estimating how many is like shooting at a moving target. Additionally, the needs of larger congregations are obviously different from those of smaller ones. Moreover, society has changed so much that it has proven difficult to come up with a formula that withstands the test of time. Add to this our tendency to romanticize volunteering and we soon find that staffing is a complex matter.

In the past, churches – including many large ones – relied on a cadre of dedicated volunteers to meet their staffing needs. But congregations of all sizes are finding it difficult to recruit, train and manage the number of volunteers needed to do all that is required. I often hear people wax nostalgically about the good old days when there was a volunteer for every job and a job for every volunteer. While my reading of dusty old newsletters and annual reports tells me that things were never *really* that good, it would be fair to say that the volunteer pool has been shrinking – and that it continues to do so for most churches. While it may be tempting to blame people for this decline by somehow attributing it to a lack of volunteer spirit (or worse), doing so is neither fair nor profitable. The simple fact is that lifestyle changes have reduced the time available for volunteering. And Unitarian Universalists have been affected by these changes more than most other faith movements!

As churches grow larger, their staffing needs grow larger and more complex. Not only must large churches deal with the shrinking volunteer pool, they also face increased expectations for service by both members and the larger community. Individual positions may grow so large that it is no longer reasonable to ask a volunteer to fill them, nor may it be practical or possible to break a position up into “volunteer-sized” pieces. Even when church programs do rely heavily on volunteer staffing, such as in the case of religious education, the task of coordinating and training calls for a paid professional. There is a greater need for specialization among staff, along with the training and skills that specialization demands. Each of these factors, in addition to others, point to the need for increased staffing levels in most large congregations.

In his book *Staff Your Church for Growth*, Gary McIntosh observes that churches follow one of three policies for staffing, whether or not they are even aware of it. The most common strategy among churches is to staff for *decline*. The next most likely approach taken by churches is to staff for *maintenance* (in other words, to remain on a plateau in size). There are comparatively few churches that intentionally staff for *growth*.

Encouraging churches to be intentional about their staffing strategies, McIntosh offers a simple staffing formula. If a church is staffing for maintenance, it needs the equivalent of one full-time program professional (minister, religious educator, membership coordinator, and so on) for every 150 active participants (measured by average weekly attendance, including adults and children), assisted by one full-time support staff person for the first program professional and one half-time support staff person for each additional professional. (This staff complement does not include custodial staff, since the caretaking needs are largely determined by the size of the facility rather than the size of the congregation. Nor does this staff complement include those employees who are staffing a “subsidiary” of the congregation, such as a daycare center or social service agency.) If a church wishes to staff for growth, the basic program and support staff formula remains the same but the ratio shifts to one program professional for every 100 active participants.

When adding staff, McIntosh encourages churches to strive for balance. For instance, the gifts and talents of an associate minister should ideally complement those of the senior minister. It is also important to strike a balance between *maintenance* positions, which serve the needs of current members, and *growth* positions, which expand the congregation’s ministry. Yet another need is to balance relationally motivated staff with task-oriented staff.

The staffing needs of a church are not met simply by complying with a formula, however sound. Staff must be *empowered* with the authority necessary to accomplish the goals developed for their positions. This can be a growing edge for some Unitarian Universalists. It can be especially challenging when staff assume tasks and responsibilities that formerly fell to committees.

Staff members also function best within an environment where the lines of authority are clear. The ideal staff is one that functions as a team, where goals are shared, communications are clear, and working relationships are collaborative. But all good teams have leaders and in a large church the team leader is the senior minister, or co-ministers as the case may be.

Interestingly enough, churches that are well staffed usually find that their volunteer pool increases! We can speculate that this is because the quality of the volunteer experience improves when there is adequate staff to coordinate and support the work of volunteers.

However we may feel about the increased reliance on paid staff in our churches, there can be little doubt that the quality of congregational life is enhanced by an adequate, balanced, well-trained, fairly compensated and strongly motivated church staff.

