

Volunteers II

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How does the church look after the volunteers that offer themselves? My first response would be – not very well. Too many church volunteers feel underappreciated, over worked and burnt out. So what practical steps should we take?

1. Monitor the workload. Each person has a different amount of time that they can volunteer for church activities, so there is no simple answer for how much any one person can take on. But some struggle to say ‘no’ and take on too much – and that leads to burnout. It is equally true that doing too little can also cause people to dropout of church life – finding small tasks for busy people can encourage engagement. Keep an eye on everyone in the church and ensure that they are comfortable with the level of time they volunteer.
2. Give away control. A recipe for disaster is to give people a task to do and then not allow them to do it in their way. As a church we need to provide our volunteers with the resources they need and then allow them to do the task. Too many people have experienced doing something at church only to have someone come up behind them and “fix it.”
3. Ensure there is a reward. People want to see results from their efforts and reward is not about money or praise. Acknowledging effort (not necessarily every time) and bringing attention to the outcomes are important to motivate volunteers. A comment on a flower arrangement, a thank you for a reading, appreciation for help – they all affirm the volunteer and encourage them in the task.
4. Be fair. A feeling of injustice eats away at a volunteer and erodes their sense of value in what they offer. Many of us will have worked hard on a project and found the thanks going to others. A few will have been criticised for what they did when it wasn’t their fault. Often we don’t realise that we are being unfair – but the church is littered with stories of people who have left feeling that they have been unfairly treated.
5. Build community. A volunteer works best with other volunteers. There is something about giving time together that encourages and uplifts people. Sharing together in a task provides support and encouragement.

Volunteers are the heart of a church community – to keep them beating we need to look after them. But they are us – we need to look after ourselves as well and make sure that our workload is manageable, that we have the resources for the task and the ability to do it. We need to find how our efforts make a difference and speak up when we sense injustice. And we need to rejoice in the building of God’s community within our church.

Blessings to you in that task.