

From Stressed to Blessed, A Conversation for Recomposing Volunteer Service in the Congregation

by Larry Peers

“You should have seen the one that got away!”
“I got a big one—quite a catch!”

Each of these comments was followed by brief peals of laughter as a small group jokingly talked about the process of recruiting members for volunteer leadership positions in a congregation. The fishing metaphor seemed to sink into even deeper foolishness as we related stories of luring members successfully into a committee or other responsibilities within a congregation.

When Jesus charged his followers to be fishers of men” he most likely had something different in mind than the valiant attempts that are made year after year in many congregations to “catch” some new volunteer for a vestry or board position, a critical committee, or some other role in the life and work of the congregation.

Although we could speak lightheartedly on that Sunday about the task of recruiting volunteers, we also knew the solemn truth about some of the uneven and deceptive attempts within and across congregations to not only recruit volunteers but to also engage members in meaningful service, such as misrepresenting the duties or the time commitment that would be required, providing no training or support, mismatching the person with the position, or passing a position to someone as if it were a hot potato.

In her book *Sharing the Ministry: A Practical Guide for Transforming Volunteers into Ministers*, Jean Morris Trumbauer elaborates on some of the worst dynamics observable in congregations when there is a drive to fill positions in manipulative ways. Her designation for this pattern is the “Church of Twisted Arms.”

Trumbauer poses a holistic view of a “shared ministry system” within congregations that requires careful attention to all that happens before and after the actual recruiting of a person for a volunteer position. When I have heard Trumbauer present on this topic to audiences of congregation members, she often has to manage the unrealistic expectation that there is some quick-and-dirty way to transform one’s approach to successful volunteer ministries. No magic solution exists. Instead, she offers eleven interconnected processes for reorienting a congregation toward a “shared ministry system”: discovering gifts, designing positions, recruiting, interviewing potential volunteers, matching individuals with clearly defined positions, training, supervising, supporting, evaluating, managing data, and planning. For most congregations the higher-leverage processes are clearly defining the position, discovering gifts, and matching people with the tasks or positions that will naturally fit their gifts and inclinations and that can

lead to a success for the congregation. The aim of this attention to the whole shared ministry system is to foster a “community of gifted persons who minister both within and outside the faith community.”

From Stressed to Blessed

Before focusing solely on processes and techniques, it is important to achieve some clarity about what we ideally want our members to experience from their ministry or service within or outside the congregation. In consultations I have facilitated with congregations on this theme, we have imagined what it would be like to move from being stressed to being blessed in one’s volunteer service. Sometimes it takes a lighthearted yet honest appraisal of what we know doesn’t work before we can even begin to articulate what a fulfilling experience would entail.

In a dominant culture in which many people feel stressed by the competing and growing demands upon their lives at work and home, congregations need to approach volunteer ministries with care. A congregation does not add any significant value to the lives of its members if it replicates patterns of deception, burnout, overwhelming expectations, and demands they are already experiencing elsewhere.

Oftentimes members truly seek to give back to their faith community or to live out their faith through meaningful volunteer service within the church or the community. Yet we often don’t provide an opportunity to hear this deeper yearning even in ourselves.

Jesus offered this admonition: “Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone?” (Matt. 7:9). We need to begin our conversation by understanding that exploring creative and new approaches for engaging members into volunteer service is not just for the sake of the congregation alone. It is for the sake of the weary and hungry souls who turn to our sanctuaries and meetinghouses for some solace, renewal, and grace—for “bread,” not a “stone.” Thomas Moore, in his most recent book, *A Life at Work*, offers this perspective on the significance of this task for religious communities and the individuals who gather there:

Doing work that has no soul is the great hidden malady of our time. Clearly, it would be worth our while as individuals and as a society to address unhappiness at work and discover the deep roots of our discontent...Pay attention to your deep and complex inner life, become more sensitive about your relationships, consider your past thoughtfully, and use your imagination at its full power.

If, indeed, for many in our pews “doing work that has no soul” is the great malady, then the poignant task of our religious communities is to help others connect with their own unique call and purpose in ways that can serve their lives as well as their congregation. This is a broader religious task than just “filling slots” in a volunteer roster.

A Rummage Sale

Phyllis Tickle, in *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why*, points out that the church has a “rummage sale” every five hundred years or so as it clears its attic and soul of forms of thinking and doing that no longer serve its emerging destiny. The rumblings about our congregational volunteer systems are a complex dynamic between deeper soul issues for

individuals and collective soul issues for the church at large. Indeed, it is time for a rummage sale on many of those practices that diminish our ability to engage members into meaningful service.

We stand at the threshold, recognizing that what has gone before will necessarily require not just doing some things differently but also being different. What we need at this juncture is not to just find new methods for luring volunteers into the work of the congregation but to ask new questions about the whole enterprise that will lead us to renewed commitments and practices. As Peter Block advises in his book, *The Answer to How is Yes*:

When we look for tools and techniques, which are part of the How question, we preempt other kinds of learning. In a sense if we want to know what really works, we must carefully decide which are the right questions for this moment. Picking the right question is the beginning of action on what matters. And this is what works...Good questions work on us, we don't work on them. They are not a project to be completed but a doorway opening onto a greater depth of understanding, action that will take us into being more fully alive.

What we do not need are merely surface changes, such as the valiant attempts in some churches to edify volunteer positions by giving them more esteemed names—such as “ministries”—but keep-ing everything else essentially the same.

The shifts in the culture around congregations continue to have an impact on the dynamic tensions within congregations. Anthony B. Robinson, in *Transforming Congregational Culture*, talks about these shifts as a move from having a civic faith where people served out of obligation, to human transformation, in which people seek personal meaningful experiences from assuming that someone was raised within the congregation and thus “has the goods,” to being intentional about delivering the goods to the modern seeker from being givers in money and volunteer time, to becoming receivers who can eventually give back from a place of gratefulness of having known the impact of being served by others from reinforcing a culture of boards and committees, to becoming part of a culture of providing ministry and service to others from being just another organization in the society, to being explicit about the unique role that one's faith-based identity has to offer.

The gist of this understanding is that some of the customs that congregations developed during a time when going to church was an expression of civic responsibility have passed. What drives those who seek religious community in our time is a desire for human transformation and meaningful service.

Our bylaws, our committee structures, our practices are all artifacts of a time that has gone by. At one level we know this. But at the same time the tyranny of the familiar limits our capacities to fully engage our imaginations and our efforts into the wholesale reimagining of what volunteer service can mean in a new era. We need to ask ourselves some new questions and be willing to inquire into what's possible.

Considerations for Something New

The fact that challenging economic times are causing some congregations to shrink their paid staff and positions means that there may be a new demand among congregations to explore this

field of volunteer engagement more forthrightly and intentionally than ever before.

As we redesign what volunteer service might become, we also have to reimagine at a deeper level the aims and purpose of this necessary aspect of congregational life. In my consulting work with congregations, I use a three-phase process of narrative planning to assist congregations in doing this deep work:

- reviewing what is
- revising what could be
- recomposing what's next

What is offered here is a way for you to begin this conversation within your own congregation.

Reviewing What Is

To begin, take an honest and informed look at what is currently happening within the congregation's volunteer service practices and the different arenas in which service occurs. Ask:

- What is being accomplished through the current volunteer ministries of the congregation?
- What stories can we tell about the actual impact of our service on the lives of those who are served and those who serve?
- What are the actions, practices, and patterns that support these accomplishments?
- What are the actions, practices, and patterns that inhibit our bringing forward the best experiences through our volunteer service?

Beyond this overall view, it is often helpful to go deeper into this inquiry by asking about the actual experiences of your members. I have often used an appreciative inquiry approach that has included such questions as:

- Tell of a time when this congregation brought out talents or gifts in you, maybe even talents that you never knew you had. What actually happened? What did individuals or the congregation as a whole do to make that experience possible? What attitudes or qualities were present that made your experience possible?
- Tell me about a time when you felt that the church was really there for you and/or when you were served by this church, its members, its programs, or the ministry of the congregation. Who was involved? What happened? What about this experience helped you feel served or ministered to from the experience?
- Tell of a time when you feel your service (no matter how "small" or "big") was an expression of your own faith or moved you to go beyond yourself—where indeed you experienced that "service is our prayer." What happened to bring this forth in you?

This reviewing phase of the process allows a telling of the story of "what is" in a way that can allow you to get a big-picture view of how you are currently living out your volunteer service in the congregation. An appreciative inquiry approach allows you to recognize what you do when you are doing this well and gives you some signals as to what are the best experiences you can strengthen and build upon.

Revising What Can Be

One could approach the volunteer systems as a problem to be solved or as a possibility to bring forth. While not wanting to ignore problems or challenges, it is best to know first what you do well and how to build upon that. Once you are clear about where you want to be headed, the problems worth attending to are those that are obstacles to your moving toward your agreed-upon directions.

In the revising phase of the conversation, you are considering some possibilities for your future ways to engage members in volunteer service. This is a phase that occurs prior to making an actual commitment to a specific plan. You might think of this as an exploration of different scenarios that you want to consider in your imagination, research, and ponder before you make the specific commitments for moving forward in a different way. In revising, you would ask questions such as:

- What would happen in our congregation if we were to do more of what we know we do when we are at our best in engaging people in volunteer service? What possibilities might we begin to see emerge?
- What few things could we do differently in how we approach volunteer services that would make the most difference for us as a congregation?
- What are some of the possible ways that we could intentionally link the life of faith and the life of service within our congregation?
- What are the barriers to full-hearted participation in the service of our congregation that could be removed to bring forth some remarkable experiences for members of our congregation and those we aim to serve?
- What cherished assumptions about engagement in volunteer service in this congregation inhibit our capacities and limit our possibilities of being a congregation that is rich with opportunities for service and empowerment? If we suspended those assumptions, what might we discover becomes possible?

This conversation about possibilities can serve to stretch the imagination beyond solving problems to creating environments that will foster opportunities for meaningful engagement. It naturally leads to some experiments or provisional practices to try as a congregation.

Recomposing What's Next

Once these possibilities are explored, a congregation may get clearer about what commitments it has for a transformed system for engaging members in volunteer service. In the recomposing phase of the conversation, you move toward what you will do differently as you move forward. This is an ongoing process of learning and recalibrating one's actions from what is learned. Utilizing the structural tension between "what is" and "what can be" can help you develop or "recompose" what's next by asking these questions systematically:

- What is our clarified purpose and luring vision of engaging people in the volunteer service of this congregation (from the revising phase conversations)?
- Where are we currently? What strengths do we want to build upon, what obstacles do we want to overcome (from the reviewing phase conversations)?

- What actions do we take from where we are to where we want to be—so that continuous learning can occur, so that the results of our actions can consistently guide us to make necessary course corrections, and so that we might be guided by our purpose and be the results we desire along the way?

As we become clear about our aims (#1), we can recognize when our actions are causing us to oscillate rather than advance toward our purposes for a renewed volunteer system and practices in the congregation.

Stories Unfolding

As I observe congregations moving through this process of reviewing, revising, and recomposing their volunteer service practices, there is an energy that is released that brings the conversation to a different place than do the usual problem-solving approaches, which can often be immobilizing or misleading.

One congregation recognized that its revitalization required it to be less inwardly focused and more focused on living out a renewed connection to its surrounding community. It has redefined some of its volunteer roles in order to create connections with the community. The results have included partnerships with other community organizations, hosting forums for the community, and creating a welcome center that makes connections with visitors more intentional. The congregation's renewed sense of purpose has given meaning and direction to its volunteer roles. These are not positions to "fill" but ways of feeling fulfilled by intentionally serving the congregation's renewed sense of purpose.

Another congregation began to review each of its committees as part of extending its current success in small group ministries in the congregation. Each committee or task force incorporated practices that included a religious focus, an opportunity for personal sharing and reflection, and an understanding of how that committee's tasks furthered the faith life or mission of the congregation. Their "work" was part of living out their faith.

Another congregation recognized that it excluded younger families through its existing system of committees. It then intentionally created a variety of places for people to be involved, including task forces, one-time projects, short-term projects, "virtual" or online meetings, ongoing committees, and a series of task groups that reported as a council periodically to coordinate efforts.

Moving from How to Yes

Each congregation will make its own transition toward revitalized volunteer service practices. The beginning of that process is not to seize on a particular tool or technique but to ask the right questions and begin the journey toward what's next. Again, as Peter Block advises in his book, *The Answer to How Is Yes*:

Picking the right question is the beginning of action on what matters. And this is what works... Good questions work on us, we don't work on them. They are not a project to be completed but a doorway opening onto a greater depth of understanding, action that will take us into being more fully alive.

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