



# Recruiting and Training Volunteers

## How do we recruit volunteers?

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First, let's talk about how *not* to recruit volunteers. Do not go begging: "We need someone to teach junior highs, and I've tried everyone I can think of. Won't you please help us out?"

The natural, and correct, response to that kind of approach is, "Sorry. If I'm the bottom of the barrel, you don't want me, anyway. I think I'll just stay with my adult class." And do not make an announcement in worship: "Fall Sunday school starts next week, and we still need a teacher for the senior highs. If you'd be willing to help, please see me after worship." That is a bad approach for at least two reasons. First, it carries a message to the senior highs that they are not important and that anyone can teach them. Second, you have to take whoever volunteers, and the people who volunteer will inevitably be the last people in the world you would want to have teaching your senior highs. Do not focus only on young adults. Some of them will make excellent youth leaders, but some of them will be people who want to relive their own youth, to be one of the youth. (See Question 52 for more about attributes of a good adult leader.) Do not tell them that working with youth is easy and will not take any time to prepare. Remember, to care means to prepare. Be honest about what you are asking volunteers to do and how much time and energy you are expecting them to contribute.

So, how do you recruit volunteers? It is an ongoing process, but let's take a one-year approach. Start early. If you need new teachers for September, start recruiting in February or March. Begin with prayer, asking for God's guidance as you seek to engage people in ministry with youth. Then make a list of the people you believe would be the best possible prospects for teaching (see Questions 52–63). Go to each of these people and talk about what you want him or her to do and why. One approach I have found successful is to say, "What I'm about to ask may be the most important thing God is calling you to do in the next year." This identifies the recruitment process as part of living out our discipleship in response to God's call. Lay out the big picture, telling what your plan is for Christian education with youth. Give the person a copy of the plan to study. Show the person where you think he or she would best fit in with the plan. Be specific about what you would expect in terms of time, energy, and enthusiasm. Be clear that resources are available. I once recruited a teacher and found out two weeks later that she thought she was going to have to write her own resources. Be clear that you expect him or her to use the resources the church provides and not to just go off on his or her own whenever an idea strikes. Talk to volunteers about the training opportunities that are available for them (this may mean you'll have to create some training sessions) and what kind of ongoing support is available.

Remember that many adults are reluctant to commit to working with youth because they are not sure of their own skills and knowledge. Do not tell them this does not matter, for they know it does. Talk to prospective adult leaders about the gifts and graces you see that they have for working with youth. You may know that they have a gift for teaching. Or, they may have the kind of personality that you know will resonate with youth. They may have important knowledge in areas that are crucial to your game plan for the next couple years. (Graduates of DISCIPLE Bible study, for example, probably know more about the Bible than do most other adults in the church.) Assure prospective leaders that there are specific opportunities for them to learn those skills/knowledge about which they are concerned. Be sure you can follow up on that assurance with specific training events.

All that takes time and energy on your part, time you might think you could better spend actually doing ministry with youth. Recruiting and training strong lay leadership *is* doing ministry.



## What are some different ways to recruit and train volunteers?

Let's assume that this question is different from the previous one and means something like, "Are there some new and/or unusual ways of recruiting and training volunteers?" We will divide the answer into two parts: one dealing with recruitment, the other with training.

1. What if, as a key element in your recruiting program, you noticed which adults in the congregation make a point of talking to youth? Those people would be prime candidates to recruit for youth leaders/Sunday school teachers. You may even want to ask the youth who they would suggest as potential youth leaders. Another possibility is to recruit parents. Several youth ministers with large confirmation classes use the parents of the confirmands as small-group leaders, support people, presenters, and so forth. Many of those parents then volunteer to stay with the youth in that class as teachers through their junior and senior high school years. The models we have seen are in large churches, but the basic idea could work in almost any size church.
2. Another possibility is to encourage your congregation to develop a series of courses on spiritual gifts, in which each participant takes a spiritual gifts inventory and the results are entered into the church's database. Check out which people show teaching as a spiritual gift. (In fact, this could be a gift you could give to the congregation: Advocate that every person in the congregation, over the next three years, take a spiritual gifts inventory and be involved in a small-group discussion about what their gifts mean. This could be a great resource for the entire church.) Use training as a recruiting tool. Invite people you think would be good youth leaders to take part in a workshop for training leaders. Many people say no to being a youth leader because they do not know what to do or how to work with youth. Once they have the opportunity to explore some basic skills, they may be more open to stepping up as leaders themselves. And do not forget older adults. Many of us think we have to have younger adults, who will identify with the youth. You definitely need some younger adults, who have more energy; but you also need some older adults with more experience and wisdom as a balance. Someone who is sixty may not want to hang out all night at a lock-in, but he or she can offer a great deal of experience in other settings. An old joke says that the

best leaders for junior highs are people their grandparents' age, because they have a common enemy. Actually, studies in generational theory have shown there is a solid sociological basis for that old joke (see Question 96), so take advantage of it.

Now, what about training? First, you need to have all your youth leaders—old and new—involved in Safe Sanctuaries training (see Question 97). Safe Sanctuaries policies and procedures are about protecting both youth and adults from abuse and/or accusations of abuse. Your annual conference may have people or resources that can help you develop policies for your church. More and more churches are requiring all adults who work with children and youth to have this kind of training before they can serve in any volunteer or paid position with children and youth.

Second, you need training in skills for working with youth. Adults want to know how to talk with youth, how to deal with discipline problems, how to get skills in teaching and leading, and so forth.

Third, you need training in content. Many adults are reluctant to work with youth because they do not know enough about the Bible themselves. Provide regular opportunities for adult workers to study specific content. One way to do this might be to have monthly or quarterly training sessions that would focus on the specific content to be taught the next month or quarter. This would allow adults to explore the biblical and theological content of upcoming sessions and gain some confidence in their ability to teach that content to youth. (See Question 69 for more detailed models.)



### **How do we find and train leaders youth will accept?**

This calls for a counter-question: What are the dynamics behind wanting leaders youth will accept? Does it mean youth will accept only certain personality types? or age levels? or levels of skill? Do youth have hidden criteria that determines whether or not adults will be accepted? Questions such as those will lead you down a dangerous path, where you allow youth's acceptance (real or imagined) to dictate who you ask to serve as leaders. That does not mean youth should not have some voice in decisions about their leaders, but they should never have veto power.

Here is the good news: The quality youth want most in adults who work with them is love for youth. If they are loved, they will accept a lot of inadequate training and knowledge. As a youth, I had a youth

fellowship leader who had none of the skills and gifts that we often look for today. She did not have a lot of charisma, did not have great speaking skills, did not have a deep fund of knowledge about the faith (although she knew more than we thought she did at the time). What she did have was a depth of love for us and faith in us that helped us be better than we were. She supported us as we searched for answers to questions. She made sure we had logistical support to attend district and conference youth events and to get to camp in the summer. She helped us raise funds for mission projects, and she taught us to pray. By almost any criteria of initial youth acceptance, she would not be on most of our rosters of youth leaders. Yet, she was one of the most effective youth leaders I have ever known.

So, what kind of teacher/counselor will youth accept? As we said in Question 52, you need to consider some characteristics of good counselors/teachers as you recruit leaders. Because those characteristics are so important, they are repeated here.

Good counselors

- Are comfortable being adults.
- Love youth.
- Have a growing faith in God through Jesus Christ.
- Are willing to commit time and energy to youth ministry.
- Are flexible and have tolerance for ambiguity.



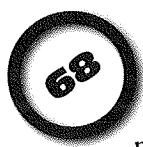
### **How do we keep leaders? After a year, they say, "I've had my turn."**

Part of the answer is the distinction between recruiting leaders and filling slots. If you simply fill slots so that an adult is in every position, you will probably have to fill most of those slots again next year. If you recruit leaders who love youth and are willing to make commitments to care and to prepare (see Question 86), you will have a better retention rate. Both take time. One approach takes time every year; the other takes more time in the beginning but less time in the second and third years.

Obviously, job transfers, increased job responsibilities, and other factors outside your control are going to affect your retention rate. I try to keep a pool of leaders who have had Safe Sanctuaries training and some training in basic skills so that I have trained people to fall back on if a leader is suddenly transferred. It might also be useful to have twice as many trained leaders as you need so that they can rotate out every couple

years. Most adults, even those who love working with youth, also need time to learn with other adults. This is particularly true for youth Sunday school teachers. If you can tell them they have a year's sabbatical after every two years they teach, they may be more willing to make longer-term commitments.

Honest appreciation is also a simple way to keep leaders. One congregation that was faced with the problem of finding new teachers for youth Sunday school every year solved the problem by having a teacher appreciation banquet every year. Youth and their parents hosted the dinner (a potluck so that no one was stuck in the kitchen cleaning up) and invited the teachers and their families as special guests. Teachers were given corsages or boutonnieres and were seated at a head table, while youth were assigned to keep water glasses and coffee cups filled. The pastor and Christian education director gave speeches of appreciation, naming specific contributions each teacher had made. Youth also gave public thanks for what the teachers had done. Finally, each teacher was given a plaque engraved with his or her name and a special thanks for being a teacher. That church had an amazing rate of retention. Another congregation gave each adult worker with youth a canvas tote bag for carrying supplies. The bag said "You're Special—You Help Our Youth." This helped the congregation become more aware of who was working with youth so that they could thank the volunteers.



### **How do we get volunteers to make serious commitments long-term?**

A key part of that commitment is recruiting the right people in the first place (see Questions 65 and 66). Another part is being sure volunteers get the support they need. Support includes training, resources, a sense of knowing where they fit into the big picture of Christian education with youth, and appreciation for their efforts. When you recruit, ask them for a minimum of two years' service.



### **What about models for training? What should volunteers know?**

Taking the second part of the question first, volunteers should know

- Safe Sanctuaries policies and procedures;
- Basic communication skills with youth;
- A variety of teaching methods;

- Something about the ways youth learn;
- How what they are doing fits into the big picture of Christian education with youth;
- Basic knowledge of biblical and theological concepts;
- How to find the answers to questions youth ask.

How do you train busy people in all those skills and areas of knowledge? They will give up before they ever get started. Well, sure, they will give up if the approach is as blunt as what is listed above. However, you are more subtle than that, so you will not tell them all that before you start. Simply assure volunteers that they will get training in what they need to know and will have support in future crises. Consider the following models as possibilities for your program.

### **1. Safe Sanctuaries Policies and Procedures**

Safe Sanctuaries policies and procedures are about protecting youth so that the church, either on-site or off-site, is a safe place for them to be. It is also about protecting adults who work with youth. Recent public revelations about sexual abuse in both Protestant and Catholic churches remind us that we all need to be more vigilant about protecting our youth—and ourselves. Creating Safe Sanctuaries involves both policy and procedure for ministries with children and youth. Policy is the structure in which the issues are spelled out. It answers the questions about who, what, and why. Procedures spell out how your church implements the policy. It answers the questions about when, where, and how. Workers with youth should be trained in both policies and procedures. Many annual conferences have training materials that you can use in your local church. These materials include information on state laws, how to be aware of signs of abuse, and sometimes even first aid.

### **2. An Introductory Retreat**

Schedule a weekend retreat late in the summer every year for your teachers and fellowship group leaders, both veterans and rookies. If possible, plan the retreat for a Friday overnight and all day Saturday, at a site away from the church and distractions. Arrange for childcare where it is needed. Recruit a team of youth parents or other adults to take care of meals, snacks, and other logistical issues so that the teachers can focus full time on learning. Set aside Friday evening for building community and laying the foundations for the retreat. This time could include inviting teachers and leaders to raise issues and questions that concern them. If their issues will be dealt with during the retreat, tell them to expect that. If

not, tell them they will be dealt with during the coming year. Also on Friday night, lay out the big picture of Christian education with youth in your church. This could include distributing copies of your master plan.

On Saturday, have a series of ninety-minute sessions that include Bible study, introduction to the resources for the next quarter and how to use them, teaching/learning methods, support systems in your church, and other topics that fit your situation. Include time for rest and reflection as well as for work.

### **3. Monthly or Quarterly Updates**

In this model, you can do two things. First, teaching teams can take some time to go over the material they will be teaching in the next month or quarter, noting what biblical and theological background material they might still need, what teaching methods they are not familiar with and could use a little coaching on, and so forth. (Actually, it would be ideal to do this every month, but time pressures probably will dictate quarterly meetings.) Second, plan to spend some time, as a part of each meeting, giving your leaders some training on such topics as multiple intelligences, the Millennial Generation, a new teaching skill, or other area of concern. Include a time for dealing with specific questions and concerns raised by the teachers and leaders themselves.

### **4. Bible Study**

Many teachers still feel inadequate when it comes to teaching the Bible to youth. (This will be true even of DISCIPLE Bible study graduates.) From time to time, invite youth teachers and leaders to a special Bible study session. This is not an ongoing weekly study, although it could be if the teachers request it. Rather, it is an occasional study that has the following characteristics:

- It involves an extended period of time (two or more hours).
- It focuses on a biblical theme, such as covenant, grace, or salvation.
- It has some depth of study and learning.
- It may involve the pastor or other skilled Bible teacher from the congregation.
- It may or may not be related to biblical themes coming up in youth studies.
- It is not a how-to session but one designed to enrich the teacher's own faith.