

The Definitive Guide to
FINDING,
TRAINING,
and **KEEPING**
Church Volunteers

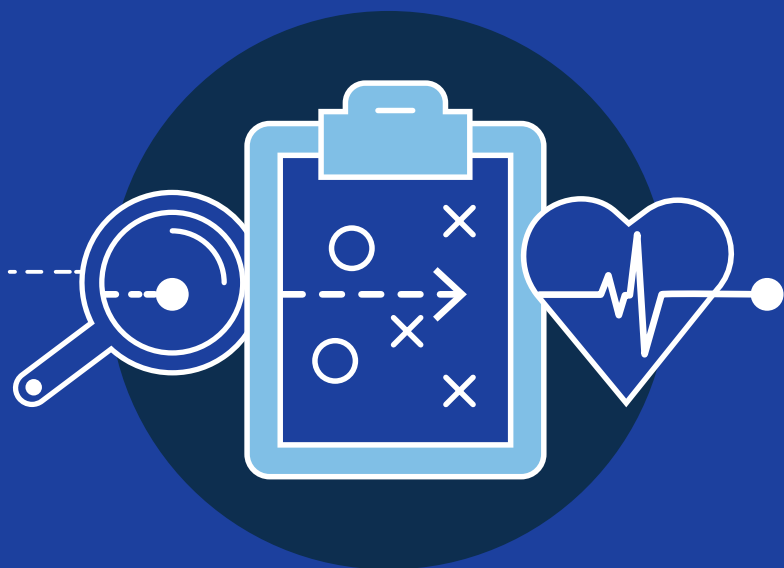


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7 Hidden Factors in Creating a Healthy, Sustainable Volunteer Culture

No matter what day of the week you're reading this, there's one thing I know for sure: Sunday is never more than 6 days away. That's another service to plan, another sermon to write, another worship set to choose... The list goes on. Church leaders know how many hours go into making a Sunday service happen, and the cycle never stops running. It's a lot.

Over the course of the week, a lot is going to happen at your church: The facilities team might clean up, youth group might play capture the flag, your worship band might rehearse (hopefully).

Or maybe your church, like so many, meets at a location where you load in and out every weekend—which means all of those other activities are happening at other places. It's just a microcosm of the number of unseen hours that go into making a few hours on Sunday a reality.

But no matter what happens this week, no matter where your church meets this Sunday, no matter what kind of service you hold, there's one thing that's true of all of them: **They wouldn't happen without volunteers.**

It's not overstating it to say that volunteers are the lifeblood of most churches. They give your staff and your pastor a reach that wouldn't be possible otherwise, increasing the hours that can be invested and the people that can be reached. And more than just representing the function of how your church does ministry, volunteers represent part of the core of your ministry itself—the people so dedicated and bought in that they'll give their most precious resource, one they can never get back or earn more of: Time.

Most of the people who serve at a church also give to their church.

(90%+)

Yet how much has been researched and written about church volunteers? Where do they come from? Why do they serve? Even more, almost every church we talk to always feels like they're a few (or more) volunteers short.

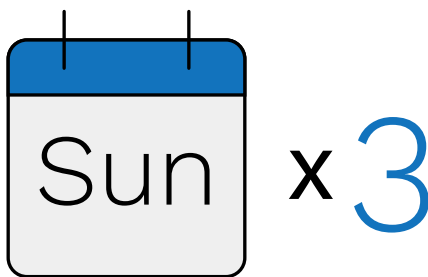
We wanted to discover why some people decide to give one of their most precious resources away, for free: The time they can never get back. So we decided to ask them. 1,200 of them to be exact.

Some of the information was about what we expected: Most of the people who serve at a church also give to their church (90%+). 80% of that same group are in small groups. And 95%+ said they attend church at least three times a month.

But of the 1,200+ volunteers and 500+ pastors/staff we talked to, we started seeing some patterns. Patterns in what was working for churches with healthy volunteer cultures and things that were missing for churches

that were struggling. Patterns of what healthy, sustainable service looked like. But also patterns of a gap—a gap between how volunteers view, approach, and plan for service and what pastors and church staff think of the same topics.

In the end, we distilled that research into seven key findings—the hidden factors that make the difference between a volunteer culture that works and one that doesn't.



Hidden Factor #1: The Motivation Disconnect

Imagine scrolling through a list of job postings in your area, and coming across one for “church volunteer.” What would the listing look like? “Wanted: Church volunteer, 20 hours a week, on the job training iffy, salary nonexistent.” It’s hard to imagine that listing getting a ton of resumes.

Taken objectively against “regular” jobs, volunteering—at your church or at any nonprofit—doesn’t make a ton of sense. So the first question we wanted to ask church volunteers and church leaders was simply: Why do you volunteer?

We started by asking volunteers to choose the main reason they serve:



The main reason volunteers chose was:

It helps me grow in my relationship with Christ, though every answer was popular at some level (with one particularly excited volunteer writing in “all of the above!” in the ‘other’ section). The

overwhelming theme from volunteers was that their primary motivation for serving was related to personal spiritual growth.

What is the main reason that you serve/volunteer?

It helps me grow in my relationship with Christ
31.39% (360)

I was invited to by pastor, or staff, person, or other
8.89% (102)

For fellowship and connection with others
5.32% (61)

Other (please specify)
15.43% (177)

I love my church
11.68% (134)

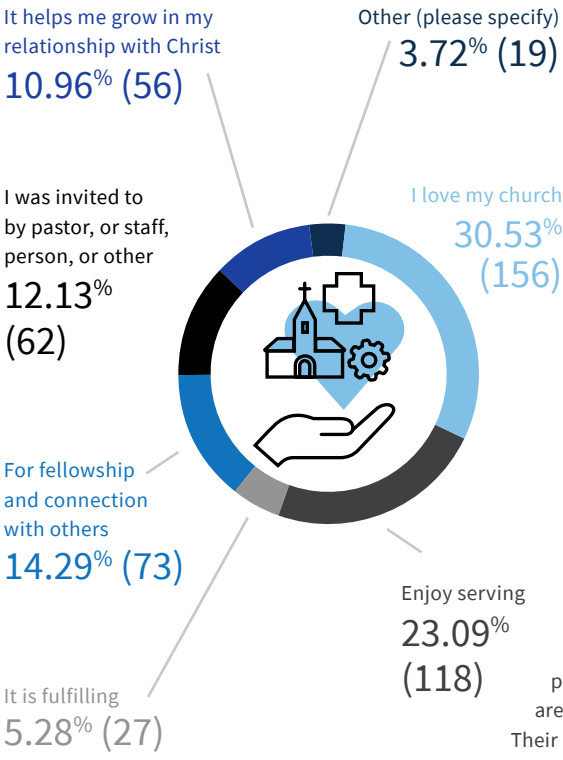
Enjoy serving
22.06% (253)

It is fulfilling
5.23% (60)



What is the main reason people volunteer or serve in the church?

Where the results started getting more interesting was when we asked church leaders the same question—why do you think people volunteer at your church?



When asked why they thought congregants volunteered, 30% of church leaders believed it was out of a love for their church. Only 11.68% of volunteers chose this as their prime motivation for serving.

But we know that volunteers serve out of a spiritual motivation. In fact, 31.39% said they volunteered “to grow in their relationship with Christ.” But only 10.96% of church leaders believed this was a major motivator for their volunteers. It’s not surprising that 13% of church leaders reported never teaching on service or spiritual gifts, even though volunteers are hungry to receive insight on the primary reason they serve.

The hidden key here is that the view of volunteers about the purpose and reasons for serving are highly spiritually motivated.

Their focus is on their personal growth and the ability for others to grow because of their service. The service itself and the commitment to church is secondary.

The report revealed that many pastors/staff have a poor understanding of why their community members volunteer. And without that insight, these churches may be missing a huge opportunity to identify, recruit, and train their more spiritually-motivated volunteer army.

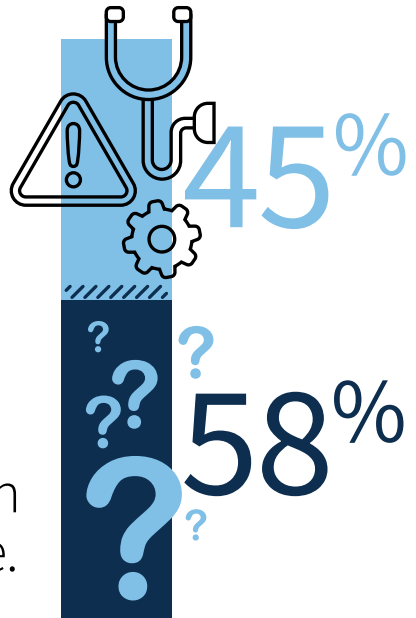
Hidden Factor #2: Training and Recognition

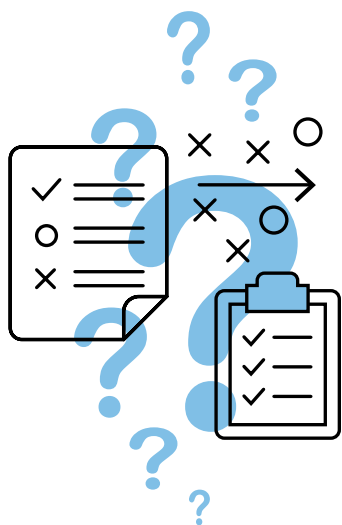
If you're like most church leaders we've talked to, then you probably have a to-do list of people to see, things to fix, and items to plan that you know you can't accomplish. There just aren't enough days in the week to get it all done all the time, which puts church leaders in the constant position of having to decide what's most important before burnout takes over.

So if your church hasn't always put together the best training for your volunteers, you're not alone. In fact, you're in the majority. Here's what we learned:

45% of pastors report that they do not offer orientation/training for volunteers.

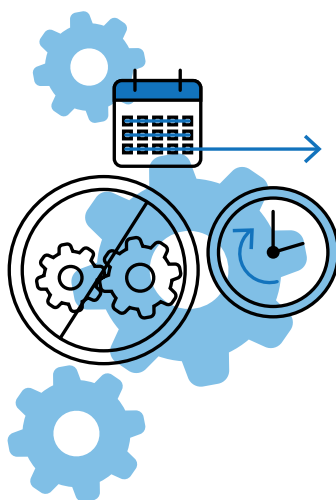
58% of volunteers said they had no orientation or training for their role.





56% of pastors say they don't provide job descriptions to their volunteers. This number is confirmed by **volunteers, 59%** of whom say they don't have one for their volunteer role.

52% of pastors say there is no time frame given to volunteers for their role. A starting time or date is given, but not a term of service. **Volunteers confirm this as 50%** do not understand the term of service. A corollary finding is that volunteers indicate that serving too long is a leading cause of burnout.



24% of pastors/staff say they don't do anything to show appreciation to volunteers and **22% of volunteers report** experiencing nothing specific done to show gratitude.



The churches that are doing volunteer appreciation are getting creative as indicated in the number of write-in answers describing what they do.

Here are two examples:

We love to honor those who serve so every Thursday we pick someone serving and do a #shoutoutthursday on our social media accounts that talks about a specific person and the team(s) they serve on. We have that person answer questions about why they serve and we post that as well. It's just another way we want to honor people.

Leaders and volunteers intentionally celebrate each other whenever we see someone "go pro" (essentially, take their role past doing a task and go the extra mile to meet someone where they are).

The research shows some clear issues a majority of churches can immediately address to help develop a healthy and positive volunteer culture. Most people would not accept a job where there wasn't job description, no orientation or training, and no clear start and end date. There's a great opportunity here for many churches to better steward their volunteers by setting clearly defined expectations around their role and time frame.

Hidden Factor #3: Love Volunteering? You're Not Alone

The volunteers we surveyed indicated that 55% currently serve in some way outside the church. 72% of those responding that they do serve outside the church view it as important as their work in the church, and there are even 6% that see it as MORE important.

**79% of the
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79% of the volunteers responding to the survey had been engaged in church life and ministry for 20+ years. The trend to move outside the church for service is not just about those newer to the church continuing their outside service. This includes people who have been involved in church a long time moving out to serve in the midst of the community.

Interestingly, the data shows that pastors are not threatened by this, but are encouraged by it. 80% of pastors reported encouraging their members to volunteer outside the church. This is a remarkable display of generosity considering how important to the bottom line functioning volunteers are to a church (see key result 5). Not

only are pastors encouraging the posture and activity of service in the community, but of those who say they do, 78% say it is as important as the work in the church, and 5% even categorize it as more important. These numbers mirror volunteer responses.

It is significant that the pastors/staff taking the survey and the volunteers taking the survey are a random and diverse national sample. The data indicates that the hours that may be used within the church are now being distributed toward the community—whether to schools, sports leagues, non-profits or other public benefit groups.

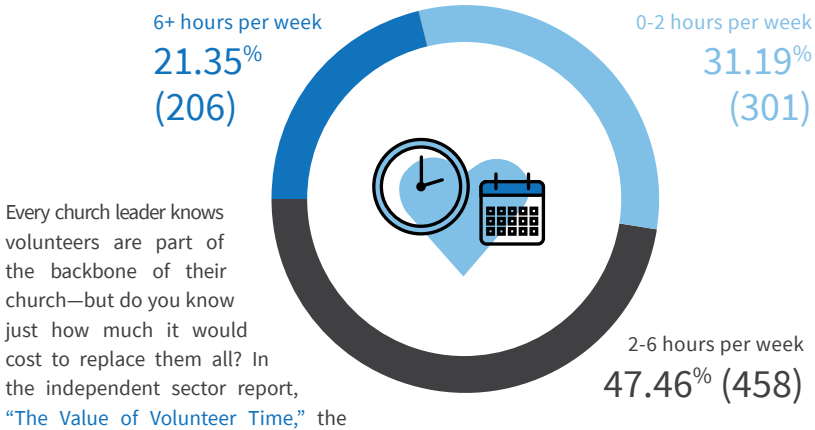
It's always good to remember that generosity isn't a zero sum game: Said otherwise, the more people are generous, the more likely they are to be more generous. Most people don't sit down and say "I'm going to volunteer 4 hours a week, where should I invest those hours?" Rather, they think "I can help with that, does the timing work?"

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Hidden Factor #4: The Real Value of Church Volunteers

78% of the volunteer respondents indicated that they are serving weekly. The remainder are in volunteer roles that require service less frequently, but regularly. Of those who indicated that they serve weekly, the breakdown of hours served looks like this:

If yes, how many hours a week do you serve?



2019 rate for volunteer time is gauged at \$25.43 an hour. This valuation assumes all volunteer jobs are the same, even though someone may be doing the books pro bono (high hourly value), while someone else is cleaning the restrooms (low hourly value).

Using this calculator and applying the percentages from the research for a 200-person church, would mean that 32 people are serving 6 or more hours a week. Assuming 48 weeks of service by this group in a year, this group would serve 9,216 hours valued at \$234,362. Granted, 32 people being this highly engaged in church volunteerism would reflect a healthy volunteer culture, but it shows the bottom line value of having a highly functional church.

Hidden Factor #5: Burnout

53% of the volunteers indicated that they have experienced or are experiencing burnout. Why? By far the answer that caught people's attention for "why" was that they are spread too thin. There were, though, a great variety of answers including 24% who wrote in their own answer, sometimes in painful detail. Here are a few examples:

“

My ideas & suggestions are discounted and dismissed (no matter how well researched or presented) as “not at this time.”

”

“

Combination of several: Too thin, no appreciation, lack of change. Also, there are too few these days that see serving Christ in his church as a priority. They take but don't give.

”

“

I'm a little tired of hearing “We appreciate you.” It's exhausting like small talk but it almost feels desperate like they're scared I'll quit if they don't constantly remind me how much I'm appreciated. I'd be more likely to quit to get away from that phrase. Tell me specifically what I'm doing right or wrong or what you want changed.

”

There were also those who indicated that they had not burnt out or become discouraged. They shared stories and emphasized that their focus was not on the service, but the God who they are serving. What are the reasons for non-burnout? Respondents were very balanced in their feedback that included...

- **I feel appreciated**
- **I feel fulfilled**
- **I enjoy who I am serving with**
- **I experience good support from pastors and staff**

Volunteers are in a unique position: Most have full-time jobs, households to care for, hobbies they enjoy. The absence of payment for their service and the spiritual call to help with their local ministry means they place more emphasis on intrinsic motivators.

Leaders that don't prioritize volunteers' need to be invested into spiritually, thanked personally, and don't give them a voice in the way their work is done unknowingly weaken their service culture.

By including some of these insights in what has helped prevent burn out, pastors/leaders can help their people stay in sustainable rhythms of service. It gets back into the importance of recognizing service and volunteers in meaningful ways that don't come across as trite or redundant, and better focusing on the spiritual growth that comes as a result of service.

Regardless of your volunteers' level of burnout, the good news is there's plenty that leaders can do to remove common barriers to service and develop a healthier working environment. We'll explore those solutions in later sections.

Hidden Factor #6: The Barriers to Healthy Volunteer Culture

There are some real barriers for pastors/staff to overcome in order to see healthy volunteer engagement and retention. These barriers are both internal and external to church life. In answering a “check all that apply” question on why staff/leaders believe people don’t volunteer, the top answers were:

- I am too busy outside church (77.5%)
- The staff do the work (41%)
- Not interested (41%)

For those not volunteering, the answers differed:

- 22% - too busy outside of the church
- 18% - no clear job/role for me
- 16% - don’t know which ministry to serve in
- 14% - I don’t feel like serving at this time

Both the perception of pastors/staff and the reported reality of volunteers is that the pace of life and culture is the biggest barrier to overcome. This is an external issue impacting volunteering in the local church. Pastors and staff will have to look hard at how they are going to grapple with the “fast pace” and both teach and model a biblical lifestyle of priorities and rhythms that will be life giving to the people of the church. A simple step churches can take is to provide time frames for what people would say yes to in their volunteer role.

Too busy outside church?

77.5%
Perceived

22%
Actual

There are those obstacles, though, that are very real to the volunteers that church leadership can immediately address:

- **Making the volunteer needs known**
- **Providing job descriptions that are accessible to potential volunteers**
- **Allowing volunteers to see the ministries they might serve in**
- **Making known what staff members do in their jobs and what is needed by the whole of the church**

With people having to evaluate where they choose to spend their time, the importance of removing barriers and creating a compelling and positive experience for people only increases. By taking the initiative and work to get this set up, pastors/staff will help lead people onto a higher level of engagement in their journey of faith.

Hidden Factor #7: The Five Keys to Healthy Volunteer Culture

13% of the pastor/staff respondents indicated that their churches were doing great and had no significant volunteer needs or issues. While a small number overall, it was encouraging to see that some churches had found ways to create a culture and environment that encourages volunteer success.

So what is the “secret sauce” for the churches that are doing great and have plenty of volunteers? In follow up questions to these churches experiencing success, five practices stood out.

1. Flexibility: Successful churches are creating many options for service, including the types of role, as well as time frames in which to serve. They allow volunteers to rotate jobs to test out where they might be called to serve more long term.

“

We also rotate people quite a bit. There is a beginning to their volunteer time and also a definite time they can either continue to serve or opt out. “Easy on Easy off” is what we call it.

—Gary W., The Assembly

“

We also try to find people places to minister where they feel valued and gifted rather than trying to push round pegs into square holes.”

—Rex G., Imprint Church

“

I try to match skills and gifts with a particular job. BUT, I also encourage folks to try something out of their comfort zone.

—Susie F., Heritage Presbyterian

2. Pipelines: Churches with a healthy volunteer culture have specific ways for people to enter the process of volunteering. They offer orientations and training. This contrasts with the 45% of pastors/staff who reported not having any training available to their volunteers.

“

We're still in the early stages of doing this well but we are building out a pipeline where leadership development is intentionally happening at every level and not dependent on staff. We're building a culture where leaders intentionally develop leaders.

—Matt T., Crosspoint Church

”

3. Specificity: Churches doing well with volunteers get focused on the person and the task. These pastors/staff make a specific ask to particular persons for a job. Part of this is providing teaching on spiritual gifts and calling and having those who have identified them experience placement in a role where they can thrive.

“

Again, it's not a matter of beginning with a project, but beginning with our people and their unique gifts and interests, always asking: 'How might God use me, just as I am?'

—Rhoda P., St. Ansgar United Methodist Church

”

“

Personally ask people to serve. People respond to being specifically asked. Mass calls for volunteers aren't generally effective.

—Matt T., Crosspoint Church

”

4. Modeling: The pastors/staff of churches that are successful with volunteers are intentional about teaching that as Christ came to serve, so have we. This is a key ingredient that is understood by most of those who took the whole survey—81% shared that they serve in the church outside of their vocational duties as a pastor or staff.

“

We follow a servant-leadership model for all staff and volunteers. (We seek to model the example we see in Jesus.) When something needs to be done, we all jump in to help. No job is too menial for any of us though we have definite responsibilities to facilitate smooth operation. People notice our example and jump right in along with us when a task needs to be done. We call all our pastors by their first names, avoiding titles or anything that would tend to create “professional distance” or separation.”

—Sonny B., Life Foursquare Church

5. Recruiting in Teams: A focus on the recruitment and training of entire teams is a fifth mark of churches with a flourishing volunteer experience. In other words, they focus on the belonging aspect of serving and not just the doing. It is not just what is happening, but who I am doing it with that is being addressed. People want to do things together with others of like heart and gifting.

“

We recruit in teams or to teams. Thus, we assure people will not be ‘alone’ in any role. We try to have the volunteers be part of a TEAM...and they do life together. They know their ROLE in the vision for that department or job.”

—Doug T., Redwood
Chapel Community Church



More Time Might Not Be The Answer

No matter what the state of volunteerism is in your church, we hope there was at least one thing you took away from this research that will help increase the reach of your ministry.

We know that one of the reasons volunteers are so important to your church is because at the end of the day, you only have so much time and energy to invest into your church. And if you're like most church staff we talk to, you don't have enough time or energy to get everything done that you could get done. They're the boots on the ground always getting things done and helping achieve ministry goals.

Churches with a low volunteer base feel the very real need for additional help. And if that describes your ministry, you're now armed with the insights you need to make the right changes to improve your volunteer culture.

While your church needs committed hands, feet, and minds to help with Kingdom work, you also need partner organizations that help move the needle on your ministry goals. One of those organizations is Pushpay.

We founded Pushpay to give pastors and church staff another meaningful point of connection with the people in their congregations. It's not just about getting the work done to hold weekend services, manage ministries, and care for the community. It's about growing a connected body of believers and building connections between churches and the communities they serve.

That's why we designed a world-class giving and engagement platform to nurture people toward a deeper sense of belonging in their church, encourage healthier generosity, and reduce administrative workload.

Through partnering with over 7,500 churches nationwide, we understand the importance of working side-by-side with individual ministries and supporting their mission with reliable tech and customer support.

Ready to find out how we can support your ministry goals? [Talk to an expert today.](#)



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