Motivating Volunteers in Your Church: A Twelve-Point Checklist
by Bill Allison

#1 - The Spiritual Gift Factor

Do volunteers in your church really understand THEIR SPIRITUAL GIFTS?

If you are going to foster an ethos of service, you must start by helping people understand and discover how God has wired them spiritually. Although a general understanding of spiritual gifts is essential, the core issue is helping volunteers understand THEIR spiritual giftedness and how THEIR giftedness fits into YOUR ministry.

God has given each person in the body of Christ at least one primary spiritual function/gift (1 Peter 4:10-11). Teachers should primarily teach. Leaders should primarily lead. Helpers should primarily help. Administrators should primarily administrate. You get the idea.

Many of us know from painful personal experience that it is no fun to serve where you are not gifted! I'd rather eat nails than crunch the numbers of the church's financial books—though I bet that information would be fairly interesting! :)

Sure, we’re all responsible to teach, lead, evangelize, help, administrate, etc. on some level. However, when we’re using our primary gifting to serve God—we tend to be motivated because our God-designed giftedness is being used for His Kingdom! When we’re not plugging our primary gift into our means of service—then we’re not so motivated.

So, do those who serve in your volunteer cadre understand their spiritual gifts and how God has wired them up? Are they using those primary gifts in their service in your ministry?

(Editor's note: An excellent resource for helping your members discover their spiritual gifts is CLASS 301, available from Pastors.com.)

#2 - The Passion Factor

Are volunteers serving in an area in which they have a God-given PASSION?

It's possible to be passionate about something that you're not gifted to do, but more often a person's God-given giftedness goes hand-in-hand with his/her passion—and vice versa. Show me a person who's serving in an area in which he/she is not gifted AND passionate—and I'll show you a high maintenance volunteer. You, as a leader, will constantly have to pump these folks up because they are not serving in an area in which they're passionate!

Are the volunteers in your church high maintenance or are they serving where their passion is?

#3 - The Clarity Factor

Do volunteers KNOW EXACTLY WHAT YOU WANT from them?

As leaders of volunteers, we make an awful lot of assumptions about the volunteers under our charge. We assume they know exactly what we want them to do. DON'T ASSUME—even with those volunteers who've served you long and faithfully!
It's a HUGE relief to a volunteer when you tell them exactly what you expect them to do. Spell it out clearly and on paper-at least once a year! Walk your volunteers through your specific expectations step-by-step. If you don't take the time to clarify exactly what you want from volunteers-not only will you frustrate your current volunteers-but also you'll add one more barrier to getting new volunteers for your ministry.

Do the volunteers (and potential volunteers) in your church know exactly what you want them to do-or are you just assuming they know? Is it in writing? Do you review your specific expectations with ALL volunteers at least annually?

#4 - The Feedback Factor
Are volunteers given FEEDBACK about their service?

In The One Minute Manager, Ken Blanchard and Spencer Johnson say, "The number one motivator of people is feedback on results."

Are you giving feedback to your volunteers about their service? Do you know HOW to give feedback in a positive manner-both praises and reprimands?

The One Minute Manager is an extremely fast read and a must read for anyone who oversees the performances of others-whether they be employees or volunteers-because the authors show managers how to set one minute goals, do one minute praises, and do one minute reprimands-all skills needed to function effectively as a leader and manager.

I remember my first year as a teacher in a public high school. At the end of the year, I walked into the principal's office and said, "I need some feedback!" I wanted to know how I was doing-the good and the bad. I found working where there was no feedback-neither praise nor correction-scary and frustrating.

Volunteers want feedback too. Answer these questions with honest specific examples:

When was he last time you orally or in writing praised a volunteer for specific excellent work? When was the last time you skillfully and lovingly pointed out an area of improvement?

Perhaps your first step is to buy and read The One Minute Manager. I can HIGHLY recommend it whether you are a CEO of Domestic Affairs (i.e., a stay-at-home mom) or a CEO of a major corporation.

#5 - The Equipment Factor
Are volunteers EQUIPPED with tools and training to do their ministries well?

It's a real drag to be asked to do something you can do well-but not have the proper tools to do it well! When I was a waiter working my way through college, one of the tasks I enjoyed doing was vacuuming the carpet at the end of my shift. However, whenever the vacuum was not working properly (which was regularly), I hated that task! Why? Without the appropriate equipment, a relatively banal and easy task took longer than normal and the job was never really done well.
Not having the correct tools and training takes the motivational wind out of a volunteer’s service sail.

Are ALL the volunteers in your ministry and church equipped with the proper tools and training? When was the last time your leaders got some leadership training? When was the last time your teachers participated in a teacher-training workshop?

**#6 - The Modeling Factor**
Do volunteers have LIVING MODELS to follow?

Motivational leadership pundit John Maxwell states that the number one motivational principle is that people do what people see. Without a living model of what you expect from volunteers, all the talk, teaching, training manuals, and videos are for naught!

Listen closely leader: **YOU NEED TO BE THE FIRST LIVING MODEL OF SERVICE YOU EXPECT FROM YOUR VOLUNTEERS!**

The speed of the leader is the speed of the team! If you expect the volunteers in your church to serve God in a motivated fashion, you MUST be the first living model you want your volunteers to follow. People do what people see.

Do the volunteers in your ministry and church have living models to follow—or just good talkers?

**#7 - The Freedom Factor**
Are volunteers FREE TO CHOOSE, explore, and discover their best service fit?

According to educational guru William Glasser one of our basic needs as human beings is the freedom to choose. Think about a time you had to do something you were not particularly excited about doing. You probably felt trapped. Your motivation to do that which you had to do was totally eclipsed by your motivation to get out of whatever it is you had to do!

When people feel trapped in their volunteer service, their one desire becomes to get out from under the tyranny! I’ve been at church board meetings where the leaders sat around asking each other, "How many more years do you have left to be on the deacon board?" It’s like they were in ecclesiastical prison—marking their days until they were free!

Often it is at this point that some well meaning but not so wise leaders will seek to manipulate volunteers to continue to serve. Sometimes we even put a little spiritual guilt on wavering volunteers.

Again, I ask you to read closely: **GUILT IS THE WORST WAY TO MOTIVATE ANYONE TO DO ANYTHING.**

Let the Holy Spirit convict—and you stay out of the guilt business! Jesus said, "Whoever wants to follow me-pick up the cross and get going" (Allison paraphrase). Jesus threw out "Whoever" challenges, but He did not succumb to manipulating people via guilt. Take a page out of Jesus’ motivational handbook. Challenge folks to get involved at high levels of
involvement, but stay away from manipulating people through "spiritual" guilt. Guilt tactics will eventually de-motivate anyone under your "care!"

Understand clearly that when people are free to choose and move on to other areas of service, one of two things will happen-and both will be to your advantage.

First, some volunteers will leave your ministry, but this isn't bad if they weren't gifted or passionate about their volunteerism in your ministry. Besides, it will allow them to move on and serve in other areas of ministry as they discover their best fit.

Second, others will continue to volunteer and serve with you because they CHOOSE to do it! These are great people to have in your volunteer army!

Are the volunteers in your church and ministry serving out of choice or guilt and manipulation? Are volunteers REALLY free to choose to move on to another ministry without guilt?

#8 - The Efficacy Factor
Do volunteers really understand THE BIG PICTURE: How what they are doing is contributing to the overall success of the mission and vision of the church?

Studies of effective public educators have found that successful teachers often share a common belief: They believe they are making a difference in students’ lives! Education experts call this Teacher Efficacy. I believe the church needs to cultivate Volunteer Efficacy.

When volunteers in the church-regardless of where they are serving-really understand how their service makes a significant contribution to the accomplishment of the church’s overall mission and vision-then they tend to be motivated to serve! To say it another way, volunteers who understand the big picture and their role in seeing that picture realized - those are the motivated volunteers!

Why? They're making a difference! They have Volunteer Efficacy. On the other hand, if volunteers feel like they are simply filling a slot in the cogs of the ecclesiastical machinery, they'll tend to be unmotivated.

Do ALL the volunteers in your ministry and church really understand their role in the achievement of the church's vision and mission-or do they tend to believe they are a warm body filling an insignificant slot?

#9 - The Thankfulness Factor
Are stellar volunteers recognized, PUBLICALLY APPRECIATED, and championed for their outstanding and sacrificial service?

Legendary leadership expert Max Dupree notes that the last job of the leader is to say thank you. If you oversee volunteers and are not skilled at CONSISTENTLY saying thank you (verbally and in writing), you will not oversee many volunteers for long!

A friend of mine, who's a youth pastor, understands that without his volunteer workforce, his ministry would not be successful. So what does Bruce do to keep his volunteer team focused
and motivated? He intentionally plans times of public recognition, thanks, and encouragement for those volunteers!

One weekend, Bruce rented Sonlife Ministries' Victorian mansion (in Elburn, IL-a great place for a retreat-call 1-800-770 GROW) and from Friday night until Saturday lunchtime, Bruce honored, rewarded, thanked, encouraged-and MOTIVATED-those who labor with him throughout the year.

We had a blast. The food was tremendous. And we stayed up late into the night laughing and playing games… like students!

The whole thing ended at Bruce's church-where all the volunteer youth workers were honored with a great meal cooked and hosted by the students in his youth ministry! After the retreat and lunch by the students, one of the adult volunteers told Bruce, "When people in this church find out how well you treat us, you'll have people lining up at your office door to volunteer to serve in the youth ministry."

EXACTLY the point I am trying to make! There is a connection between appreciation and motivation for volunteers in the church!

Most volunteers don't serve to be loved, appreciated, and thanked. However, volunteers tend to flock where they are loved, appreciated, and thanked. Don't be like some leaders of volunteers who neglect volunteers and take them for granted and then mount a soapbox to preach a sermon on commitment.

Look in the mirror and ask YOURSELF if you are doing a good job of PUBLICALLY recognizing, appreciating, and thanking those stellar volunteers who work along side of you! The volunteers in Bruce's ministry had their already high motivation level bumped up a notch that FUN weekend being treated like kings and queens… which leads me to the next point --

#10 - The Fun Factor
Are volunteers having FUN volunteering and serving in the church?

In some churches, having fun is the same as sinning! This ought not be! To have fun, according to behavioral scientist William Glasser, is one of our basic needs in life! Furthermore, Arthur Costa, an education pundit who's identified sixteen signs of intelligent behavior, lists a sense of humor as number eight! That's right-Costa believes having a sense of humor is a sign you are intelligent! (That makes me a genius!)

The shortest distance between two people is humor! I know that volunteering is not one big laughing festival, but from time to time there needs to be a little fun involved! Someone has said that laughter is one of the telltale signs of the health of an organization. Furthermore, the authors of the book, Fish: A Remarkable Way to Improve Morale and Boost Results (another great, fast read about motivating people), argue that one of the keys to motivation is play! As the authors say, "Work made fun gets done."

When is the last time you had a good laugh with the volunteers in your ministry or church?
#11 - The Relationship Factor
Are volunteers experiencing a sense of COMMUNITY with those whom they serve?

There is something about serving along side of others that tends to make people bond with each other! COMMUNITY! Community is the natural by-product of doing a life of service with other laborers. Since one of our basic, God-given needs is to belong, it stands to reason that those volunteers who work together AND experience genuine community with each other will most likely be motivated volunteers. This is the relationship factor of motivation.

On the other hand, show me a volunteer who serves in relational isolation, and I'll show you a short term volunteer!

Are the volunteers who work in your church and ministry experiencing community with other volunteers? Why or why not? Is working in your ministry more like a family or a business? What, specifically, can you do to create an environment of community among the volunteers under your care?

#12 - The Prayer Factor
Are YOU praying for the volunteers who work in your ministry or church by name?

" When you're trying to find volunteers, pray (Luke 10:2). " When you're seeking to motivate volunteers to high levels of service for God's Kingdom, pray.

I don't understand how, through prayer, God often moves in someone's heart to serve Him-I just know that prayer moves the heart of God to move the heart of people. And note well that motivating volunteers is truly a heart issue. When someone's heart is in something-they are motivated!

You can use the first eleven motivating factors to motivate volunteers, but, ultimately, motivation is a heart thing-and thus, a God thing. Therefore, it is a prayer thing.

Who are your key volunteers? Name them.

If you could put together a dream team of volunteers to work in your ministry, who from your church would be on that team? List them.

Why not stop right now and invest a few moments of prayer to God for some of your key and potential volunteers?

Application: Turning Knowledge Into Life Change

1. Evaluate your own motivation: Which of the above twelve points contribute most to your own motivation? The least?
2. Evaluate the motivation of your current volunteers: Think of one very motivated volunteer in your ministry right now. How might the twelve factors explain his or her motivation?
3. Think of one unmotivated volunteer in your ministry right now: How might the twelve factors explain his or her lack of motivation? What one SPECIFIC change could you make RIGHT NOW to better motivate the volunteers under your care?

4. List three specific people you would love to have serve in your ministry, but who are currently NOT involved in any ministry. Use the twelve-point checklist to determine what one step you could take RIGHT NOW to motivate each of the potential volunteers you have identified.