



Why some offer, why some don't

TN100 Training Notes series: Management

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If you are concerned for all-member ministry in your church, it is helpful to understand why some people volunteer for service and others keep out of the way.

This is only one aspect of the whole issue of how Christians serve their church. It must not be divorced from big issues such as the church's teaching on service nor from vital, practical matters such as how you go about inviting people to volunteer and then how you support them in their work.

It is easy to over-spiritualise volunteering in church and to assume that everyone who offers has the highest possible motives for serving their Lord. It is also easy to make people feel guilty for not volunteering when their main area of service is, and should be, at home, in their workplace, or in their local community.

The following lists of why people offer and why people do not has been drawn from over 25 years of training church leaders in principles of volunteering, in observing church workforces in hundreds of churches when I work as a consultant, and from secular sources of research in a sector which is highly professional ... unlike, I am afraid to say, much church thinking on this subject.

So, provided you appreciate that this is only one area of many to consider in the broad topic of church volunteering, here are my two lists. They may go some way to explaining the behavioural patterns you observe on this issue within your own church.

As a practical exercise, get a group to note which in each list might be the most relevant for your church and then add other reasons. You might prefer to do this for a particular type of post and then decide on appropriate action to take.

Note: Article A43 on this website, *Every member on active service*, takes a more detailed look at church volunteering.

Twelve reasons why people may offer to serve

Here are four of the reasons leaders might hope for or expect. People offer because:

1 **They long to put their faith into practice**

Volunteering in church is all about serving Jesus Christ. It is their enthusiasm for their faith that drives them to offer to help: whether in leading the Alpha-type course or in putting the chairs away afterwards. This is one aspect of discipleship.

2 **They are keen to support your church**

In other environments this would be seen as belief in the institution. They value your church, perhaps because of long-standing association with it, or they feel part of a close-knit church family, or they admire the Minister and want to help.

3 **They want to give back value**

They have valued the teaching, they love the musical tradition, they became Christians through this church, their children were taught and entertained in a small group. As a result they are happy to provide some kind of payback to express their appreciation.

4 **They are wired to meet needs**

Some people spot a need and want to meet it. Their value system, perhaps through the example of parents, is to get involved. They notice that the churchyard needs attention, the group needs a Secretary, or an elderly couple need a lift on Sundays.

Another set of four reasons, this time where there is more obviously benefit for the volunteer as well as the church's ministry.

5 **They enjoy being with other people**

For some, especially those who live alone, volunteering as part of a team gives them company and the satisfaction of working with others. They chat while they fold the news-sheets or serve refreshments. They receive a benefit, and so does the church.

6 **They want to bring about change**

People who are frustrated with the current situation and have visionary eyes agree to get involved. So the techie offers to improve the ailing sound system, the tidy person hates the mess on the common and gets involved in the litter-picking action day.

7 **They long to be valued**

Some receive little appreciation in daily life and have a genuine desire to be needed. Their church offers an opening for this if they are prepared to edit the newsletter, become a steward, play in the band or sing in the choir.

8 **They want to enhance their CV**

Young people may be encouraged to take on volunteer posts to add to their CV and so enhance their chance of a university place or a job in a crowded market-place. Helping to lead the youth group on a Friday night looks good on the document.

Here are four other motives that are slightly more questionable, but very present in many churches.

9 **They were pushed into it**

It may be that an over-zealous Minister or a forceful team leader put the person under undue pressure so that they felt they had to offer. If the leader added a phrase such as 'I saw you leading the teens' group when I prayed', the pressure becomes intense.

10 **They simply cannot say 'No'**

But some people, when asked in person, feel it would be somewhat rude or even a failure on their part to refuse any request to help out. They know others have turned it down so believe they ought to fill the gap, even if they do not have the time.

11 **They want others to admire them**

Some long to see their names on the list of committee members on the news-sheet each week, or to be recognised as a leader in some form, or to be seen performing some task in a public place such as at the front of church as a lesson reader.

12 **They desire power**

Ultimately a few people see that the route to power is to be elected to an important office (such as Building Group Chair) or corporate body (such as a church council) as a means of getting their own way or outwitting a rival or people who think differently from them. Then there's the unknown paedophile who offers to teach in Children's Church.

Some church leaders are thrilled when anyone offers as a volunteer, but it is important to recognise that people's motives are not always completely pure. Some leaders rejoice at the spiritual response to an appeal for help, when the offer may be for worldly purposes. But that only affects some offers of course and for many one of the earlier reasons will apply.

Twelve reasons why people may not offer to serve

But for many church leaders the problem is not seen so much as questionable motivation as a lack of people-resource or those not willing to get involved. Research by the Office for National Statistics shows that in most age groups the amount of volunteering is declining. So why don't people offer for some posts? Leaders often put the blame on those who fail to put themselves forward, but often the fault lies with the church itself.

If you are a church leader, are you ready to be checked out? Here again is a list of twelve possibilities from everything I have observed and from mainstream research in the world of volunteering. In this section, assume that the person concerned would seem to have appropriate gifts and/or experience for the post in question.

First, four reasons linked to changes in society.

1 **They are shattered**

Increasingly people who earn their living in the workplace are finding the pressures of employment, or the stress of parenthood, or failing relationships or other pressures use all their available energy and they need time off.

2 **They have little spare time**

Closely related to the above point this applies in particular to churches where members work shifts, commute, are single parents, taxi their teens everywhere, or have grandchildren to look after if both their parents are out at work. Or there could be the very genuine reason of serving Christ in activities outside the church.

3 **They have gone back to work**

This is a mainly gender-specific point. In an earlier time many married women did not go out to work and were available to volunteer during normal working hours. Now most of those people are in employment, even if part-time, and unavailable during the day.

4 **They fear increasing legislation**

Many people are frightened to take on responsibility where Safeguarding or Health and Safety issues have to be faced. It may be the form-filling, but is more likely to be the risk of false accusation of, for example, improper behaviour with children.

Secondly, four issues relating to the church itself. Where does blame really lie here?

5 **They cannot offer long-term**

Churches tend to put a high value on length of service, when many people in today's fast-changing world want short-term projects. Some jobs have hidden extras too. People fear not being able to find the exit and so avoid the way in.

6 **They fear lack of support**

Research has demonstrated that people offer to organisations they admire. Conversely, they are uneasy about offering for posts that are mismanaged. Most churches are poor at giving adequate support to volunteers and this puts people off.

7 **They cannot relate to the team**

It is a sad that people may refuse to join a volunteer team because of sour relationships with other members, lack of trust in the leader (or Minister) or a fear that the team is dysfunctional. If church members do not love each other, teamwork is hard.

8 **They have not been asked**

It seems so obvious but most people need to be asked face-to-face before they offer. A 'Sits vac' ad in the newsletter simply does not do it. This is especially true in churches where some people feel that there is a genuine humility in not pushing oneself forward.

Finally, four faith-linked reasons which are especially noticeable in churches.

9 **They have low self-worth**

Some Christians, especially in churches where spiritual gifts are taught in a certain way with value placed on some more than others and quality stressed, feel they have little to offer and, especially in an older generation, should therefore not volunteer.

10 **They are consumers**

It is now not uncommon for some people to move from church to church in one area every few years. They may want the church with the appropriate teaching, or worship style or children's ministry. They are less likely to volunteer than long-term members.

11 **They are frightened of failure**

If the underlying theology of the church is one of success or perfectionism, many will not want to try new areas of service in case they fail and are harshly judged. This applies in particular to up-front roles such as music or leading intercessions.

12 **They are untaught disciples**

If the challenge of Christian discipleship is not taught well in the church, many will be unaware of the meaning of being part of the body of Christ and serving God, seeing all that these notes cover instead as volunteering simply to keep the ship afloat.

So, given these lists, what action does your church need to take to encourage all-member ministry? There may be changes to be made to teaching, structures or practice.

To understand more about volunteering in a general context check out the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) at <https://www.ncvo.org.uk> and the Directory of Social Change at <https://www.dsc.org.uk>. The 2007 report, *Helping out, a national survey of volunteering and charitable giving*, prepared by the National Centre for Social Research and the Institute for Volunteering Research, is still the best general guide for facts and figures but be aware it is pre-Covid. Research by the Office for National Statistics published in 2017 shows a downward trend in the amount of time people are offering for volunteering.

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN100. See also Articles A43, *Every member on active service*, and A47, *15 principles of volunteering*. Also Training Notes TN24, *Church members can burn out too*, TN31, *Affirming volunteers*, TN36, *Square pegs in round holes*, TN55, *So, who should be in the dock?* TN84, *How to say 'No' when you should*, and TN139, *Church workers in teams*.

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN100 under Management.

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