



Serving in a post-Covid church

TN148 Training Notes series: Management

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These notes supplement TN139, *Church workers in teams*, and set a wider context. These are written for all churches struggling to recruit volunteers in a post-Covid world and suggest a different approach.

What's going on?

Almost every church I have worked with over the past year or so has expressed a frustration at the lack of volunteers available to maintain the work of the church in question. So what exactly is happening? In one sense this has always been the case, but it is certainly more prevalent now.

As I see it, many churches have been wonderfully supported by an army of Christians who saw practical service in and beyond their church as part and parcel of their discipleship. But in many churches this army was aged in their 60s, 70s and 80s. Many of them were looking for a chance to hand over to younger people but, for the moment at least, kept going because they did not want to let the church down.

Along came Covid and lockdown and this sudden and unexpected discontinuity gave most people a break from service. When the time came to restart everything, many of these people, who were growing older one year at a time, took the opportunity to say it was time they stepped aside, partly because they were getting too old for the work they were expected to do and partly because they were exhausted and cherished the break that lockdown had given them.

Meanwhile a younger cohort of church members had not been able to offer the kind of time practical service needed and felt that Sunday attendance was as much as they could offer in their busy lives. In families both parents were often out at work to pay the mortgage or rental, and coping with childcare arrangements and costs. Life for today's parents is several degrees more hectic than for earlier generations.

At the same time as all this was happening, there were rising costs that everyone had to cope with: energy costs spiralled, food prices rose sharply and interest rates suddenly started on an upward trend from the low levels that people had been used to. So employing more church staff, or any church staff for that matter, was not an obvious option.

And hence the volunteer hole in the staffing of the church's work. I note that a very recent survey by Gavin Smith of 'The Church Office' website found this to be Administrators' biggest concern.

Approaches to adopt

First, some foundations. Here are four ideas.

Volunteering is not the right concept

You might offer to help run a club, association, political party, to litter pick in your area, to be part of a Good Neighbours scheme. But a church is not a club – it is the gathering of disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ and there is an expectation that part of discipleship is to serve one another (check out Galatians chapter 5 for just one biblical example of this).

So to 'ask for volunteers' is not quite the right approach. It is part of the deal when you sign up to follow the Master. Perhaps we need to drop the word and use alternatives such as 'workers', or 'disciples'.

Expecting people to offer is not the only concept

That is one approach but it needs to be balanced with two others. It starts with the vacancy to fill. But you might instead start by looking at each person in your church and assessing their gifts and experience and what challenges in service might help them grow their faith.

A third approach might be to expect Christians to put service in the world outside the church as their priority: witnessing at the school gate, bringing their faith to bear in committee membership of the local clubs, being salt and light in all kinds of ways in the local community. Most churches are not good at offering support for that approach.

Assessing spiritual gifts is not the only quality

There are many other aspects to show whether someone might be suitable for a particular area of service. What about knowledge, practical skill set, passions, life experience, Christian character, availability, and other ideas?

Blaming people for lack of commitment is not fair

Some church leaders talk to me in terms of lack of commitment. They say church members today are simply not prepared for the challenge to serve. But I question whether this is always fair. People have seen too many bad cases in the use of volunteers and for them it may be sensible to hold back. I suspect that much of the blame for this should lie with our churches. Those who serve have simply not been properly chosen and supported.

For more on all these see Article A43, *Every member on active service*, on this website.

Understand what helps people to serve

In my experience as a church consultant I have discovered twelve features of practical service that make them attractive to most people, especially young adults. There is nothing amazing in the list, but if any of these twelve ideas are lacking in the church, it will be harder to motivate people to offer their time without charge.

What church leaders need to do is to put themselves in the shoes of church members so I express these in the voices of such members. Hence the 'I/me' format. Not everyone of course will say what is cited here, but many would.

1 **A church vision I can own**

I want to be part of an enterprise that knows where it is heading so that I can join in with that. I am not keen on propping up the structures to keep the show on the road. So I want to be able to see that what I am being asked to do, whatever that may happen to be, will have a clear feed into the overall church vision. This means there *is* a church vision, that I know what it is, and that I can sign up to it with enthusiasm.

2 **A church leadership I trust and respect**

Vision and leadership go together so I want to be clear who the leadership team of this church consists of, feel I know at least some of them, trust them for the challenge they are putting in front of us, and respect them for their Christian character and for their spiritual wisdom. So the leadership team need to be clearly identified and to be accessible to me.

3 **A discipleship challenge I can respond to**

I do not expect the leaders to try to set a vision that is lacking in challenge. I need to appreciate that Jesus called disciples and made it clear that this could involve making life hard. I need to understand that offering for practical service is a feature of my own discipleship of Jesus Christ, and to be taught about the implications in my life for this. Service within and beyond the church may take me out of my comfort zones so I need support and encouragement..

4 **A scheme with a champion**

I want to see that practical service is not something for those who cannot say 'No' but for the whole body of Christ. So it is encouraging to know that the church takes service seriously with someone responsible and clear promotion. This tells me that I am not alone but part of a church of workers, all seeking to play our part in promoting the church's various ministries. (See Article A43, *Every member on active service*, for more on this idea.)

5 **An approach that is personal**

I want to know that someone is taking a personal interest in fitting me to an appropriate area of service, rather than just trying to fill gaps. So I want to see that those who run the scheme value me for who I am and take the trouble to get to know me and so discern what I might be able to offer.

6 A purpose I can see fits with the church vision

I want to be able to understand the reason why our church runs the area of service I am being asked to serve in. I want to play a part in a necessary work that brings blessing to others and glory to God. I value being able to understand the purpose for this particular ministry and so consider it a privilege to be asked to be contributing towards it. So a simple role definition for this area of service would be welcomed.

7 A gift, skill, enthusiasm or experience I believe I have

I would like to see that who I am and where my skills lie can be of use to the ministry I am being asked to contribute to. This means that the church knows something of my gifting, experience and passion, so that I and others can see that this work of God fits me well. But I also need to see that just because my paid job is in one specific area, it does not follow that I will want to be used in that same area in church.

8 A team I can be part of

I am not so keen on being part of a rota so that I fill gaps and would much prefer to be part of a team who together are serving the church. I would love this team to pray for each other, to encourage each other and to advise each other. This will mean I can identify with others, form relationships with them, and serve with them. (See Training Notes TN139, *Church workers in teams*, also on this website.)

9 A team leader I can serve under

This means that I trust and respect the team leader, who has invited me to join their team. They enable us together to deliver ministry and to run the team well, in spite of differences there may be in age, gender, personality and Christian experience. The leader will enable us all to talk in 'we' about our service rather than 'I' language. Their enthusiasm for the team's ministry will be infectious and they will take a real interest in every member of their team.

10 A commitment that is limited

I find it hard to know where I shall be one year from now in a rapidly changing world, so to be asked to serve for a limited time, such as a year, with the ability to review and, if necessary, opt out after that would be welcome. This is not looking for a soft option but being realistic in a world where serving in one ministry for life is no longer the norm. I also want to be given a break if I am exhausted.

11 An achievement that is celebrated

It would be helpful if I could see that ministry in this church is appreciated by the church's Minister and other leaders. I would like to see people thanked in appropriate ways for all they offer and their achievements celebrated. This may be the responsibility of my team leader, but I would like to see it broader than that with overall church leaders aware of our team's work and showing due appreciation for it.

12 **A role I can develop within**

I would like to feel that I can grow as a Christian disciple through practical service and therefore want this service not to meet the church's need while being a dead-end for me, but an area where I am challenged to trust God to help me minister, and so to be considered for further areas of service that might stretch my ability and my faith. I want a role that is worthwhile – I want to grow.

All these points together create a culture of joyful service, as we as disciples follow the Servant King.

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN148. See also Articles A43, *Every member on active service*, A45, *How to lead a team at church*, and A47, *15 principles of volunteering*, plus Training Notes TN100, *Why some offer, why some don't*, and TN139, *Church workers in teams*.

Contact John if you would like to enquire about the possibility of advice or training on working with 'volunteers'.

Cartoons are by Micki Hounslow for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN148 under Management.

John Truscott, 24 High Grove, St Albans, AL3 5SU

Tel: 01727 568325 Email: john@john-truscott.co.uk Web: <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk>