



Affirming volunteers

TN31 Training Notes series: Management

These notes were first published on the website in August 2006 and last updated in June 2018. They are copyright © John Truscott. You may download this file and/or print up to 30 copies without charge provided no part of the heading or text is altered or omitted.

Most church workers are volunteers. Whether they are lay preachers, small group leaders, musicians, children's activity leaders, finance officers, committee members, welcomers or flower arrangers, and whether their names are listed on the church website as office-holders or merely printed on a notice-board rota, they serve without pay or legal contract.

But, too often, they also serve without proper support or encouragement.

There is the view that Christians can get all the job-satisfaction they need from knowing that they serve Jesus Christ. Another idea is that the sole requirement is a public 'thank-you' at the annual meeting (but how not to exclude some?). Too often, anything further is ignored.

But volunteers are human being, not cogs in a Christian machine. They work best when they feel their service is appreciated.

So when I run training events on working with volunteers I usually devote one session to listing the kind of affirmation I believe such workers deserve. The list has some surprises in it. There is also a clear implication that churches need to invest resources in making much of this happen.

I am told by some that, in this busy age, people are no longer able to volunteer. I find they do if they believe in what they are doing and trust the church to look after them properly. It's the sentence-for-life feel they fear – and the pain of neglect.

Here are ten ideas to get you started. For these notes I have not included items in print, such as definitions of role or volunteer contracts but they can be important too (see Article A8 for some of these).

1 **Christian teaching on discipleship**

I make no excuse for putting this first. Volunteering in a church is not just about keeping the show on the road. It is about service, obedience, putting faith into practice and growing as a Christian. It is also about service in the world more than service in the church, but that point will have to be developed elsewhere.

You affirm both lay preachers and flower arrangers by helping them understand that people grow as disciples when they put the Bible's teaching into practical action. Also, that all have gifts from God to use for the common good.

Sources for this will include preaching, small groups, one-to-one work and reading.

2 **Prayer**

Which tasks does your church pray for? Be careful if you pray for your preachers, outreach groups and children's group leaders, but never consider those in the church office or the maintenance team. If you have mobilised all the gifts God has given you, and if you teach that these are all spiritual ministries, you should pray for them.

Such prayer both teaches that you indeed see such work as needing God's power within it, and encourages the workers themselves to see their service in a new light.

Examples include intercessions in services, teams of workers making time to pray together when they meet, church prayer diaries and schemes of worker prayer partnerships.

3 **Due recognition**

This is a balancing act. It is not right to ignore the work that people do. But neither is it right to pander to people's pride.

Some up-front posts have their own reward, so it is no bad thing to play-up the behind-the-scenes tasks. Perhaps recognise the ministries of washing-up and photocopying, and the effort of those who put out the chairs every week.

Some of this can be done through other means listed (such as prayer and saying thank-you). Other ideas include some kind of commissioning each year (eg. for each rota), or the church's leadership body undertaking a review of each area of ministry on a regular basis.

4 **On-going communication**

People need to be kept in the loop, especially when a standard church programme changes. For example, you affirm the children's group leaders when you remember to warn them that there will be a special all-age service in a month's time so no groups will meet that week.

Other aspects of this heading include occasional meetings so that everyone knows what is going on. A one-page report for everyone, especially those not present, is a must.

Similarly, regularly updating role statements or job manuals shows you care.

5 **Training**

Treat this word with care. Telling the stewards team, some of whom have been in situ since before the Ark (but see point 10), that you have arranged an exciting training evening for them may not go down too well.

But to offer a training budget so that your youth leaders can go off to an annual weekend together, or to lay on in-church training for the lesson readers, can show that you appreciate their ministry and want them to feel you are supporting them in their desire to do it well.

Once training for all is part of the church culture, there should be no problem. Simply be careful how you sell the idea in the first place!

6 **Practical help and resources**

Under this heading come funding and what that can buy, plus practical help to show people are appreciated.

If you ask someone to help lead an activity, then your occasional enquiry as to whether there is equipment or stationery (or other needs that will help them undertake the task well) will not go amiss. Perhaps the youth group could make good use of a DVD player or a decent sound system, the holiday club team could do with a respectable budget so that they can get really good props, or the cleaners would love a modern and appropriate vacuum instead of the old hand-on they use at present.

To show people are appreciated, perhaps the couple running Alpha would value free baby-sitting support from the church (provided they can vet those who sit for them), or each playgroup leader could be given a term off from time to time.

7 **Encouragement and thanks**

Does this really need stating? Yes, and yes again. What means most is an unexpected and unofficial thank-you instead of the annual meeting "well, I must now remember to thank everyone ...". Is your congregation always thanking people for the work they do – and are the leaders role-modelling this?

A Christmas outing for those on the catering team can be one way of saying "thank-you and you are appreciated". The thank-you for "your imaginative way of helping me pray this morning" to the person who led the intercessions can make them want to do it again. The parents who take a real interest in the work of the groups their children belong to, saying thank-you to the leaders from time to time, can mean so much.

8 **Feedback and correction**

Yes, this is included in a list of items to provide affirmation. If done sensitively and provided it becomes part of the culture of the church, people are affirmed in their work by receiving helpful feedback.

The issues then become how this is done, by whom, and in what way. A bald criticism of last week's flower arrangement at the front of church may not be quite the best approach! The idea of team feedback to help each other improve, where the people giving the feedback will also receive the same on their efforts, may be a better way forward.

The problem is that most churches have never done anything like this, and the idea has taken root that you must never criticise a volunteer.

9 **Team support**

Ideas include sharing a job around two or three people so no one has too much to do (though beware tasks where continuity is important, as in children's work), and offering

an apprentice scheme so that everyone has a No. 2 who can eventually take over from them.

If people are part of any kind of team (or even just on a rota), much can be achieved by get-togethers, the sharing of experiences and ideas, and the sense of having fun doing the job together. Team leadership is a key role: reminding people when they are on duty, encouraging the whole team together, instilling a good sense of discipline.

10 **Short-term contracts**

This is one of the most important points in this list. The idea of people offering to undertake a task for one, three or five years means that they know they are not committing themselves to a life-sentence, and the church is not stuck with someone well past their sell-by date.

The idea can be extended to an understanding that people may stand down without feeling failure if personal circumstances change. And within all this should be the more radical idea that, to stretch people's faith, there is an expectation that once they have mastered this role, it will be good for them to find themselves in something rather more demanding, not in terms of time commitment but of spiritual challenge.

It affirms people to know they are being developed in their service. At the same time it makes the whole business of volunteering clearly part of discipleship – which brings us back to point 1 and the circle is complete.

So, how would your church score on these ten? Which are your weakest areas? Choose one to work on.

By giving more attention to volunteer support, you need more time. But it is my thesis that the more care you take of volunteers, the more people will offer. The whole scheme may need more organisation (perhaps by a volunteer – or by a member of staff in a larger church) but the point is not just to get work done, but to build people up in their faith through practical service. That is worth aiming for.

These notes are available at www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes and then TN31. For details of suitable paperwork for volunteers, see Article A8, *Worker agreements*. For related issues see Training Notes TN36, *Square pegs in round holes*, TN55, *So, who should be in the dock?* and TN100, *Why some offer, why some don't*.

Contact John if you would like to enquire about the possibility of his running a training event on how to mobilise and work with volunteers in a church or mission agency context.

Cartoons are by Micki Hounslow for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication, Administration. File TN31 under Management.

John Truscott, 69 Sandridge Road, St Albans, AL1 4AG

Tel: 01727 832176 Email: john@john-truscott.co.uk Web: <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk>