

# LEADERSHIP

/ LEADING VOLUNTEERS

## Why Volunteers Quit

Barbara Beach

### Why Volunteers Quit...and what to do about it.

John just filled the last Sunday school teacher slot. He heaves a sigh of relief. Now he can sit back and relax.

But not for long. The next week, one of the volunteers calls. She says she can't teach the first- and second-graders anymore.

"Here we go again," John thinks.

Do you share John's frustration? Just when you have all your volunteer slots filled, some volunteers quit. Why does this happen?

### WHY VOLUNTEERS QUIT

Quitters may not be lazy or uncommitted; they often have valid reasons for quitting.

1. **Volunteers aren't challenged.** Volunteers need to feel they're getting something in return for their work. For example, if you ask school teachers to teach the same grade at church as they do in school, they're doing something they've always done. And they aren't challenged by anything new.

"If you try to make [volunteering] too easy, you just cut the legs out of it," says Dr. Cynthia Thero, president of The Source International, an educational development firm.

Marlene Wilson, who conducts workshops and conferences on volunteerism and is the author of *How to Mobilize Church Volunteers* (Augsburg), agrees, "Sometimes we recruit people and we don't give them anything really significant to do. So it's a waste of their time. With dual-career marriages and single parenting, people want whatever time they give to make a difference."

2. **Volunteers don't have a job description.** "People don't dare say yes to something they don't know what they're committing to," says Wilson. Even the secular sector considers job descriptions important to get volunteer support. A Maryland school puts a detailed list of "volunteer opportunities"-including tasks and dates for special events-right on the student information form that parents receive when enrolling their children.
3. **Volunteers aren't sure of their performance.** Volunteers want to know they make a difference. They want to know how the program is better or

different because of their volunteering. "[Volunteers] leave the program because no one evaluates their impact," says Thero.

4. **Volunteers aren't trained.** "Volunteers quit because they say yes to something and assume that somebody is going to train and support them," says Wilson. "But they find they are thrown out there on their own."

Thero affirms, "How good the program is depends on the training."

## HOW TO KEEP VOLUNTEERS

Even though volunteers often check out for good reasons, there's good news. You can ensure long-term, satisfied volunteers in your ministry.

1. **Know what your volunteers want.** Develop an interview process. Ask volunteers: What expertise do you bring to the program? What do you need out of this experience? What are your goals in working with children? "Help volunteers understand that they need the experience," says Thero.
2. **Understand current trends.** "Two-thirds of volunteers work outside the home," says Wilson. "A lot are part of the sandwich generation and inheriting additional family responsibilities [from elderly parents]." Consider shared leadership or shorter time slots to lighten volunteers' loads.
3. **Develop a clear job description.** Give detailed descriptions of specific tasks, such as leading children's singing for one-half hour each Sunday morning. State how much time the position requires, including training time. Specify a finite term of service.
4. **Train.** Volunteers want good training to succeed in their job. But how do you know when you've had a good training session? Ask yourself: Do people give all kinds of excuses not to come? Do volunteers drop out?

Ask volunteers: What do you wish you knew? What do you need to know to be effective in your job?

Plan individualized training sessions, if necessary. Have seasoned teachers mentor new teachers. Send informative clippings to volunteers. Role play with volunteers what to do in specific classroom situations. Use books, CDs and DVDs, such as Children's Ministry That Works (Revised and Updated) . Always be available to answer lots of questions.

Have volunteers evaluate their training. Ask: Was your training helpful? What parts do you suggest changing?

**5. Support volunteers.** Support is different from affirmation. "[People] get the whole issue of affirmation mixed up with support," says Thero. "Most people don't support; they just affirm. Support is an ongoing, personalized concern for the volunteer."

Children's ministers and Christian education directors have to do more

than give compliments. You need to celebrate volunteers' marriages, birthdays and graduations. And support them through their pain. Find out how people are doing in their personal lives: Ask about a sick aunt or offer to babysit for a night out.

**6. Provide times for spiritual growth.** "We can get so focused on offerings to the unchurched, or to peripheral members, that we forget those who are going hungry near at hand," says Roy Oswald, author of *How to Prevent Lay Leader Burnout* (Alban Institute). Encourage teachers to talk with each other about the lesson's scripture and pray before each lesson. Lead a Bible study for Sunday school teachers. Plan prayer breakfasts or a once-a-year overnight retreat to focus on spiritual growth.

**7. Recognize volunteers.** Find personal and surprising ways to say thank you. For example, send notes in the mail-"I'm so glad you agreed to work with us"; make phone calls; make heart magnets that say, "You're at the heart of what happens in this church"; give plants to say, "Our ministry wouldn't grow without you."

**8. Evaluate volunteers.** Observe volunteers in the classroom. Provide resources for any problems they may have. "As threatening as evaluations may appear," says Oswald, "they are an effective way to make people feel supported in their roles. [Volunteers] know that someone cares enough to check on how things are going."

*Barbara Beach, departments editor of CHILDREN'S MINISTRY Magazine, is a volunteer at her church.*

## **I QUIT!**

These volunteers quit for different reasons:

"I didn't think materials lent themselves to where the kids were. I spent every Saturday evening punching out materials for the kids because kids couldn't do it themselves. Materials weren't age-appropriate."

*Vi Yount*

*Greeley, Colorado*

"Sue and I felt the Lord was calling us to go into Christian financial ministries at our church. And we didn't have time to do both children's and financial ministries. We didn't move out of Christian ministry. Instead, we just moved into a different focus."

*Jan Gonzalez*

*Medford, New Jersey*

"I'm pursuing a master's degree and had too much going on. So I decided to drop Sunday school. I hope it won't be permanently."

*Laurel Rynd*  
*La Mirada, California*

"We have fifth- and sixth-grade girls. We started out okay, but I couldn't get them to want to learn anything toward the end of the year...I don't think I'm cut out to motivate this age group."

*Violet Davis*  
*Jacksonville, Florida*