

# How to Recruit Strong Volunteers for Your Youth Ministry

by Rob Tessier

Whether starting a new program or reviving a present one, recruiting volunteers is an ongoing task for all Directors of Youth Ministry (DYMs). A collection of strong volunteers can be a necessary ingredient to create a vibrant youth ministry program. At the same time, selecting one or more poor volunteers can land a ministry in troubled water. Therefore, it is important to carefully discern how to recruit strong volunteers.

**Here are five steps to building and recruiting a strong volunteer core:**

## **1. Define your need and ideal candidate**

- a. Just like an electric company would not hire a plumber to wire a home, it is important that a youth ministry program does not recruit just anyone to be a volunteer. Defining the criteria needed in a candidate is vital.
  - i. Love for Jesus and love for youth - Any person who is going to work in direct ministry with young people needs to have a true passion for their faith and a true care for teens. In some way they need to be able to articulate that their goal is to bring youth to a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ. In addition, it should be evident that the volunteer has a core spirituality and an active prayer and sacramental life.
  - ii. Commitment to the ministry - A strong volunteer is someone who is able to keep a commitment. In some ministries, that might be defined as every Sunday from 4:00-9:00pm and one planning meeting each month. Consistently fulfilling the commitment is vital. In the course of a year, there should be no more than 2-3 Sundays missed.
  - iii. Team player - A ministry team requires people who bring good ideas but are also willing to sacrifice their own ideas at times to follow someone else's. A collaborative spirit is imperative on a ministry team.
  - iv. Clean personal life - It's important to be sure a new volunteer is in full compliance with the child protection policies and guidelines, is living a moral personal life, and is a lawful person who avoids any instance of scandal.
- b. The criteria described in "a" are important for a direct youth ministry volunteer (one working relationally with teens). An indirect minister is someone who supports the ministry by providing food or assisting in various support roles. A person in this category does not need to be scrutinized as closely; therefore, this article will focus on seeking the direct youth ministry volunteers.

## **2. Look in the right places**

- a. Ask other parish leaders (a personal reference will turn up your strongest volunteers)-
  - i. The RCIA coordinator is someone that may be able to recommend some people who have gone through RCIA and would be good with teens. New Catholics can sometimes make the best youth leaders because they are on fire with their newly found faith.

- ii. The pastor or parochial vicar may have encountered someone in marriage preparation or even in conversation after Mass that would be a potential candidate. Priests can be a great resource for identifying good volunteers.
  - iii. Highly active parishioners, parish council members, leaders of committees, and the young adult ministry at the parish will often know of people they can recommend to be contacted about volunteering in youth ministry.
- b. Be observant while at parish events (trust your instincts and God's prodding to reveal the right people to you).
  - i. Daily Mass is a great place to spot a couple of key volunteers.
  - ii. A prayer gathering, or pro-life event, or young adult social can all be places to discover new potential volunteers.
- c. Advertise the need (this has the greatest potential of discovering someone that is not desired; however, this method can discover a new parishioner who moved into the parish after being a stellar youth ministry volunteer somewhere else)
  - i. The bulletin is one place to post your ad, both in the regular parish section and on the Youth Ministry page.
  - ii. Standing at the pulpit to make an announcement about the youth ministry program and stating the opportunity for volunteer involvement can be very helpful in late August.
  - iii. If your parish holds a ministry fair, be sure to have a booth and be ready to discover new volunteers.

### **3. Invite, screen, and discern**

- a. Invite - Upon discovering a new potential volunteer, offer a personal invitation to them to discuss the youth ministry program. If possible, have this discussion free of distractions and time limitations. The discussion is an opportunity to learn about the new volunteer and share with them the goals and activities of Youth Ministry. It should be stated up front that the meeting is an opportunity for both parties to learn more about the other and discern whether it is a good ministry fit.
- b. Screen - If the discussion proves to be revealing a potentially strong volunteer, then some sort of an application should be given to him/her along with the Diocesan Office for the Protection of Children and Young People (OPCYP) compliance paperwork. It should be requested that everything be completed within a week. A follow-up meeting can be scheduled to go through everything. The application should be one that asks about their spiritual and moral life in addition to questioning their desire to work with youth in a relational ministry setting. A [sample application](#) is provided on the Office of Youth, Campus, and Young Adult Ministries website.
- c. Discern - After the discussions and review of the application, discern whether the person is a good fit. If both the volunteer and the DYM feel it is a good fit, be sure to clarify the commitment before both agreeing to work together.

### **4. Retain strong volunteers through pro-active measures**

- a. Vision, leadership, and organization - Volunteers want to be led and they want to be a part of something that has a mission, goals, and clearly defined expectations. One of the best ways to keep volunteers is to communicate clearly the schedule, the expectations, and the vision.

- b. Gratitude - Thanking a volunteer goes a long way in keeping him/her! Verbal praise when they do something well should consistently be part of a DYM's response. In addition, some sort of an appreciation party or dinner should be provided at the conclusion of each semester. The Office of Youth, Campus, and Young Adult Ministries offers a great Appreciation Mass and Dinner to which you can bring your volunteers as a way of thanking them. A handwritten note of thanks and a small gift at the end of a year is a wonderful way to show gratitude. A volunteer who feels appreciated is much more likely to continue.
- c. Sense of ownership - As a volunteer becomes more integral to the team, they begin to feel a sense of ownership about what they are involved in. As long as that is tempered with following the vision and working within the parameters set forth by leadership, a sense of ownership will help strong volunteers stay longer and speak proudly about their involvement. A volunteer with a healthy sense of ownership will help attract other strong volunteers.

#### **5. Redirect and release poor volunteers**

- a. As a year is closing, it is important to evaluate the effectiveness and level of commitment represented by each volunteer. Sometimes there is a need to redirect or release a volunteer that proves to be a distraction or a disruption to the youth ministry program. Though difficult to do, by letting that volunteer go, you will probably be helping your Core Team and your youth ministry program to improve.
- b. For a volunteer who simply is not pulling their weight and is proving very inconsistent, it is best to sit down with them and review the commitment. Likely, there are other family and personal factors making it tough to keep the commitment. By recognizing these other factors and letting the volunteer know that it might be better to spend more time taking care of those other life situations as opposed to volunteering, the result can be a greater sense of freedom for the volunteer. Certainly, the door does not need to be totally shut; after a semester or a year off, that person can reconsider coming back if they can keep the commitment.
- c. For a volunteer who is a disruption or distraction due to not being a good team player or being resistant to the vision set forth by the DYM, a different tactic may be needed. In this case, it's important to sit down with the volunteer and provide examples of how that volunteer has been disrupting the program. It may be helpful to have a priest or other trusted person who understands the situation in the meeting as well. Hopefully, it will become clear to the volunteer that they, too, would be happier volunteering in a different program that they find better fits their vision.

In closing, if one pays close attention when building strong leaders, a youth ministry program will not have to do significant recruiting each year. Some volunteers will stay for more than 10 years and others will come seeking to volunteer because of the good reputation that you've developed.

*Rob Tessier has been a Director of Youth Ministry in the Diocese of Arlington for 23 years and has been serving at All Saints Parish since 2001 while also serving as Middle School Religion and Theatre Teacher at All Saints Catholic School. Additionally, Rob is founder/director of both Upper Room Theatre Ministry and Spotlight on the Arts Summer Camps which both bring the arts alive within a Catholic setting for youth. Currently a graduate*

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