

# 3 Things Your Church Volunteers Wish You Knew

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Most of us realize church volunteers are essential to a healthy, growing church. They willingly fill in the gaps wherever they're needed in order to help churches serve their members and communities. It's not a stretch to say church volunteers are the unsung heroes behind the scenes — most ministries couldn't function without them!

As important as we know church volunteers to be, volunteer burnout is a common issue in many churches. If you've been involved in ministry at all, you've probably experienced church volunteers feeling undervalued and overworked. Think about it: volunteers likely have busy lives outside of church, but they want to give back with their time and help churches grow and reach people for Christ. They don't have the same capacity to help as a paid staff member, but they are often expected to have much of the same availability and enthusiasm. Oftentimes, that's unrealistic and unsustainable!

Ultimately, a healthy volunteer program is essential to a healthy church. There are a lot of ways to prevent or lessen volunteer burnout, but it takes leadership willing to listen to the concerns and requests of volunteers. Here are three things your volunteers probably wish you knew about why they burn out (and steps you can take to prevent that happening):

## 1. Volunteers want meaningful work.

Imagine this: you're a member of a church and want to become more involved and give back with your time. Your pastor announces there's a big need for church volunteers. You sign up in an area of interest, attend volunteer training, and show up on Sunday ready to serve. You arrive at your post and...there's nothing for you to do. Maybe there's no leader pointing the way, or maybe an abundance of people have signed up to serve in this particular area. No matter the reason, there's almost nothing more frustrating than showing up ready to help and being left to twiddle your thumbs.

It's up to church staff to make the need for volunteers clear.

Does your church really need five people at the coffee table? Do you need three greeters at every door? Are there already plenty of people helping set up before service or clean up afterward? Tell your volunteers! If you're desperate for children's ministry volunteers but have all the youth group leaders you need, make it known.

It helps to give your volunteers choices, too. People want to serve where they're gifted. Being placed in an area they didn't choose that clearly has enough help is disheartening. If their ministry of choice doesn't need extra help when they sign up, be honest with them and talk through other ministry needs that might be a good fit.

Another part of making work meaningful is the option for growth in volunteer roles.

If you provide a clear path of development, people will see that you're willing to make a long term investment in their service to your church. It's motivating and encouraging to know that you can build as you go, rather than staying stagnant in the same role without an end in sight. Some volunteers may be content to stay in their roles longterm — that's okay, too! What's important is working with each individual to make sure they feel they are in the right role at the right time.

## 2. Volunteers need breaks.

Even the most enthusiastic and dedicated church volunteers are going to need a break at some point. It can be daunting to sign on for a commitment with no end in sight. After all, life changes quickly — career responsibilities shift, family needs arise, health issues crop up — and people might not have the time or energy available to serve like they did when they first signed up.

If someone needs to adjust the level of their volunteer commitment or back out entirely, show them kindness and understanding. It's okay to expect volunteers to show up on time and serve their church well. Responsibility is important! However, a little grace goes a long way when someone's life shifts and they need to dial down their commitment.

You can also help volunteers avoid burnout by scheduling breaks into your volunteer rotations.

You could try different rhythms (i.e. three weeks on and one week off) or adopt a semester long commitment agreement. Have volunteers sign up for shifts for a season, and at the end of the season, talk with them and evaluate how they're feeling about their role in your ministry.

If they're still energized and enthusiastic, they can sign up for another semester. If they're feeling a little overwhelmed, let them know it's okay to take a break or try out a different area of ministry. The important thing is to acknowledge and affirm that volunteering is not an endless commitment. When you emphasize that you want your volunteers to feel fulfilled by their roles, you show they're important and valued as part of your church team.

At first, you'll probably have to be the one to initiate talks about taking breaks. Tell your volunteers it's okay to take rest periods and encourage them to do so. If they don't feel comfortable enough to ask or are worried about judgement, you can create a bridge by making breaks mandatory at certain intervals, or repeatedly emphasizing that breaks are okay.

It also helps to make sure you cross-train people to serve in more than one role. For example, you may have plenty of people volunteering for your greeter team, but far fewer helping out with children's ministry. If someone in children's ministry needs a break, make sure you have someone who can step in and cover their duties.

### **3. Volunteers want to be appreciated.**

They may not ask for it directly, but regular appreciation goes a long way to keeping your church volunteers motivated. When you're in a regular Sunday rhythm, it's easy to unintentionally overlook volunteers. If they're committed to showing up and helping services run smoothly, they become part of the team. They aren't compensated (nor do they want to be!), but most volunteers are grateful to have their contributions acknowledged. Spend some time showing your volunteers they're valued — here are a few options to try:

- Volunteer appreciation dinners or outings
- Small gifts or a card on their birthdays
- Shout-outs from the stage on Sundays
- A word of thanks or encouragement from pastors or other ministry leaders
- A handwritten note of appreciation on volunteer anniversaries
- Mentoring from volunteer coordinators or staff members
- Ongoing training and development
- Praying together each Sunday before the service starts

Another way to appreciate volunteers is to offer them a safe space to provide feedback. Try an anonymous survey sent through email, or a suggestion box where they can submit their ideas. Encourage honest dialogue by regularly asking volunteers how things are going, what would make their jobs easier or more fulfilling, or what could be improved in their volunteer area or in the volunteer program as a whole.

When you get feedback, act on it! If there's a suggestion you could take or an improvement you could make, do so. If you never act on feedback or don't create an open dialogue surrounding issues or suggestions, volunteers won't feel like they're being heard.

### **Conclusion**

Ultimately, the most important thing you can do to prevent volunteer burnout is communicate. Your church volunteers signed up to serve for a reason. They want to be engaged in your ministry! If leadership at your church consistently recognizes and values volunteers, your volunteer ministry is more likely to remain healthy. If you think your church could improve on any of the points listed in this article, talk to your volunteers. Chances are they'll be happy to communicate with you and tell you any other questions or concerns they have about continuing to serve at your church in a healthy capacity.