

SIGNS OF HOPE

At one time or another, each of us has probably been overwhelmed thinking about all that we have to do in order to be true to the Gospel. These feelings intensify when we are tempted to dwell on our personal shortcomings, or on obstacles others put in our path. But we must never despair! The Lord will make sure His work will be done. With faith in hand we help ourselves by taking time to reflect on all the good efforts accomplished by ourselves and others.

There are many big and little victories—"signs of hope"—we have only to look and then to tell each other. We invite you to send us word about the "signs of hope" in your diocese. Meanwhile, take a look at the following stories which are sure signs of hope.

Volunteers—Steady Signs of Hope in the Church

Thérèse Bermpohl

Volunteers are sure signs of hope in the Church. They are the ones "on the front lines," generously carrying the bulk of service in the Church. We see them teaching parish religion classes, praying in front of abortion clinics, feeding the hungry, and even holding bake sales to raise money for building renovations. They work for love of God and for love of Church. Despite the great volume of tasks that exist in the Church, there is a vast pool of individuals out there just waiting for the chance to help, to volunteer.

Realizing that NFP ministry has its own set of very unique requirements, still, finding new volunteers is essential to the life and health of your program. Part of the solution to this enduring problem may be just a matter of devising a new and effective recruitment strategy. As hard as that may be for some to believe, it's possible. Your new strategy can service the needs of NFP ministry by interfacing them with the talents and gifts of those who are looking to volunteer.

In *How to Mobilize Volunteers*, Marlene Wilson helps to answer some of those questions concerning how to begin or how to parlay an existing ministry into a successful volunteer program. Using the typical Church program as a model, Wilson cites the following reasons why people are reluctant to volunteer:

- 1) The ministry's job is not clearly defined.
(That is, the amount of skill and time needed for specific jobs is not spelled out.)
- 2) Various organizational forms—such as "time and talent sheets"—are not used properly.
(When people are asked to fill out information sheets listing their gifts and talents they expect to get a response. When no follow-up is attempted, they get a clear message that their talents are of little or no use. A word to the wise—don't have people fill out forms if you are not going to use them!)
- 3) Those in charge don't delegate.
- 4) Leaders are more interested in filling jobs with warm bodies than matching talents with specific jobs.
- 5) People stay in one job for too long and burn out.

Take time out of your busy schedule to reflect upon your NFP program in light of the above points. Ask yourself if any of these problems might be applicable to your program. If you realize that you have one or two of these weaknesses, don't give up! You can address such shortcomings and overcome them. Wilson devised several suggestions to help. She begins by noting that strong leadership is key. But "strength" does not mean "oppression." Good leaders

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Marlene Wilson lists the following top reasons why people volunteer:

TO BE NEEDED

TO SUPPORT THE CAUSE THEY BELIEVE IN

TO HELP OTHERS AND MAKE A DIFFERENCE

TO LEARN SKILLS & USE WHAT THEY HAVE

TO BELONG TO A COMMUNITY/ TO KEEP FROM FEELING LONELY

TO STRENGTHEN THEIR SELF-ESTEEM & TO BE AFFIRMED

TO GROW IN FAITH & GOD-GIVEN GIFTS

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need to delegate and allow others to get involved. An effective leader is one who enables others, fostering their individual gifts. A wise leader is aware of his/her own talents and abilities and is considerate of all the people connected to the program. This last point, that of being considerate, can at times become a "trap" to even the strongest leader. Wilson says that one of the most common reasons leaders refuse to delegate certain tasks is because they find a particular job unpleasant. They fear "pawning off" the unpleasant task on an unsuspecting volunteer. They prefer just to do it themselves. However, studies show that in all probability what is one person's least favorite job, will be another's favorite. So, be open about the variety of tasks in your program and let people decide for themselves if they can take them on.

Motivation is also very important to any volunteer program. Marlene quotes from David McClelland and John Atkinson's book, *Motivation and Organization Climate*, which focuses on 3 factors which most affect how people are motivated: the need for power, achievement, and affiliation. The authors note that all three factors can be positive when used for the good of the community. For example, achievers are always ready for a challenge, they are best at organizing programs and solving problems. Affiliators, on the other hand, are task-oriented and enjoy working with people. Power motivators are movers and shakers who can raise money, negotiate, and hold the group accountable for its actions. The trick is to match tasks with people. The bottom line for your program, however, is the faith factor.

We all know that the greatest motivator for Church people is their faith. It is therefore imperative that leaders help volunteers to view their jobs as expressions of their faith. In short, to view their

work as "ministry." Attitudes must change so that jobs can be viewed as ministry. This is especially important in NFP ministry where volunteers often work amidst great obstacles. Your NFP program can buffer or work to alleviate the weariness of volunteers by letting them know they are valued. One word of warning: when people invest themselves in work which is viewed as ministry they must still be encouraged to

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maintain a certain "detachment." For example, if a task changes hands, the one "letting go" should see it as an opportunity to allow another to "share" his/her gifts. This is nothing other than fostering the virtue of generosity in program life. In this way, the temptation to "pos-

sessiveness" or "turf wars" can also be side-stepped and peace can reign in your program.

Program environment also plays a strong role in attracting volunteers. The atmosphere you set in your program should be conducive to fostering openness. Here are some questions to ask yourself as you strengthen your program: Are volunteers made to feel welcomed? Do volunteers feel part of the team? Are conflicts handled with care or are they ignored? Do clients and others in the Church thank them properly? Do volunteers feel supported?

Marlene Wilson worked for seven years placing & recruiting volunteers in various organizations. Whenever she and her colleagues asked volunteers why they left previous positions they usually cited the following reasons: "I didn't know what was expected of me"; "I didn't have a job description"; "I didn't know who I was responsible to, so I never knew who to go to with problems or ideas"; "No one ever said whether or not what I was doing was helpful"; and "I was asked to do more and more and I just got burned out." Over the last ten

years leaders in the field of volunteerism have tried to address these problems and have come up with some solutions. Good management skills are at the basis of a good volunteer program. These skills include taking a careful look at: recruitment; creating new program strategies; periodic evaluations; and affirmation.

"Recruitment"

Recruit and interview with care. Never tell someone that he/she is your "last hope." Allow people to say "no" gracefully. When attempting to convince someone to take on a particular position, make the request as personal as possible and avoid guilt techniques. You might try setting up file folders with job descriptions, clearly listing the name and phone number of the appropriate contact person. This way potential volunteers can simply drop by the office and easily scan for jobs they might be interested in doing. Interview people carefully listening to what they have to say. Encourage them to talk about their interests, skills, and feelings about getting involved. Try to ask open-ended questions, sum up what they say and wait for clarification. Be sure to give people direction. Make use of talent sheets and ask the right person for the right job. Try to get back to them within a short period of time (e.g., three weeks).

"Creating New Program Strategies"

When you can, recruit before you plan new program strategies. Remember people are committed to plans *they* make. When people are part of the planning process they take ownership. Hold "brain-storming" meetings with your staff. Ask yourselves basic questions like, "Where are we now, and where do we want to go?", etc. Set goals (why) and objectives (how). Devise a plan of action (who, what, when, how—including a budget.) Organize but, again, try not to recruit before designing jobs.

"Periodic Evaluations"

Review positions at the end of each year. Break down weighty jobs and

allow dull jobs to grow. For example, permit the person who files to set up his/her own filing system or let the person who types the newsletter also gather the news and information. You can even set up new positions to reflect the talents of new people. Allow volunteers to be creative—of course within limits. Lose phrases like "we always" or "we never." When you perceive that you have matched someone to the wrong job the person in charge needs to either retrain the volunteer or move him/her to a position better suited to his/her gifts. Demonstrate that people are as important as programs. When asking volunteers about their talents listen and watch. When they light up, that is usually a good indicator of gifts. Affirm everyone working with you. Encourage volunteers to be open with you. When they feel a job is over their head allow them the freedom to say so.

Hold yourself and volunteers accountable to the goals of your program. Having a job description for both of you helps. If you notice that someone is not doing a good job then review the job description with him/her and clarify the problem. If the volunteer is still not doing their part—let them go. Periods of evaluation with documentation (forms) can facilitate this. It's a chance to say "well done" and the opportunity to note the need for improvement. The feelings and comments of volunteers are valuable. Using both objective and subjective evaluations can help you decide whether to add, drop, change, or keep programs

"Affirmation"

Volunteers need to be more carefully interviewed and assigned tasks appropriate to their skill levels. They need to be involved at the planning stages of programs whenever possible. They also need to receive recognition and to be valued as team members. Signs of gratitude such as publishing a list of people who volunteer for your program—teachers, witnesses, consultants, baby-sitters, and secretaries—in the diocesan news-

According to a gallop poll 41-45% of all volunteers in the United States and Canada were male and 33% of Americans volunteered on a regular basis in 1981.

(Wilson, p. 87)

paper will go a long way. When you can, reimburse them for out of pocket expenses—remember, the program should make sacrifices as well as the volunteers. Recognize birthdays, anniversaries, send Christmas cards. Provide child care services to parent of young children. Write thank you notes, etc. Hold an annual recognition dinner and honor your volunteers with all sorts of awards. Above all, plan special Masses, worship services, or retreats around their ministry.

Finally, no ministry is complete without prayer. Remember to pray for your ministry and your ministers! Pray together as a staff. Get a team of people together at different parishes who will pray for the well being of your program. Never underestimate the power of prayer!

You may want to get a copy of Marlene Wilson's book, *How to Mobilize Church Volunteers* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1983). It is informative and has some helpful diagrams which can facilitate your thinking. Hope this has been helpful. May God bless you and your ministry abundantly! ■

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