LEAD FORWARD CONFERENCE WORKSHOP

The Volunteer Shift

From filling slots to developing leaders

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Numbers that should make us lean in

47 → 19

Average regular volunteers in a church of 250–300

Since 1998

62%

Of volunteers who left during COVID never returned

Permanent loss

Age 62

Average age of a church volunteer today

What happens next?

TODAY WE'LL EXPLORE

Three things that change everything

01 Why people actually say yes

The real motivations behind volunteering

02 Why they leave

Often quietly—and permanently

03 How to shift

From managing volunteers to developing leaders

01

They want to contribute to a cause they believe in

People volunteer because they care about the mission. They want their time and energy to matter for something bigger than themselves.

02

They want to learn and grow

Musicians want to sharpen their craft. Tech teams want to master production. Even the coffee team often wants to learn how to make that perfect latte art.

03

They want ownership and voice

At work they may have little say. On a church team they can actually lead change. People stay when they feel their ideas and input genuinely matter.

04

They’re motivated by a desire for change

They want to improve something.

05

They want to have fun and enjoy what they’re doing

They don’t have to volunteer—they actually enjoy it. Their paid work may not bring them life, but this does. “This is my happy place.”

06

They want community

They want to meet new people. People are lonely. Volunteering is one of the last places where real relationships still form.

A personal invitation changes everything.

Research confirms what many of us have sensed:

The strongest predictor of someone volunteering is not a stage announcement or a signup sheet.

It is a personal invitation from someone they respect and trust—to do something specific, for a defined period of time, where they can see the impact.

01

They were underutilized

The woman who is the CEO of her company—but we only have her bringing cupcakes to the church lunch.

02

The physical environment made their work harder than it needed to be

She got to the volunteer shift and nothing was ready—the photocopier wasn’t working, the Sunday school curriculum wasn’t picked up.

03

The atmosphere felt impersonal, tense, or cold

People won’t spend free time where they don’t feel welcome.

04

They made a suggestion that was ignored

No one even responded. When people feel unheard, they quietly step away.

05

“Insiders” never really let them in

Long-term volunteers or church attenders formed cliques. New people never felt like they truly belonged.

06

They didn’t know how to say “this isn’t a good fit”

They didn’t like doing that particular job, but didn’t know how to say so—so they just disappeared.

07

Staff treated them as an interruption rather than anticipated help

When volunteers feel like they’re in the way instead of valued help, they stop showing up.

08

The reality of the role did not match what they were promised

They thought they were going to be doing one thing but ended up doing something very different.

From checking boxes to developing leaders

Leadership is about motivating and energizing people.
Volunteers will be both your greatest strength and your greatest tension.

The way through the tension is to stop seeing people as positions to fill and start seeing them as potential to develop.

Eight practices that develop leaders

1

LOOK

See the potential

2

SPEAK

Call out the gifts

3

ASK

Invite personally

4

INVOLVE

Create ownership

5

SERVE

Walk alongside

6

DIRECT

Lead in your voice

7

GROW

Stay a learner

8

PRAY

Seek God’s eyes

Look at the potential in your people

Pay attention to their actual lives

What do they do? What season are they in? People become loyal when they feel known.

Look with spiritual eyes

What gifts has God already placed in them?

See potential, not problems

The aggressive greeter may be your next problem-solver

Focus strategically

Spend 80% of your limited development time with the top 20% of volunteers.

The four qualities of high-potential volunteers

1

Faithful

They show up. They come to the meetings and the events.

2

Reliable

They do what they say. You never have to worry.

3

Available

They have capacity right now—not just good intentions.

4

Teachable

They try new things and respond to feedback.

Say what you see

Call out the giftings in people when you see them.

When you name a gift in someone, they often begin to grow into it

Everyone in your congregation has something that needs to be called out.

Personal invitation changes everything

Stage announcements and newsletter pleas rarely work.

A personal ask almost always gets a response—and an ask can change the trajectory of someone's life.

"Sarah, I always admire how organized you are—could I ask you to help me organize the Sunday school classes?"

What works is someone asking Sarah. The strongest predictor of church volunteering is being personally invited by someone.

Involve them in the journey

Involvement	Ownership	Motivation	Action	Momentum
creates ownership	fuels motivation	produces action	builds momentum	creates change

Never run errands alone. Take them to training. Give them a real say. Watch them start recruiting others.

SERVE

When you lead—learn to serve.

Be the one who picks up trash, washes dishes, or steps into childcare when needed (within healthy limits).

Serving with them builds trust faster than directing from above.

DIRECT

Step up and lead in your own style and voice.

Don’t try to be the previous pastor. Lead from what God has gifted you with. Authenticity is what people resonate with most.

Use progressive release (John Maxwell):
I do, you watch → We do → You do, I watch → You do.

GROW

Stay a learner.

Ask for feedback regularly. The discipline of daily learning means you’re not afraid of hearing that you need to grow as a leader.

Your willingness to receive feedback models the very culture you want to build.

PRAY

Prayer changes things.

1 Thessalonians 5:17 — “Pray continually.”

Pray for wisdom and direction. Pray for eyes to see untapped potential and unseen people. Pray for the right people in the right positions.

Prayer is what makes the unseen potential visible.

THE SHIFT IN A SENTENCE

Recruiting people	→	**Developing people**
Assigning tasks	→	**Creating ownership**
Managing volunteers	→	**Releasing leaders**
Doing ministry ourselves	→	**Multiplying ministry through others**

01

Clear vision

People will follow a leader who tells them where you’re going and why it matters.

02

Good training and confidence

They will work for leaders who equip them so they don’t feel set up to fail.

When people feel prepared and confident, they stay longer and serve with greater joy.

03

Passion

Can your volunteers tell that you love what you are leading?

If you're not excited about something, they won't be either. Your volunteers will borrow some of your emotional energy. They watch your face and listen to your tone.

Passion is contagious—but so is apathy.

04

Encouragement and appreciation

Overdo it.

Handwritten notes go a long way. Make eye contact when you thank them. Organize appreciation events. Invite them into your home. Never take them for granted.

Compliment them in front of someone else. These are people giving you their time—the one thing they can’t get back—so let them know they are appreciated.

05

Steady attitude

Be the calm in the storm.

If an event goes wrong—how do you respond? Are you the calm in the storm or adding to it?

Be their cheerleader. You get to remind them: “It’s okay—we will figure this out!”

Volunteers respond to steady leaders.

YOUR NEXT 30 DAYS

What is one specific shift you will make?

Will you personally invite three people instead of making another announcement?

Will you reassign someone whose gifts are being underused?

Will you spend intentional time developing two or three high-potential leaders?

This is not a quick fix.

It’s slow work that produces a thriving, sustainable culture.

The churches that rebuild volunteer cultures share one characteristic:
they invested in relationships first.

They stopped trying to fill slots and started helping people discover
where their gifts and passions align with meaningful impact.

The shift begins with how you see the people sitting in your seats every Sunday.

Questions?

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