



ENCOURAGING VOLUNTEERISM IN YOUR CONGREGATION

FROM THE FAITH INITIATIVE OF THE POINTS OF LIGHT FOUNDATION
TIP SERIES #: RRN10

*The primary goal of social service programs is to improve the situations of program recipients. But as any long-time volunteer will tell you, serving others brings as much, if not more, benefit to the giver of the service as to the recipient. *Studies show three important points about the connection between faith and volunteerism: 1) voluntarily serving others is more effective in strengthening the impact of faith than attending worship services more than once a week; 2) volunteering with persons of different or conflicting backgrounds and beliefs tends to confirm, rather than confuse, a volunteer's faith; and 3) congregation members who are personally involved in community ministry are more apt to financially support the congregation than are members who do not volunteer. *(For more information on this study, contact support@fastennetwork.org)*

PROMOTING VOLUNTEER SERVICE TO CONGREGATION MEMBERS

Although engaging in service can provide many spiritual benefits, volunteers still may find themselves feeling unchallenged and unfulfilled by their work in the community. Strengthening the faith-life of volunteers should be an important focus for congregational leaders, not only because service is such an integral component of a religious lifestyle, but also because community needs are great, and volunteers are consistently in high demand.

Here are some steps congregational leaders can take to revitalize their congregants' commitment to serve while strengthening the faith-life of volunteers:

- Challenge members to get involved in community ministry as a necessary outgrowth of religious faith.

Provide the means for them to respond to your challenge. Offer mission opportunities through the congregation itself, and seek out opportunities for volunteers in public, private, faith-based and secular venues. Consider programs that require once-daily volunteers as well as once-monthly volunteers, so that even members who have very little time to donate can get involved in volunteer work. For families with school-age children and for working professionals, provide opportunities to volunteer during hours when they could be available, i.e. during weekends, vacation times, evenings and early mornings.

- Work on moving members from short-term volunteer ventures to long-term commitments.

Many congregations literally move their members, sending them on long-distance mission trips during which participants can gain a new appreciation of the positive impact made in people's lives because of their efforts. But opportunities for joyful service exist close to home, too. Volunteers who thrive in distant missions settings may be inspired to get involved in similar projects locally.

- Define volunteer jobs in ways that emphasize the relational aspect of volunteering.

Relational services— such as delivering meals weekly to a regular set of people, tutoring the same child over a period of time, or visiting residents of the same senior center—give volunteers the chance to develop personal bonds with other people. The challenges and rewards gained from developing personal relationships are far more significant for the faith formation of volunteers than non-relational service.

- Set the standard by setting an example: get personally involved in community service.

Congregational leaders who are involved and visible in community ministries will be better equipped to connect the congregation's services with the community's needs.

- Celebrate and educate volunteers.

Pray for upcoming volunteer events, and plan time afterward for the volunteers to share and reflect upon their experiences. Consider establishing a prayer group to help support volunteers through potentially difficult experiences in their community work. Use the group time to examine the social and economic factors that create the problems that volunteers are called upon to alleviate. Encourage volunteers to find ways to respond to systemic problems as well as to the impact of such problems on the lives of individuals.

- Encourage service for service's sake.

Discourage the congregation from equating success as a volunteer with solving the community's problems. Remind volunteers that volunteering is an opportunity to learn, to befriend and to support, and that the burden of changing lives doesn't rest on them personally.

With the right balance of encouragement, opportunity, challenge and support, religious leaders can lead their congregations towards a renewed commitment to serving their communities and towards a stronger faith.