

CRASH COURSES *in* YOUTH MINISTRY

RECRUITING VOLUNTEERS

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UMCyoungpeople.org



DISCIPLESHIP MINISTRIES
The United Methodist Church

A crash course (in training or education) condenses lots of practical material so that you can read and understand it quickly. A crash course is not where we strap you behind the wheel of a youth ministry bus, point you downhill towards a target and say, “*Hope you don’t crash!*” as you hit every bump possible on the road ahead.

Each of these crash courses in youth ministry are loaded with practical tips and basic wisdom that you can read today and put in to practice tomorrow. If you are a part-time or no-time (amazing volunteer!) youth worker, these crash courses are especially for you. (They’re also great for anyone leading a youth ministry. Just saying.)

Additional crash courses are available at:

UMCyoungpeople.org/CrashCourses

Further training for a variety of leadership roles in ministry is available in the e-learning section of Discipleship Ministries’ store at:
store.UMCdiscipleship.org/product-category/elearning

INTRODUCTION

I WAS STANDING AT THE FRONT OF THE SANCTUARY MEETING AND TROUBLESHOOTING WITH THE GROUP OF PEOPLE WHO HAD STUCK AROUND AFTER MY SEMINAR ON YOUTH MINISTRY AND THEOLOGY.

A woman with a familiar, somewhat desperate, somewhat tired, look in her eyes sat in the front row. I knew what she was going to ask before she opened her mouth...

“Jeremy, all of this theology stuff is great and all but, I just don’t know how I can take time to think about all of this because I can’t even get any help.”

“You’re having a hard time getting volunteers? Is that it?”

“Yeah, but I am a volunteer. We don’t have a big youth group, so I can really do everything by myself, but when I’m sick or out of town, there’s nobody but the pastor to oversee the youth group, and the pastor is not great with kids, so they just don’t come when he is leading.”

I had good news for her, and good news for you too. Though recruiting new volunteers can seem like some sort of secret black art, there are a handful of simple things anyone can do, at any size church, that



will dramatically increase the likelihood of getting volunteers. And they are things that, in my experience, are most effective when the person doing them is a volunteer.

01 WHAT DOESN'T WORK

BEFORE WE START ON WHAT TO DO, LET'S SAVE SOME TIME BY TALKING ABOUT WHAT DOESN'T WORK.

First and foremost, do not waste your time on anonymous approaches. That means bulletin inserts and pulpit announcements. In over two decades of doing youth ministry and training thousands of paid and volunteer youth workers all over the United States, I have heard precisely one story where an announcement in a bulletin or from a pulpit was successful in recruiting long-term, effective volunteers. Every other story I have heard has been about how no one came after the appeal or how only one person came and ended up not working out. To recruit volunteers, you have to follow the model Jesus used when recruiting the disciples: WWJD? He'd get to know people!

The second big waste of time is trying to recruit volunteers without knowing what you need them to do. There is nothing less appealing to people than saying, *"Just show up."* or *"We just need another warm body. All you need to do is be in the room."* For most people, adolescence was one of the hardest and most awkward seasons of their lives. Because of that, the idea of walking into a room full of teenagers is, let's just say, less than appealing. To find people to work, you need specifics



when you ask them. (WWJD? He'd get in there with the kids anyway!)

The last big time waster in trying to recruit volunteers is apologizing and/or being ungrateful. Though the thought of reliving one's adolescence is enough to make most reasonable adults run for the hills, you and I both know that working with teens is powerful and rewarding work. So, don't apologize when you ask.

Don't say, *"I know teens are oddly intimidating and we kind of need a lot of time, but we really do need some help."* HARD. PASS. The other side of that coin is being ungrateful. Being overly sensitive to the difficulty of working with teens in asking for volunteers can be unsuccessfully replaced by refusing to recognize the difficulty. Ungrateful volunteer asks come across, *"I am asking you to do this because it is the parents' obligation to do this because it's for their kids."* People have a limited amount of time, and they won't give it to an organization that doesn't recognize their sacrifice.

If you are a volunteer youth worker, this is a particularly slippery slope. When you are starting to get burned out and overworked by a church, it can be easy to slip into this form of recruitment. But no matter how true it is that you are doing the work without help from the parents (who should be helping you), coming with that as your motivator for getting help will not work. Unless people know what they need to do and feel like it's part of a bigger mission, they are going to pass—regardless of how much guilt you are able to heap on them.

Oh, you know what doesn't work? Planning anything without having volunteers ahead of time!

02 THE FOUR THINGS YOU NEED TO SAY TO GET PEOPLE TO SAY 'YES'

WHAT DO YOU NEED TO DO TO GET MORE VOLUNTEERS WHO ACTUALLY HELP AND STICK AROUND?

Step one is to make an intentional, specific, mission-oriented, personal request when you approach someone about volunteering. We'll talk about which people you need to ask soon, just remember that we are not working on a really good bulletin announcement...we are working on what you need to say when you walk up to someone in church next Sunday (or their favorite hangout any day of the week) and ask that person to volunteer.

You have four pieces of information you have to know and communicate to get someone to the point where that person might say, "Yes." (These are what, when, how often, and the endpoint of volunteering if you are the impatient type.) If you've ever gone to buy a car, think about this inevitable question you'll get from the salesperson, "*What do I need to do to get you in a car today?*" The salesperson asks that because he or she knows that if you walk off the lot, he or she is likely going to lose the sale. If you don't have all the information ready when you ask a person to volunteer and you have to get back to that person, you are most likely going to lose the "sale" of recruiting that volunteer.



Knowing why volunteers are important should already be in your back pocket because of your mission and vision for youth ministry. When asking volunteers to join in that vision, you need to start your request with “what.” What are they going to do? And let’s be clear...the answer has to be more than, “*just show up and be there.*” Your “what” needs to be specific and stated in terms of mission. Are they leading a discussion? Cleaning up after the youth eat dinner? Entering attendance into the church database?

You’ll notice “run youth group” was not in that list. Yes, you need someone to do that, but that is a massive task that you will want to invite someone to do once that person is hooked on youth ministry, and you know he/she works well with teens. In fact, the first key to an effective “what” is making it as small as you can so that it seems easy to fit in someone’s schedule. Look at your typical youth meeting and find the pieces that someone could come alongside and help you or another volunteer. Having a partner for support can be huge at the beginning. (WWJD? He’d send them out two by two. Mark 6:7 or Luke 10:1.)

Maybe you get someone to come help with a game and another person to serve food and another person to help with cleanup. I know that sounds like we now are needing to recruit more people, but it is actually easier to get people to say yes to smaller, more-specific tasks. Also, let’s be honest: you’re going to have to do it all anyway if no one is there to help, so why not make it easy for someone to show up for the first time!?

course, you'll need to give people appropriate training (and background checks), and that's all in our [Crash Course on Keeping Volunteers](#).

When someone understands the “what” of your request, next make sure to help that person understand the “why.” Why is this volunteer role important for youth ministry at your church? Face it, asking someone to come clean up crusts and spills after the youth eat pizza is not very enticing. You can hear the responses now: *“Don’t we need to be teaching them to clean up after themselves?”* (If you can’t tell, I’m rolling my eyes right now.) But, when you state that task in missional terms, perspectives can shift. Prepare yourself to respond with something like, *“The reason I want someone to help me clean up, really, is because I have a limited amount of time with these kids each week. We both know hungry people can’t pay attention, and we also know getting kids to clean takes one thousand percent more time than an adult cleaning. If I want them to eat, me to eat, and have time to teach them about the Bible, I need help cleaning up.”*

So, that’s what you ask. Instead of, *“Can you come clean up after the kids eat? They are super messy.”* You say, *“We have a really limited amount of time each week with these kids, and we have to feed them so they can pay attention. If we end up having them also clean up after it’s over, we don’t have enough time to really teach them about the Bible. Do you think you could help us have time to teach the Bible by coming and doing a little cleanup for us after the meal on Sunday?”* Most people in church think it’s important to teach the Bible to teens AND don’t want to be the ones to do it. So, with

this request, you have given individuals a way to help with the former without doing the latter. Boom.

The second piece of information people need to know is “when.” When do they need to show up and how long do they need to be there? Of course, you’d like them to show up an hour beforehand and stay for the entire two-hour youth group meeting, but do you actually need them to be there that long? Especially if you have made smaller roles that help people say yes, make sure you know exactly when they need to arrive and how long they’ll be there. This piece of information is huge, depending on the busyness of a potential volunteer’s schedule. It may also start a discussion where you can learn about an individual’s schedule and create opportunities that better match the hours and days that the person could serve.

The third question people need answered is, “*How often do you need me?*” Again, I know you were hoping to have them every week for the rest of their lives, but most jobs (especially those that are not focused on building a relationship with students) can be done by a rotation of people. At some point, a rotation becomes too cumbersome for you to manage, but what about every other week or once a month? Besides, once you get people started, you will find some who enjoy things enough that they might be willing to increase how often they serve.

Finally, volunteers need an endpoint. Far too many churches expect volunteering to be like marriage: ‘til

death do us part. That is one of the most difficult parts for most people. When they feel like they have to commit to something for the rest of their lives (or even for an entire year), they are most likely going to say no. Instead, establish a clear end date of the commitment not too far in the future, and you'll thank me. Not only will that increase your "yes" rate, but it also gives you an out after a couple of months. If things aren't going well and you don't want to fire them, you can just thank them for helping at the end of their term and not invite them to help again!

With those four basic pieces of information gathered, you have a much more compelling request. Instead of saying *"Can you come to youth group and help clean up?"* You can say, *"We have a really limited amount of time each week with these kids and we have to feed them so they can pay attention, but if we end up having them also clean up after it's over, we don't have enough time to really teach them about the Bible. Do you think you could come for thirty minutes once a month and help us have time for Bible study by cleaning up the pizza boxes? We need someone to help us for the next three months."*

I mean, that's harder to turn down, right? What church member is going to say no to giving thirty minutes once a month to help kids have time to study the Bible? Ok, some people are, but you definitely don't want them around the teens anyway!

03 WHOM DO YOU ASK?

ALRIGHT, ONE LAST QUESTION—WHOM DO YOU ASK?

Most newbie youth volunteer recruiters instantly think of asking a bunch of hip, cool (insert slang that is more current and cooler than I would ever use in real life) young people because they seem like people youth could easily connect with. These potential young volunteers may be a lot cooler than you, but they are also way less likely to say yes than other groups. Why? They may not have the available time, energy, or resources required for the volunteer opportunities you have in mind. This group may be struggling to find schedule balance as young professionals, social time with friends and family; or they may even be raising young children. These factors mean that yes, you can find an awesome young adult volunteer, but the odds may not be in your favor. Young adults may not be considered a “warm market.”

In sales, there is a term called a “warm market.” This group of people is the group you have had some contact with already, and it is the group most likely to be interested in your product. There is an easy translation of that into volunteer recruitment. There is a group who are not your current “customers” (think youth) who are nevertheless already in contact with you and believe in what you are doing...we call that group parents/



guardians. So, your warm market for volunteers is the parent/guardian group!

Though all the youth in your group might not want all of their parents there every night, they are the people most likely to say “yes” to helping. So, ask them first. The secondary market, or the people next most likely to say “yes,” are all the people connected to the parents, students, and existing volunteers. You reach them by asking the parents, youth, and existing volunteers to help you connect with them. You say something like, “We are looking for a couple of people to help us stack chairs after youth group is over, who do you know that comes to mind who could help us with that? Do you have a spouse or friend or neighbor you could ask?” And then, you give them the “what/why, when, how long, and end point” you already created so that they can get a yes on your behalf!

There are other “markets” of course, and one that can yield incredible results is retired adults. These are folks who have retired from their professional lives and now have some freedom to fill their days with activities that they find meaningful and valuable. So if you know the what/why, when, how long, and duration, this group of folks can often be available when parents, guardians, and other working adults are not. Honestly, in a lot of United Methodist churches, there is a high likelihood that retired folks are a very present and underused group of people!

Youth ministry is not something we do to or for youth; it's something we do with them, and that includes recruiting volunteers. Many of the things adults assume need to be done for youth are actually tasks that can be done by or with youth. So when recruiting volunteers, don't forget that your students are part of the group that you should think about recruiting. That being said, you need adults. And while you might get a straight no, it can be a whole different ball game when the person asking is a young person. Imagine what happens when a kid is equipped with the what/why, when, how long and end point goes up to an adult in the congregation and says, "*We have been talking and think you would be a really great person to help lead games at youth group. It only takes x amount of time, etc.*" Boom. New volunteers. You're welcome.

CONCLUSION

IF YOU NEED HELP GETTING KIDS TO SAY YES TO THEIR PARENTS' VOLUNTEERING, YOU MIGHT WANT TO USE OUR RESOURCE, "[RELEASE OF PARENTAL DUTIES.](#)"

When a kid is unsure about having a parent volunteer, have this contract to print out. The parent agrees that for the duration of youth group (or camp) to release parental duties and let the other adults be their kid's parents during the program. It's funny, and it works like a charm!

If you'd like a lot more details about this and other youth ministry basics, check out current resources and training opportunities from Young People's Ministries at UMCyoungpeople.org or [*Now That You're a Youth Leader*](#) published by the United Methodist Publishing House.



OTHER RESOURCES

- [Not It! Tips for Working with Youth Ministry Volunteers](#)
- [Smaller Church Youth Ministry: No Money, No Staff, No Problem](#) by Brad Fiscus

