

CRASH COURSES *in* YOUTH MINISTRY

KEEPING 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'LL NEVER FORGET IT—I HAD JUST STARTED AT A NEW CHURCH, AND I BEGAN HAVING ONE-ON-ONE MEETINGS WITH THE VOLUNTEERS TO GET TO KNOW THEM AND HEAR THEIR PASSION FOR SERVING TEENS.

One by one, they all had some version of, *“I think I just need a break for a while.”* My response to the first person was gracious and respectful..., *“Yes. Of course. You’ve gone above and beyond. Take some time.”* But as I neared the end of the list, I began to panic. I even considered begging each person to stay just another week or month.

If you are at a point where you downloaded this article after screaming, *“ALL MY VOLUNTEERS ARE LEAVING!”* Take a breath. Calm down. It is going to be ok.



01 BIG DEAL: WHEN SOMEONE LEAVES

THANK YOU FOR BREATHING. WE RECOMMEND BREATHING AS A VITAL STEP IN STAYING ALIVE. NOW THAT YOU FIND YOURSELF SLIGHTLY CALMER, IT IS OKAY TO REMIND YOURSELF THAT ATTRITION IS NORMAL.

Volunteers come and go, and it is not necessarily an indication of a failing program when people leave. Keeping volunteers is not about begging them to stay. Although if you find yourself in a situation like the one I described in the introduction, begging can have its place in short-term volunteer retention!

The key to keeping volunteers is to create an opportunity and community that fills people, equips them, and helps them process all that is happening in life and in the ministry.

Before we get to how to create that community, let's stop and talk about what happens when someone leaves. As people are leaving, you have an opportunity to get honest feedback, and you might even be able to get a referral for someone to take their place. All of that happens in an informal exit interview. As mentioned in the [Crash Course on Administration](#), you do have to mentally and emotionally prepare yourself to receive feedback, so refer to that resource for ways frame your



attitude and the feedback conversation as opportunities for growth as a lifelong learner. I find it a comforting thought to remember John Wesley's idea of "Christian perfection," where every day is a chance to be a bit better, even if we never reach perfection itself. That exit interview conversation will focus on three questions:

- What could we have done better in supporting you as a volunteer?
- Is there any information about your duties or about the ministry that it would be helpful for us to know as you leave? (This includes everything from practical passwords to accounts they may have set up to kids who are working through something specific.)
- Do you know someone you think would be great at what you were doing?

02 KEEPING THE BEST OF WHAT'S AROUND

THE KEY TO KEEPING YOUR VOLUNTEERS BEGINS ON DAY ONE OF MEETING THEM.

Your volunteers need to be trained to do their job...and that is every job they take on. Let me say that again. Every job, whether small or large, needs training. They may not need six hours on the theology of youth ministry to greet kids at the front door of the church, but people feel lost if someone doesn't tell them what they need to do and how they need to do it. It is important, then, to think about every position in your ministry and to figure out what level of training people need in order to feel like they know what is expected and how they are supposed to accomplish those tasks. Offer that training both from a youth ministry perspective and from the perspective of the larger church. *(The trustees, for example, may care about how pizza is cleaned up and trash disposed of to a level that a youth leader may not.)*

Consider creating a job description for each volunteer needed in your ministry. Build those descriptions off the “what, why, when, how long, and duration” from our [Crash Course on Recruiting Volunteers](#). *(If you don't like the word “job,” substitute “role” or “position.” All we're trying to do is to help you create training to go with the tasks and other supports that will help a volunteer be successful.)*



Safe Sanctuaries: Abuse Prevention Training

Part of training volunteers should include health and safety policies related to working with minors. In The United Methodist Church, those policies are often called “Safe Sanctuaries,” and they help everyone involved with working with children, youth, and vulnerable adults know the behavioral expectations, reporting protocols, and other important information to ensure ministry is a safe space for the people you are serving. If you are unfamiliar with the term “Safe Sanctuaries” or do not know if your church has an abuse prevention policy, this is a good time to stop reading and go find out. Annual conference offices should also have basic “Safe Sanctuaries” policies for your reference that are in agreement with abuse prevention and reporting laws in your state. It may not be essential for the person who shows up at the church office on Tuesdays at 10 am to input attendance to go through the Safe Sanctuary training, but anyone who has direct interaction with children, youth, or vulnerable adults should be thoroughly trained in your Safe Sanctuaries policy and pass a background check.

If you need more information on Safe Sanctuaries, The United Methodist Church has great resources to help you, starting with a [policy development guide](#). Additional articles and resources can be found at UMCdiscipleship.org. Some local churches and annual conferences also have agreements with service providers to offer training and background checks, so check in with the episcopal office in your area.

Five Training Tips

As you work through what training each volunteer position needs, consider these five tips:

1. Are they having contact with students? This is key, not only in determining whether or not they need Safe Sanctuaries training, but in determining whether you want to talk them through different aspects of youth culture or common pitfalls for adults seeking to communicate with students.
2. What is the “why” of their job? This is a big part of recruiting volunteers, but it is just as important when you are thinking about training. When you talk someone through what they are doing, always put it in terms of “why.” It’s not just about helping people know where the cleaning solution is to wipe down the counter. It is important to help people see how various tasks are empowering the ministry to students. For example, because they are cleaning the counters, the students who might normally have to do that have more time to spend in Bible study, and we’re maintaining a physically healthy space for students to attend Bible study. Larger picture: we’re also being good stewards of the space afforded us by the church, so taking care of the space we use means the church can spend less on physical upkeep and replacing things and more on outreach ministries and so on.

3. How will they know when they have succeeded?
Perhaps my favorite, but least used key! A lot of what happens in youth ministry feels grey and fuzzy (subjective as opposed to objective if you like fancy words). That can make it difficult for people to know whether or not they are doing what you want them to do or feeling like they are being successful with their role. Though you might give a bit of curriculum to small-group leaders, your goals could shift from providing content to building community. It's important to state that clearly. You might say, "Look, the goal of these groups is not to cover all the curriculum. It is to have spiritual conversations and develop relationships that help students connect. If you don't ever get to the end of the resources provided, but you have had a good conversation or have grown closer as a group, you're doing exactly the right thing."
4. What do they need to do their job? Some people, bless their hearts, need an easy button. You may have to provide them everything they need to do what you want them to do. You can recruit someone to cook burgers and fries, but if you don't tell them how to turn on the deep fryer, have matches to start the grill, and where the freezer with all the supplies is, they will be more than a little frustrated and probably not be able to do what you need. A best practice is to walk through their job in your mind while making a list of what they need. Do the job yourself first and make detailed notes from the point-of-view of someone doing the job for the first

time. Most likely, you'll find a thing or two people need to know (like where to find Bibles or pens or a spatula) that you would forget to mention if you were casually explaining the job.

5. Train people ahead of time, then recap on the first day. You need to train your volunteers ahead of time, but most likely, they'll need a refresher on the first day... especially if their job requires little training. The first day your greeter shows up, don't just say hello. Say, "Hey! So glad you're on the team, here's where you stand. We just want you to smile and show the kids where the youth room door is. Thanks for helping today!" This effort to welcome new volunteers can be multiplied in effectiveness by pairing them with an existing volunteer. Introduce them and give them something to talk about while they do their jobs side-by-side. Finally, touch base with your volunteer a day or two after the volunteering experience. Ask volunteers what went well, what they enjoyed about their experience, and things that you as the organizer could do to better equip and support them the next time they are taking on the same jobs.

03 YOU'RE KIND OF A BIG DEAL: APPRECIATION & SUPPORT

YOU'VE GOT YOUR VOLUNTEERS RECRUITED AND TRAINED. YAY!

They have passed the background checks and know exactly what they need to do. YAY! Now it's time to work on developing a mindset of appreciation and support... YAY! Nothing will make your volunteers burn out and leave quicker than if they feel unappreciated and/or unsupported.

As mentioned, all relationships and support for volunteers begin on the first day. After you check in and recap your training, look for something that you can compliment them on. Are they being attentive to kids on the fringes? Are they brightening up the youth area with their smiles? Did you hear a student say something positive about them? Whatever it is, write it down as soon as you can; then after the first time they serve, send them a text or a card thanking them and giving that specific compliment to them. Next time you see them, you can mention it again and ask them if there's anything they thought of that they needed for next time.

That kind of low-level, quick appreciation should happen regularly for your volunteers. Small notes and texts should happen at least once a month and after



every event. Those kinds of appreciation notes are easy and go a lot further than leaving a card that says you're worth a hundred grand on a card and sticking a mini candy bar to it.

However, if all you ever do is small bits of appreciation, you'll miss the boat on keeping your volunteers. A couple of times a year (and whenever they have sacrificed a lot), you should go bigger. One of the best ideas I've ever stolen (professionally borrowed) was from another youth pastor. (It was Jason Gant, by the way.) Jason not only made multiple volunteers cry out of thankfulness, but he also involved a population that often gets overlooked as potential volunteers: older people who love to make casseroles. And, when it was over the first time, every volunteer I had stuck around until they moved, or their kids graduated.

Here's the idea: At the end of a youth trip (especially a week-long camp), you have a bunch of adults who have sacrificed time, some percentage of their sanity, a lot of energy, and actual vacation days to pull it off. On their way home, it hits...they are going to have to make dinner for their family when they get back. Unbeknownst to them, you sent a signup sheet to the Sunday school class with a bunch of older people in it asking for them to sign up to bring a family-sized dinner casserole (lasagna, spaghetti, etc.) to the church with heating instructions attached about a half an hour before everyone returns. You had asked Brittany, that parent who said, "I really wish I could go as a volunteer, but I have this thing..." to show up to

accept the casseroles and hang out until the bus arrives (because youth ministers are never late; they arrive precisely when they mean to!). Then, when you pull in, you announce to the volunteers that they need to see Brittany, that we are so thankful for what they have done, and that their dinners have been taken care of. Cue the tears.

That is the goal: give your volunteers meaningful “thank yous” that support them or remind them of the impact they have, while not asking them to take more time from their work or family in order to be thanked. Here’s a quick list of things that have worked for me and others in the past.

- **Volunteer Meeting Car Wash** – While you are having your regular volunteer coordination and training meeting, get kids together to wash all their cars in the parking lot because washing cars is fun for teens, a pain for adults, and a horrible fundraiser. After the cars are dry, leave a note on the windshield saying how thankful you are for the volunteers’ time.
- **Bouquet of Cards** – This is the perfect (and very inexpensive) thing to bring to a sick volunteer (or student!). Rather than buying a bunch of flowers that will die, go into the church copy room, grab some colorful cardstock (the ones the children’s minister uses) and cut them into postcard sizes. Then, go to the grocery store down the street and ask the teenager if you can buy a handful of the

plastic card holder things they use to put cards in flowers. He/she won't know how to sell that to you, so he/she will just hand you some. At youth group, ask the youth to write a personal thank you note (or two) on individual cards and then arrange them in a vase (you grab from under the sink in the church) and take it to the hospital.

- **Card Tree** – This is a super fun one. At Christmas time (or in July because that's when stores start decorating for Christmas), put out a Christmas tree and ask parents and youth to write notes thanking volunteers for the work they do with the kids. Don't make them specific because we all know which volunteer will get the most. Then, after they are all on the tree, invite volunteers to take a note on their way home one night. If you are really cool, you could add a coffee shop gift card to the cards as an extra "thank you!"

CONCLUSION

KEEPING VOLUNTEERS REQUIRES EFFORT AND ATTENTION, JUST LIKE ANY OTHER RELATIONSHIP THAT YOU WOULD LIKE TO KEEP HEALTHY.

Providing opportunities for volunteers to be heard demonstrates that you value their presence and input. Making changes to your ministry based on feedback from volunteers demonstrates that you value them on an even higher level. You may find yourself in a situation where you are fortunate enough to have a few “lifers,” but even long-term regular volunteers will need breaks sometimes. Finally, remember what the experience is like the first time that you are doing something new. Whether you have a new volunteer or an established volunteer doing something new, dedicate time to support and connect with them. Showing your appreciation and attention to their service will increase the chances that your volunteers will stay around for a while.

