

STRATEGY FOR SANITY

Earl Palmer

Lay volunteers make the church happen. They feed youth groups. They free the church financially to carry on ministry. They make up committees that hire and fire church workers and set policy goals for the congregation. They teach Sunday School classes and lead home Bible studies. They reach out to their neighborhoods and co-workers to share the hope of the gospel. They grow in personal faith. They love and encourage the pastor; they worship Christ and give His church its concrete public expression.

But they also grow tired. They sometimes slow down, or panic, or even wear out. They get on one another's nerves.

Even so, in all of the problems, they are the church of Jesus Christ. They are the ones who come forward to volunteer their time and gifts to the ministry of Christ in the world.

Tom Gillespie, President of Princeton Theological Seminary, has said: "Every institution has a spirit about it." The spirit of a church is more accurately seen among its volunteers than in the pages of a full-color brochure. In fact, what happens in the lives of such hard workers is a more accurate measure of the character of a congregation than any other combination of spiritual life indicators.

For example, what happens to the teenagers in the work crew at a Young Life camp is of more crucial, long-term significance for the total strategy of the kingdom of God than what happens with the campers at the event. The campers, like churchgoers, may experience the "spirit of the institution";

but the volunteers are the labor force who by their discipleship shape that spirit.

If this is true, then we who mobilize lay volunteers need to think carefully about how to encourage these strategic folks so that they don't burn out. In this regard, I believe that four principles apply equally to the professional church servant and the lay volunteer.

Grace, Teaching, Fellowship

In the book of Acts, the church is first described as those repentant believers who receive God's forgiveness in Jesus Christ and then are united in the "Apostles' teaching and fellowship" (Acts 2:38-42). Note that this definition does not exclude or excuse any members of the church from these three criteria. We are all inadequate individuals who repent and receive grace. We are all being taught so that we may grow in the content of the gospel. And we all need fellowship with one another.

The essential truth here is that we are volunteers or "apostles" ("ones sent out") because of grace, not because of our adequacy on a leadership flowchart. This is not to downgrade the need for our development of talents; but talents notwithstanding, we have all become Christians by grace. Thus, all anyone can expect from those of us in church work is trust in Christ, growth, and fellowship.

Many Christian lay people as well as pastors suffer because they create for themselves a greater expectation than this one in Acts 2. They fashion an idealistic myth of what a leader is supposed to be. Such myths are almost always impressive, inspiring—and false, since they are devoid of grace.

For that reason, we should test every occasion in our church life where volunteers are involved to see if these three criteria are being met. Do the parents driving the kids to camp understand the spiritual objectives of the camp, so they can see the trip in the perspective of our goals to share the gospel with teenagers? Do they have real chances for interaction and fellowship with each other and the kids? Is there teaching for them?

I'll never forget a week I once spent at Laity Lodge in Texas; on the first evening the director introduced me to every member of the lodge family to those of use who were guests for the week. Everyone was presented: the maids, student summer workers, dish-washers, volunteers from town, cook. He introduced each one and told about their families, their local church involvement and their ministries. Then they themselves shared with us their concern for our week and their hopes that we, like they, would have a growing experience at Laity Lodge.

Consequently, that evening we all were bound together by a common gospel objective and a common fellowship. Burnout is much less frequent when those New Testament bonds are part of a volunteer's experience

Authority to Act

Second volunteers need the authority to move and flex and do what needs to be done without what I call the tyranny of tiny strings. One of the worst kinds of oppression is the oppression of the faceless. Such bureaucratic tyranny is a suffocating, antihuman feature in most authoritarian societies. It's

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certainly an ambiguous form of oppression in Soviet society, where every single move in a worker's life is fastened to small committees. The work group leaders must decide about housing requests, vacation requests, educational plans. In fact, most Soviet citizens probably don't live under KGB tyranny as much as the tyranny of the thousands of tight strings which manage even the most ordinary movement, restraining human flexibility and initiative continuously.

Churches can also lose their ability to move decisively and flexibly because of the tight little strings of endless committee processes, needlessly deferred decisions, and "management by objective" committees which freeze action in the here and now. In every living church there must be a creative balance which enables people both to understand the larger policy goals and to act decisively and flexibly to meet situations without the hindrance of unnecessary institutional roadblocks. Of course, every fellowship needs checks and balances in policy making. But the "spirit of the institution" should be one of goodwill, trust, and adventure so that the experimenter and innovator are not squeezed out, but rather liberated.

This balance happens in direct proportion to the sense of shared consensus within the fellowship about what is major and what is minor. Such a shared consensus comes from healthy doctrine experienced in the community of faith by people who care about each other because they have felt God's care. Knowing Christian care in this way

keeps us mellow enough to roll with the mistakes we inevitably make.

Beware of Power

The third principle is a necessary companion to the second. It's a warning. Beware of power! Both volunteers and pastors must guard against the temptation to abuse power—to become the ones who tie the strings on people and programs so that any movement requires their agreement.

When we give in to that temptation, we ourselves become the oppressors of initiative and creativity, and those who work with us must either obey us, humor us or deceive us in order to remain our co-workers. When we become power hungry, co-workers are eventually used up, one by one. Worse yet, they may resort to various survival games of deception in order to cope with a leader intoxicated with power.

Notice the two nonproductive results. On the one hand, an abusive leadership style reaps a collection of noncreative, nonrisk-taking leader-pleasers who impair the church's ability to meet challenges. On the other hand, the abusive leader finds him or herself surrounded by dishonest power brokers. Consequently, both professional worker and volunteer grow preoccupied with empire building and church politics.

How can we avoid succumbing to this temptation? We must begin with the healthy doctrine of power taught in the New Testament. According to the gospel, authentic power is in Christ's concrete victory over sin, the devil, and death; it's the life-giving and redeeming power of Jesus. For the Christian leader, the power is actually a confidence in the power of Jesus Christ.

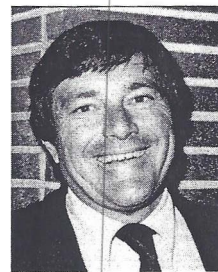
Such a confidence is not oppressive

toward others. On the contrary, it's freeing and contagious. The great continuity of the Christian church lies not in its institutional discipline or authority, but rather in the gospel of the Living Word which the Holy Spirit confirms in people's lives down through the generations. It's the authority of truth, and the power of the life changed because of truth.

The Joy of Service

The fourth and final principle applies to professionals as well as volunteers. The key to a good ministry experience is recognizing that our work is both a serious task because of God's greatness, and happy task because of His companionship with us through His people. It can be fun to drive teenagers to a retreat, to wash dishes after the morning prayer breakfast, to serve communion. The joy comes from knowing that we want to be where He is—serving His people. And that joy keeps us refreshed. Perhaps, after all,

that's what the ancient psalmist meant when he said, "I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of the Lord . . ." ♦



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