



Do You Need a New Perspective on Volunteers?

By Nelson Searcy • May 17, 2015

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Need and Belonging

Our thoughts shape the world around us, don't you agree? As the English poet John Milton famously said, "We see things not as they are but as we are." Keep this in mind as you move forward with building your volunteer base—especially when it comes to your mindset about issues of *need and belonging*. Regarding need, I'd like you to eliminate that concept from your mind—and the word from your ministry vocabulary—completely. Never think in terms of need. As for belonging, well, I invite you to wrestle with the contrarian idea that your volunteers may not need to believe before you invite them to belong. The way you think about these two areas will have significant ramifications for your ministry system. Let's dig a little deeper.

The Four-Letter Word of Ministry

"Need" is a nasty four-letter word when it comes to recruiting volunteers. When you tell your people that you need volunteers in a certain area, what they hear is that you haven't done a thorough job of preparation and stewardship.

Imagine that you are a new attender at a vibrant church. You've just dropped your young daughter off in the children's area and you are settling in for the worship service, when the pastor steps up and makes an announcement that the church needs volunteers for the children's ministry. Suddenly you feel like you've left your child in an understaffed area, which caused you to lose confidence in the church and its ministries. That's definitely not the message you want to convey. In *Simply Strategic Volunteers: Empowering People for Ministry*, Tony Morgan writes, "Preparation communicates value and importance." Need indicates a lack of preparation and subsequently a lack of value and importance.

Need also conveys negativity to your potential servers. No one wants to jump on board a sinking ship. They would rather get involved in thriving areas of opportunity. Your mindset and the language you choose to reflect it are more important than you realize. Instead of operating and speaking out of a scarcity mentality, choose a different lens. Reshape your thinking like this: You never need a volunteer; you have an opportunity for someone to serve.

For example, if we were trying to recruit more people for Super Service Thursday, we would say something along the lines of:

We have a great opportunity for some of you who really love God and want to use your gifts of administration and organization to come out on Thursday night and be a part of what we call Super Service Thursday, one of the most exciting nights in our church. We get together, watch movies, have some food, and most importantly we prepare the materials that we are going to use on Sunday to help people grow in their faith and come to Christ. Why don't you try it for a week? To learn more or to join us, check the box on your connection card.

As a potential server, would you react more positively to that invitation or to, “We need a few people to come by the church office from 5:00 to 7:00 on Thursday and help the staff fold and stuff programs”? Remember, be a master asker. Choose your words wisely.

Belong before Believing

One question I often hear is “Should I allow non-Christians to serve at my church?” In my opinion, the answer is a resounding yes—but I realize that may not be a popular position. Traditional thought has always held that people need to come to saving faith in Jesus Christ, and then take the step of church membership, before being able to serve within the church. In other words, a person had to believe, then belong, before taking any other steps on his or her journey of becoming more like Jesus.

I would argue the more biblical view is that a non-Christian can and should start belonging and becoming even before believing. The outward expression of God's work in individual hearts is more fluid than we've traditionally allowed it to be.

As we touched on previously, the door to an unbeliever's heart often swings on the hinges of service. I've seen this truth play out time and time again. A few years ago I consulted with a church in Florida that held traditional beliefs about serving. Like in most traditional churches, non-Christians were not allowed to volunteer in any capacity. When I came in, the church had recently expanded and was doing well overall, but one of their ministry areas wasn't keeping up with the pace. The parking lot was mayhem every Sunday morning because they had a major shortage of parking lot volunteers. What to do? (As an aside, men love being parking lot greeters. It gives them a chance to play cop. Dentists and lawyers and construction workers—all different types of men—get excited about putting on a reflective vest, grabbing a walkie-talkie, and directing cars toward parking spots. This simple volunteer position helps a lot of men take ownership in their church. Serving—in any capacity—tends to do that.)

Anyway, this was a young church that attracted a lot of unbelievers and seekers. They had quite a few unchurched men who were regular attenders. So we began to examine the possibility of letting some of those guys serve in the parking lot, alongside the team leader and other key players who were Christians, of course. After a lot of discussion, the church leaders agreed to give it a shot. They took an unprecedented step and opened the parking lot ministry to non-Christians. Several unbelieving men jumped at the chance to get involved.

The leaders never expected what happened next. These non-Christian parking lot volunteers started professing faith in Jesus at an astonishing rate. Many of them had been attending the church for months but had never taken a step of faith. By allowing them to be a part of something bigger than their own concerns and rub shoulders with strong Christian men, their hearts became more open to the gospel message. To this day, that Florida church lets unbelievers serve in their parking lot ministry—and in a few other ministries as well.

Opening your thinking to a more fluid progression of faith may be a big hurdle if you come from a traditional background, but it's an extremely healthy move for your church and for the people in it. That said, the extent to which you let non-Christians serve in your church is completely up to you. The approach will look different for your church than it will for mine or for the church down the street. At [The Journey](#), we invite unbelievers to serve liberally alongside believers—peppered into ministry teams that are made up primarily of Christians—because I am convinced that people often have to start belonging to something before they believe.

The worship team is one of the big ways we involve unchurched people in our services. Our team is primarily made up of unpaid professionals—members and attenders—who want to volunteer their time. But we have a lot of services, and sometimes there's a gap to fill. For example, if we are short a drummer one week, we'll hire a professional drummer. Every once in a while, we will end up hiring someone who really enjoys working with us and wants to stick around as a volunteer. If he volunteers for more than three months without taking any noticeable steps of faith, our worship pastor will have a conversation with him about where he is in his spiritual walk. Time and time again, these volunteers end up coming to faith in Christ. Why? Because they had the opportunity to interact with believers, be involved in our services, and be shepherded by our worship arts pastor—all opportunities they never would have had in a more traditional setup. (For more on how we manage worship teams and craft worship services for life transformation, see my book *Engage: A Guide to Creating Life-Transforming Worship Services* [Baker, 2011]. You can also find more information at www.ChurchLeaderInsights.com/connect.)

You can take that model and multiply it out to every other ministry area in your church. As you explore this new idea, define your nonnegotiable areas. For example, we don't let an unbeliever work directly with kids. She may be able to set up the kids area or clean up after service, but only members who have been screened can interact with the children. Similarly, we allow nonbelievers to serve as ushers and collect the offering, but they can't count the offering. Only trusted members are allowed to be on the counting team. Decide for yourself what you are comfortable with.

Remember, God has never operated solely through those who profess faith in him. He used unbelievers for his purposes throughout Scripture and often revealed himself to them in the process. As you think through the stages of faith, I implore you to stay open-minded. Question your point of view and have the courage to shift it if you see fit. You could greatly increase both your ministry system and your evangelism potential by allowing unchurched people to belong to the church and begin becoming more like Jesus before they believe.

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For more on building volunteers in the church, read about how [EastLake Church](#) in Washington state creates an environment that mobilizes impassioned volunteers in the September/October 2012 issue of Outreach magazine.