

Recruiting, Equipping, and Retaining Volunteers

One of the most difficult jobs for a children's or youth ministry pastor or minister is recruiting a full staff of volunteers who are not only spiritually mature but also joyfully motivated to nurture the faith of next generation. Furthermore, these volunteers must be adequately equipped and trained for their specific classroom roles and responsibilities. Along with that is the challenge of retaining these volunteers—if possible—from year-to-year, so there is a stable, spiritually mature core in your ministry team. How does a ministry leader do this?

While it is true that every church has unique challenges in recruiting, equipping, and retaining volunteers, there are some basic principles that can help every ministry leader in this endeavor. While these principles are not guaranteed to solve your recruiting problems, they may serve to foster an environment in which people feel more inclined to volunteer as they feel properly led, called, equipped, trained, and encouraged.

Inviting People to a Glorious Vision for the Next Generation

Recruitment is, first and foremost, about vision. You are asking people to commit their time and energy to something. What is that *something*? We believe that *something* must be defined and shaped by a biblical vision for the next generations. At Truth78, we have found Psalm 78 to be very instructive in this regard.

...tell to the coming generation
the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might,
and the wonders that he has done.
⁵He established a testimony in Jacob
and appointed a law in Israel,
which he commanded our fathers
to teach to their children,
⁶that the next generation might know them,
the children yet unborn,
and arise and tell them to their children,
⁷so that they should set their hope in God
and not forget the works of God,
but keep his commandments; (vv. 4-7)

This is not a merely a call to “work with children in Sunday school,” or a plea that “we need more helpers for our Wednesday night kids clubs.” This is a call—a command—to proclaim the most glorious truths in the universe to the next generation. And Psalm 78, in its fuller biblical context, is a vision:

...that the next generations know, honor, and treasure God, setting their hope in Christ alone, so that they will live as faithful disciples for the glory of God.

At its core, recruiting involves inviting faithful believers to join in a glorious vision and mission—one with eternal consequences. It is not only a serious responsibility but also a joyful privilege. Consider these words from John Piper:

Have you Sunday School Workers ever thought of yourselves as a squadron of God’s commandos, weekly storming Satan’s bastion to liberate his hostages? Listen to 2 Timothy 2:24, 25: “The Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome, but kind to everyone, an apt teacher, forbearing, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant that they will repent and come to know the truth, and they may escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.” When you love your students and teach them truth, you are God’s gentle storm troopers! It is truth taught in love that batters down the walls of Satan’s prison. He cannot hold out against the truth.

O, never, never underestimate the power of truth. We handle glorious things every Sunday. We are in a great battle for liberation. Do not be deceived that you hear no bombshells. Do not be discouraged that your medals are few. The Last Day will reveal that the greatest centers of power and of lasting liberation were not in Washington or London or Bonn or Geneva, but in classrooms where truth was taught and young people were “freed from the snare of the devil.” This is no exaggeration. It is absolutely true.¹

The Importance of Being a Spiritual Leader

It is not enough to simply articulate and promote a glorious vision for the next generation. There is an important relational dynamic involved in recruiting, equipping, training, and retaining ministry volunteers; namely, demonstrating God-honoring, Christ-like, Spirit-dependent leadership. For example, a children’s and youth ministry leader² should endeavor to:

- Lead, teach, and guide with the Word of God and prayer.
- Display integrity.
- Shepherd with humility.
- Be God-centered and people-sensitive.
- Be a servant of servants; have a demeanor of “How can I help you?”
- Care for people more than the volunteer roster.

¹ John Piper, “Sunday School as Liberation,” desiringGod.org/articles/sunday-school-as-liberation

² Depending on whether the individual involved has the title “Pastor” or “Minister,” some of the qualities that follow would not be applicable in the same way. For example, a woman who is a children’s minister or children’s director would not have the biblical authority to “lead, teach, and guide” in the same way a man would.

- Be visible and accessible: Let volunteers see you in the classrooms as much as possible—walk around from room to room to encourage and provide assistance when needed.
- Initiate communication. Make regular phone calls and ask them how they are doing. Invite them to share any problems or concerns.
- Feed, then lead. Feed your own soul through prayerful study of the Word. Read good books that help you grow in your walk with the Lord, and books that help you grow in areas of biblical leadership and children’s and youth ministry.

With these principles in mind, here are some practical suggestions for recruiting, equipping, and retaining volunteers.

Have a Process

Ask yourself, “What will be my steps when I recruit?” Whatever your process:

- Involve the church’s leadership, asking for their input and help. The senior pastor, speaking from the pulpit or in a general communication to the church, can help cast the vision and invite volunteers.
- Recruit early.
- Recruit year-round.
- Recruit with a deadline.
- Encourage the church leadership (pastors, elders, and overseers) to establish a policy in which Sunday school will not begin until fully staffed. This communicates a high value of the biblical education of children and youth, and it demonstrates to the volunteers that you care about them and do not want to place undue burdens on them.

Set High Standards

- Be choosers, not beggars—never beg, push, or prod for volunteers.
- Set qualifications.
- Interview perspective volunteers: Listen carefully regarding their desire to serve. Ask probing questions and follow-up questions. Look for genuine faith and a growth in grace in their daily walk.
- Implement a policy that insures the safety and protection of children and youth (e.g., background checks for all volunteers).
- Seek to match individual giftings with special roles and responsibilities, yet be willing to take some risks and try people in new roles.

Be Clear About Expectations

- Have job descriptions for each volunteer (e.g., team leader, worship leader, teacher, small group leader, etc.), and clearly communicate what each entails, and the duration of the commitment.
- Ask them to count the cost of this commitment. Is it realistic in light of their current commitments?

Core Training Series

- Ask them to take the job seriously. Teaching and mentoring children and youth regarding the greatness and worth of God and the glorious news of the Gospel is both a grave responsibility and an enormous privilege.
- Consider creating a “Volunteer Ministry Covenant” for each volunteer to sign that clearly articulates these expectations.

Equip Your Volunteers

- Provide both formal and informal training for each specific volunteer position. (Truth78’s Core Training Series has been designed for this purpose.) This is especially important before the year begins.
- Provide all necessary resources (e.g., curriculum components including Classroom Kit, Teacher’s Guides, visual resources, Student Workbooks; supplies; equipment; room requirements; etc.). Meet known needs, and address problems ASAP.

Express Appreciation to Your Volunteers

- Communicate words of appreciation to each volunteer, in person.
- Write notes (e.g., send the volunteer cards on their birthdays).
- Have special events that recognize and honor your volunteers (e.g., a year-end dinner banquet and program).
- Have the church provide a uniquely designed yearly gift for each volunteer (e.g., a coffee mug, t-shirt, calendar, etc.).

Pray for Your Volunteers

Let your volunteers know that you are praying for them. Pray for each volunteer before their ministry begins when you are looking at an empty roster. God knows each name. Then pray for each by name, throughout the year, as they are volunteering in the classroom. Pray for each to:

- love the LORD with all his heart, soul, and mind.
- develop a hunger and love for the Word.
- be growing in confidence in Christ and find all-satisfying joy in Him.
- be depending daily on the Holy Spirit.
- be a doer of the Word.
- love his neighbor as himself.
- not grow weary in the life of faith.

Build and Encourage a Long-term Perspective

When volunteers feel they are part of a glorious vision of nurturing the faith of the next generation to be joyful worshippers of God, and when they feel well-equipped and trained, they will be much more likely to want to continue from year to year. A ministry leader can foster this attitude even more as he or she articulates a long-term perspective for ministry. You can encourage this by:

- Adapting a team model in each department—working as part of a team develops relationships that can foster a longer-term commitment.
- Allowing for volunteers to “move up” with a group of students, providing them with a sense of long-term commitment to a specific group of students.
- Interviewing volunteers at the end of the year to ask them what their greatest joys and challenges were. Consider how to address these. Depending on the situation, it may be wise to provide them a gracious way to *not* serve again. Or you might encourage them to consider a new role or age group that would be more in keeping with their interests and gifts.

For further training on recruiting, equipping, and retaining volunteers, we highly recommend the following audio and video resources at www.truth78.org

[Recruiting and Retaining Volunteers](#)

[A Vision for the Discipleship of the Next Generation](#)

[A Vision for God-Centered, Gospel-Focused Teaching for the Next Generations](#)

[A Vision for Teaching the Word of God](#)

[A Vision for Encouraging Faith in Christ](#)

[Protecting Your Church from Predators](#)