

Education Links

Inspiring, motivating, guiding Unity Churches to enhance and expand their ministries with children, teens & families

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Nurturing Your “Volunteers of the Year”

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History tells us that a Mr. Robert Raikes started the first volunteer Sunday school classes for poor children in the late 1700’s in Gloucester, England. He gathered the street urchins and attempted to change their thieving, cursing and fighting into Bible reading, hymn singing and prayers. While today we sometimes struggle with the typical 45-minute session, Mr. Raikes’ classes began at 10 a.m. and lasted until 5 p.m., with an hour off at noon. There was no public education at the time, so Mr. Raikes also taught the children to read and write in a kitchen he rented from a Mrs. Meredith. Alas, the children behaved so abysmally that they were invited to “go elsewhere.”

This elsewhere turned out to be the home of a Mrs. Critchfield, where they used the old “divide and conquer” technique (girls in one place and boys in another). This proved more successful, and the Sunday school went from a collection of ragamuffins to the beginnings of a weekly program of religious instruction for people of all ages. Mr. Raikes, for his undaunted courage and tenacity, has earned my vote for a posthumously awarded “Volunteer of the Year” certificate.

There were other early volunteer pioneers as well, among them Miss Hannah Ball, who gathered a “wild little company” in



her home in Scotland for Sunday instruction. John Wesley, as a young missionary in Georgia, taught children in home as early as 1735.

Fast forward to the 20th century... We now find graded lessons available that take into account motivation, stages of maturation, learning styles and abilities. Developmental needs of different age groups are stressed, and the term “Sunday school” is somewhat archaic being

replaced by terms such as “Children’s Church,” “church school,” or the more generic “Youth Ministry.” Just as the past centuries have brought changes in educational philosophies, teaching methods, curriculum materials and facilities, it has also brought changes in our society and lifestyle.

What has remained constant is that the majority of the people who are led to be a part of the youth programs at their churches are volunteer lay people. The lay volunteer has been at the

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center of religious education in churches, because from the beginning, “Sunday school” has been a volunteer movement based on idealism and compassion and fueled by religious zeal. Behind it all was the stalwart, capable, faithful, dedicated Sunday school teacher. Hmm...Faithful? Yes. Dedicated? Yes. Capable? Well...most of the time.

Just as no one ever sets out to be a “bad” parent, no one ever sets out to be a “bad” Sunday school teacher. But experience and common sense tell us that there are plenty of inept people in both places. Almost 70% of preschool and elementary school children in America today are in homes where both parents work, nearly four times what it was in 1948. Divorce has created a multitude of single parent families, who struggle to make ends meet. This leaves little time, strength or enthusiasm left over for parenting. Not only is there little left in the

parenting bank account, there is even less time or enthusiasm left over for volunteer work or ministry.

A challenging issue for those of us in leadership roles in our churches or centers is why so many churches are willing to accept a volunteer staff that is less than what they originally envisioned for the young people in their congregations. Perhaps one reason is that the only thing perceived to be more difficult than holding the bar high for volunteers is the thought of having to dismiss them.

I offer the following as a guide to the selection and care and nurturing of a thriving volunteer staff:

1. **Decide where you are going** and create your vision. Establish your vision and mission statements with your core team as co-creators. Share your vision with your congregation.

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2. **Write your action plan** with goals and keep it in a prominent place in your children’s church area. This includes determining your precise needs, such as teacher-student ration, class size and physical space. Update job descriptions for Youth Ed. Director and teaching staff. Keep your expectations clear.
3. **Pray for your youth ministry program!**
4. **Realize** that very few people originally volunteer to teach children because they feel qualified. Most do so for a variety of other reasons—some out of a sense of responsibility, some out of gratitude, and many because they realize that the teacher learns and grows more than anyone else, while at the same time helps others to grow.
5. Feeling supported and appreciated are the top two reasons why people stay with youth ministry. Part of being a good leader is **making sure that the needs of our staff are being met.**
6. **Provide training opportunities** in your home church and go together as a team to regionally-sponsored events.
7. **Make sure your teachers have access to good curriculum,** and have been mentored in lesson-plan creation and presentation.
8. **Practice good communication with your team.** Try to visit each classroom personally. Make mid-week phone calls to your staff to check in with them and see how they are doing. Ask questions like, “What is your greatest joy? Greatest frustration?” Ask how you or other staff can support them. Ask if they have any prayer requests. What areas would they like to receive additional training in?
9. **Appreciate, appreciate, appreciate** your volunteer staff! Everyone thrives on the support and reinforcement that comes when people express their appreciation. Verbal affirmation can never be overdone. Look for sincere ways to give your team praise and encouragement. Send thank-you notes on a regular basis. Throw the staff a party once or twice a year. Take time to play together.



10. **Pray for your team** personally and connect them up as prayer partners. (I know this was number three too, but it is that important!)
11. **Provide your team with guidelines** such as job descriptions, resources and forms to make their lives and the lives of the parents easier and more orderly, as well as keep everyone in alignment with Church policy. Make certain that you talk about and use the medical release forms, heart agreements, etc. provided for regional events. Do background checks on all staff.
12. **Provide a sign-up sheet** at your regular teacher meeting so that everyone knows who is going to be where and when. ***Figure out your “what-do-I-do-if-I-am-sick-on-Sunday” plan** with the teachers. This will help allay those 11:30 p.m. Saturday night phone calls, or “Hey, no one showed up for the fourth grade class” moments.
13. **Try to connect your volunteers with service that honors what makes their hearts sing.** Do they love to tell stories? Sing? Do puppets? They will be able to shine doing the things they love.

By laying the foundation with prayer and planning as the Youth Director, your volunteers will feel supported. Your Children’s Church will be an ordered (yet lively) oasis for the children and for the staff who serves them, and all of your volunteers will be “Volunteers of the Year.”

This is obviously a very basic overview. I would like to suggest that if for some reason your church does not already have *New Directions in Spiritual Education*, Parts 1 & 2, that you run right out and get them this week! Today even! They are that terrific, and no center should be without them. Marelu Marson has a wealth of information on the care and feeding of a successful volunteer staff, as well as every other topic you can think of relative to creating and running a healthy youth program. These are published by the Association of Unity Churches International and are available for a nominal fee.

May we all be beacons of love, kindness, encouragement and divine inspiration to those we serve.

Editor’s note:

Unity Worldwide Ministries has published a *Youth and Family Ministry Guide* for directors, ministers, and those responsible for creating, organizing and growing a youth and family ministry department in a Unity center. Written by four experienced Unity youth ministry directors, the Guide is a “have to have” resource for those responsible for providing spiritual environments for our young people. Order it at www.unityworldwideministries.org/our-products