

Sharing the Ministry - Coordinating our Volunteers

Ministry is what we do together, the shared creative process of building what we are as a church community. We call our ministers and hire our staff to serve our mission in special ways, but it is the entire membership which shapes and defines that mission and the ministry that serves it. This ownership of the mission and ministry by the members follows naturally from a true understanding of congregational polity. Together we pool our resources of time, talent and treasure, and through our labors we create the events and build the relationships that make up our ministry. We participate in a democracy tempered by our also being a caring community, whose leadership helps us clarify our vision and facilitates our involvement.

We all need to pitch in on the basic infrastructure of our programs, tasks which are like the housekeeping tasks that a family shares. Also, each of us has the opportunity to find the aspects of the ministry that speak most satisfyingly to us and invest ourselves in co-creative service. Many of us wish to develop the skills to be leaders so we can give the kind of support that makes things happen. These three types of volunteer service have unique qualities that ask for different ways of organizing and recruiting. Congregations with high levels of awareness of their ownership of the mission and ministry and who intentionally coordinate volunteers in ways that encourage participation and ward off burn-out will reap great rewards.

1. Pitching in on the basics - At JUC we all pitch in on the basics with a program called Foundations of Fellowship because these tasks really do form the underpinnings of our church programs. All able bodied members are asked to participate in their choice of these tasks four times per year. New members are enrolled when they join, and feel good about doing their share while getting to meet people. Each participant's choices are entered into a data base, which is used to make sure the bases are covered each quarter and communicate with participants. The tasks included can vary. *See IV.c. Foundations.Fellowship I. and V.b. Foundations.Fellowship II.* We organize the program on a quarterly basis - fall, winter, spring, and summer. A post card is sent to each participant a month before a quarter begins with a reminder of the next quarter's assignment and a request that they schedule themselves for a convenient date. A schedule for the quarter is prominently posted. Of course, not literally everyone participates. Youth RE teachers are exempt during the quarters they are teaching. Mothers of newborns are given "maternity leave." Some longer term members who have not switched their cultural thinking may resist. A new member may be ill or have other factors which prevent participation. Compassion for individual circumstances must always go along with high expectations. At JUC we have nearly 70% participation. As the program matures, more and more people are taking the initiative to schedule themselves. A team of volunteers calls participants to schedule those who have not done so. Callers know that people being called have already agreed to do the task. Almost all the calls are fruitful because if a person can't fill the first available vacancy, they schedule for a date later in the quarter. Reminder cards are mailed the week prior to a Sunday. The fact that people choose their tasks and that everyone else is pitching in so no one gets asked all the time reduces resistance to the program and prevents burn out. The team of callers is not burned out by ten or more "no"s for every "yes." An annual mailing allows people to change their selections for the coming year. *See V.c. Foundations Post Cards.*

2. Satisfying service - Much of the shared ministry of the church is what we usually call committee work. Calling it that can make it sound unattractive - unfairly so, since the work of many of the committees is at the heart of our ministry. Worship, social action, youth and adult religious education, fellowship events, pastoral care, membership, communication - all are critically important to our mission as a religious body. When people work in an area of the ministry which speaks to them in a satisfying way, they will be more productive, less

likely to burn out, and more likely to infect others with enthusiasm. The question then becomes - how do we match volunteers with work that will be rewarding to them? The surest way is to develop a culture where people self select their involvement. If new members join a church which has high expectations that they will want to reap the rewards of service in the shared ministry, which gives them some time to settle in and figure out the aspects of the ministry most attractive to them, and which has high levels of communication about what is going on in the ministry and the opportunities for involvement, then they will almost certainly get involved in a way that will lead to long term satisfaction. At JUC, we are still developing our approaches to the best way to match volunteers with satisfying service. We have discovered that surveys or questionnaires filled out at the time of joining are not effective tools, as new members are not familiar with the ministry programs, and often result in either no calls or too many calls. A trained mentor, either volunteer or staff, works better to help a new member make connections, steer them in rewarding directions and introduce them to people active in a program in which they may be interested. Volunteers already active in a program who are enthusiastic will inspire new members to join in the fun. What must be avoided is letting the need for a "warm body" to fill a volunteer slot dictate the recruitment of new members. This may relieve a need for a while, but it will sow the seeds of burn out and may turn off a new member to any service to the church. Recruiting new members to chair a committee must be especially avoided. If members are active in a program for too long, they, too can suffer from burn out, even if the program started off being satisfying to them. Also, programs can become dangerously dependent on a single volunteer or small group if they continue in it year after year. To prevent such things, it is best if volunteers rotate through several meaningful aspects of the ministry over the years. A Volunteer of the Month program, complete with a special reserved parking spot or other means to recognize outstanding volunteers, along with thank you cards and newsletter articles for individuals and groups, offer recognition that adds to volunteer satisfaction.

3. Leadership in liberal religion - Leadership is what makes everything happen. Even if there is a high demand for some ministry program, without leadership, it won't become a reality. Good leadership needs good skills on the part of leaders. We may be lucky to have some members who have gained good leadership skills outside of the church, but many potentially excellent leaders have not had the training they need. Many churches hold retreats for the elected leadership which give them practical information about how to get things done around the church and which may include visioning and consensus building processes. What may be even more beneficial, however, is to offer leadership training to people who are not yet filling leadership positions, but who may be interested in doing so if they felt confident of their abilities and knew what would be expected of them. JUC is developing such a series of two hour workshops, to be held after our fellowship dinners, which will include training in both the tangible and intangible aspects of leadership. How to chair a meeting, submit a request for expense reimbursement, reserve a room for and calendar an event or meeting, and other such practical things will be covered in one session, along with a review of church policies on issues of importance to committees. A second session will cover how to lead a committee in building a vision of its mission and an understanding of how the work of the committee supports the mission of the whole church. A third session will introduce potential leaders to the concepts of the diversity of working styles, what motivates volunteers and how to encourage committee members to see the value of people who have a different style or motivation. We intend to invite all JUCers to participate, but will mail special invitations to people who have been members for between one and three years. We hope that this series of workshops will create a pool of potential leaders from which our Leadership Nominating Committee can recruit new leaders. Having such a pool will help to prevent overuse of the dedicated members who have been in one leadership position or another for years. A prominent display with photos of the church leadership offers recognition to these volunteers and helps newcomers identify leaders.