

Volunteer Engagement in Canada

In 2010 Volunteer Canada conducted a significant study on volunteer engagement in this country: what it looks like and how to foster it. The 2010 research findings are based on a literature review of more than 200 documents, a general population telephone survey of 1,016 households, a survey of 551 volunteers, 18 focus groups around the country, in both urban and rural settings, with 236 participations, and an online survey of 208 non-profit and voluntary organizations. All primary research was conducted in Canada. The results have been published in many forms and can be found at their website www.volunteer.ca. This summary of their findings is taken from two publications:

Bridging the Gap: Enriching the Volunteer Experience for a Better Future for our Communities

Volunteer Canada, 2010. 22 pages.

“Enriching the volunteer experience to build a better future for our communities.”

<https://volunteer.ca/content/bridging-gap-summary-report>

Building the Bridge for Volunteer Engagement

Volunteer Canada, 2013. 23 pages.

<https://volunteer.ca/content/building-bridge-ii-full-report>

These reports focus on how organizations can respond to “the gaps, trends and issues in volunteering and citizen engagement.” What follows are some major points made in the report and some of my reflections on the application to congregational life. From the 2010 Bridging the Gap study,

A relatively small group of “uber volunteers” (their term) is responsible for the vast majority of volunteer hours contributed in Canada. “This fact highlighted the vulnerability of volunteer engagement—that it relies on a small group of individuals. Given that these “uber volunteers” are aging, and tend to represent the traditional volunteer, it is critical to be aware of the demographic groups who are following this age group, and be strategic in how to engage them in order to mitigate future shortages of volunteer contribution.”

“The results show that fostering meaningful volunteer engagement in Canada today is not just a capacity issue, but also a strategic one that must evolve with the trends to meet the needs of both organizations and volunteers themselves. Respondents indicated that the optimal formula to engage volunteers strikes a balance between:

- Designing specific, set roles and being open to volunteers determining the scope of what they can offer;
- Being well organized but not too bureaucratic; and
- Matching skills to the needs of the organization but not assuming that everyone wants to use their work skills in their volunteering.

This latest research underlines the necessity of tailored approaches in order to retain and increase the volunteer base, especially if organizations are to have success with re-engaging past volunteers.”

What follows is a bullet-point summary of survey findings and recommendations for addressing the findings in your organization / congregation. For greater depth you can refer to the summary reports or to the website of Volunteer Canada.

The Characteristics of Volunteers Today

- Volunteering changes throughout our lifecycle. Organizations need to find ways to help people adjust how and where they volunteer throughout their life.
- The volunteer relationship today needs an emphasis on reciprocity. Organizations today not only need to consider its needs, but also need to ask questions like, What are the needs and goals of the volunteer? “Respondents indicated a preference for having these mutual needs openly expressed, negotiated and met whenever possible.”
- Volunteering today is “personal”, reflecting what is meaningful to the individual.
- Many people look to volunteering as a means to develop new skills
- People of all ages find it appealing to volunteer as a group (eg. the youth group together, a Bible study group together, a family together)
- Matching the person to the position is more important now than ever. People want volunteer opportunities to match their interest, skills and schedule, and to contribute in a way that feels personally meaningful.

“One of the greatest hurdles [organizations need to overcome] is a traditional mindset of what a volunteer is.”

- There needs to be a shift from an “organizational focus” to a “people focus.”
- “Organizations share the responsibility in creating an updated culture of volunteerism.”
- Whether your congregation is larger or smaller, the same principles and learnings apply.

“Why are some Canadians not volunteering?”

- Three of the main reasons are: recruiting efforts are not specifically targeting the kinds of people the organization needs, people perceive organizational and administrative barriers to involvement, and organizations aren’t effectively responding to the changing interests of volunteers.
- The 2010 study found that “most organizations do not have the tools, training, and strategies in place to engage youth, families, baby boomers, and employer-supported volunteers, particularly using a skills-based approach.”

“Volunteer engagement needs to be a strategic focus [of the organization].”

- Congregations too often emphasize the needs of the organization (eg. a vacant position needs to be filled), overlooking the interests, needs and goals of congregants in their volunteering.
- Organizations need to make a shift in mindset from “how do we manage volunteers?” to “how do we engage volunteers?”
- “Successful volunteer organizations make volunteer engagement a strategic focus for all levels of the organization.”

“Organizations can create a more rewarding volunteer experience by:

- Laying out the goals, projected impact and value of the volunteer commitment;
- Clarifying ‘the what’, and being more flexible regarding ‘the where, how and when’ of volunteer activities;
- Engaging a volunteer’s unique skills, talents and interests to increase engagement and satisfaction
- Getting to know their volunteers better, including what individuals are looking to achieve by volunteering.”

“Many people are looking for short term roles that have impact, that allow them to see what the results are.”

- Many volunteers desire a feeling that their work is significant and meaningful. How can volunteer roles be adjusted to provide this?

“The demand for opportunities where families can volunteer together is great, but the current supply of these opportunities is small. However, the number of volunteers who are parents of school-aged children make this a distinct demographic worth considering. Family volunteers tend to value charitable activities highly and recognize that family participation in volunteer work can contribute to a happy, stable and rewarding life.”

- Can your congregation become a means for families to find meaningful opportunities to volunteer together?

“Many people come with professional skills but many professionals are looking for volunteer tasks that involve something different from their work life.”

- Don't simply pigeon hole people. Take time to discover volunteers' interests, passions and motivations.

“Many organizations focus on what they need BUT many volunteers also come with their own goals to be met.”

- Of all the research findings, this finding had the strongest agreement among survey participants. Increasingly organizations are encountering volunteers that have their own direction, objectives and even specific tasks in mind, and they are doing this in order to gain more satisfaction from their volunteer work.
- Helping volunteers meet their own goals in volunteering helps the congregation retain volunteers.
- Can a congregation provide the option for persons to establish volunteer roles that they define for themselves rather than are defined by the congregation?
- They survey found that a majority of volunteers desire a sense of reciprocity in the volunteer relationship—it is not just about what a person gives in volunteering but also about what they get back by way of a sense of meaning, satisfaction, accomplishment, and influence.

“Many organizations still want long-term commitment BUT many more volunteers are looking for shorter-term opportunities.”

- “In general people are looking for more diverse and shorter roles” and it appears that this perspective is growing in Canada. It can be a challenge for a congregation that depends on long-term commitment and it can find it difficult to establish short-term opportunities.
- Some organizations are adjusting by changing their expectations, accepting higher rates of turnover and committing more time to recruiting.

For More Information

The Pastoral Effectiveness—Congregations Committee of the Presbytery of Calgary-Macleod has named member engagement a focus for 2014 – 2015. You are invited to contact Rev. Peter Coutts for more resources on the topic of member engagement, including volunteerism.

Rev. Peter Coutts
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