

How to work well with young volunteers

Topic: Good Practice

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INTRODUCTION

Young volunteers are an invaluable resource. Bursting with energy, passion and enthusiasm, they are an asset to any team. But they can also bring challenges.

There's a strange time of transition between being a young person and becoming an adult within a church. The young adult has to work out where they fit, even in a church family they've grown up in. This is something young adults find difficult. Therefore it's essential we give them opportunities to find their place and purpose.

Rooted in the Church, a recent report from the Church of England, found that 'young people seek to be treated as equal members of the Church. They want to have meaningful roles, not tokenism.' Young adults are looking for somewhere to belong. A place where they are treated as equals, empowered with purpose, and trusted with real responsibility. We can give them these opportunities.

THEOLOGY

For a biblical example of working with young volunteers we need look no further than Jesus and his disciples. The disciples were most likely between the ages of 15 and 23.

Consider the feeding of the five thousand (John 6:1-15). When faced with a hungry crowd Jesus asks Philip where to buy the bread (v5). Hearing the problem, Andrew then offers a potential solution (v9) and Jesus uses Andrew's suggestion to perform a miracle. Other gospel accounts suggest that, after praying over the five loaves and two fish, Jesus gave the food to the disciples to feed the crowd.

Imagine how it would feel if Jesus asked you for advice. Not only did Jesus ask his disciples, he listened and acted on it. As John writes, Jesus already had a plan in mind, but rather than jump straight to performing a miracle Jesus took the time to invest in his young volunteers and showed he valued them.

PRACTICALITIES

Empower

Empower young volunteers by giving them genuine responsibility. Give their role a purpose that stretches beyond fulfilling ratios and avoid simply giving them a job that fills a gap. Focus on the individual and the skills they have to offer. Take time to consider what leadership opportunities you can offer them. Are you able to create new opportunities to enable the young volunteer to grow their gifts?

Whatever the opportunity may be, ensure you clearly communicate with the young volunteer outlining their role and your expectations. Show that you value the young volunteer and affirm their worth by trusting them with responsibility and giving them the space to own it.

Encourage

Be there to support the young volunteer every step along the way. This may involve helping them to plan and prepare for their voluntary role, reassuring them while performing their responsibility and affirming their contribution after fulfilling their role. If possible, share your encouragements for the young adult with the rest of your team. Make sure that they feel like an invaluable, equal member of the team.

Challenge

Just as with a young person, you are building a purposeful relationship with this volunteer. Help them to grow their gifts by giving them honest feedback. There may be opportunities to do this as part of a team debrief. If possible, show that you value your young volunteer by investing your time in mentoring them on a one-to-one basis. This will help to build a relationship of trust and also give you a better understanding of your volunteer and their gifts.

It's important to note that young volunteers may fail, just like the rest of us, and that's ok. This is one of the reasons it's vital to build a purposeful relationship with the volunteer. Tell them that you trust them, recognise their God-given gifts and empower them again and again and again...

REFLECTION & LEARNING

Some things to consider...

- Where are the existing opportunities for young volunteers to get involved?
- Can you create new opportunities?
- What would they like to do? If you ask, make sure you listen and, if possible, follow through.
- What are their gifts? How can you give them space to grow? Spend some time in prayer and ask God to help you see them as he does.
- Is there space to encourage and challenge volunteers, as a team and individually?
- Where can you step back? Investing in young volunteers takes time, where appropriate, make

the most of your team by delegating some of your responsibility.

- Spend some time reflecting on your own gifts and the opportunities you've been given to use them.

DEVELOPING PRACTICE

Invest in your team and encourage equality. Create space to build relationships among the team, as well as with the young people.

Consider how the development of young volunteers can become an essential part of your youth programme. In your planning, highlight where leadership opportunities arise and allow time for training.

Support your team. The *'Rooted in the Church'* report presents the model of a *'mentoring chain'* that can act like a support network. For example, a young person is mentored by a young volunteer, a young volunteer is mentored by a youth leader (or mature volunteer), the leader is mentored by another church member and so on.

Consider where you fit in this chain, is there another person on your team who could mentor a young volunteer? Bear in mind that a young volunteer could be quite close in age to some of your youth, match them with someone at the younger end of your group to help them establish a mentoring role.

Remember you are a role model to young volunteers, lead by example.

FURTHER INFORMATION

For an insight into what young adults want from church read: **Rooted in the Church**
<https://www.churchofengland.org/media/3775547/rooted-in-the-church-summary-report-nov-2016.pdf>

For more on how to lead a team of volunteers read:
Leadership 101: Five keys to leading a volunteer team
<http://www.youthandchildrens.work/Past-Issues/2017/February-2017/Leadership-101-Five-keys-to-leading-a-volunteer-team>