UNseminary

INCREASE YOUR CHURCH'S VOLUNTEER TEAMS

WITH THIS PROVEN MULTISITE EXPANSION TACTIC

BY RICH BIRCH

Does your church have **fewer volunteers today than it did a year ago?**

Are you wondering **how you're going to rebuild your church's teams** after everything that's happened with COVID-19 and the way our culture has changed as a result of the pandemic?

Have you wondered **where you go next when it comes to gaining more people for your teams** in the future?

If you're worried about your church's volunteer teams, you're not alone.

At the end of 2020, Dan Reiland and I executed the National Survey of Executive Pastors, asking a number of questions. One of the glaring findings of this survey was that volunteer engagement in churches has fallen dramatically across the country. This survey asked whether people agree or disagree with a number of statements. This statement was the most disagreed with: "Our church grew its active volunteer base in 2020." **72.18% of the executive pastors surveyed disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement.** Based on this response, it seems like churches across the country are facing a grim situation when it comes to volunteer engagement.

We need to find new ways to build these volunteer teams and see them flourish in the coming weeks, months, and years.

This lack of volunteer engagement is a problem on multiple fronts. **Primarily, this is a significant issue because it represents a decrease in our church's ability to disciple people.** We all know that people volunteering to serve on our teams is a critical way that we help those people discover what it means to follow Jesus. At its core, a Jesus-centered life is one of orienting our lives around serving the needs of other people. Volunteering is one way that we help people live a Jesus-centered life. With less people volunteering on our teams, we have less opportunity to help them grow in this area.

Additionally, a lack of volunteerism is a problem for our churches because **it represents a significant challenge for future church growth.** Over the years, we've seen that growing churches systematically encourage members to invite their friends to come to church. Over time, as we've studied this, we've seen that churches with a healthy number of volunteers have a strong correlation to churches that have a culture of high invitability. There is a strong connection between people volunteering at church and the likelihood that they will invite their friends to attend. **The more people volunteer at church, the more likely they are to invite their friends and family to be a part of that church.** The difficulty here is that if fewer people volunteer, fewer people are talking about church with their friends, which ultimately results in a negative trickle-down impact on the growth of your church.

Frankly, a significant reality of not having volunteers in our churches is that we get less done as a church. All of our churches utilize volunteer teams to help push our ministries forward. In fact, local churches are among the greatest volunteer engagement organizations in the world. Due to the pandemic, most of our churches have shifted to a digital platform, resulting in an erosion of family ministry and a focus on a smaller number of people required to "make church happen". **We are all experiencing fewer people engaged in our mission, and we all need a strategy to get people reengaged so that we can continue to propel the mission of our churches forward.**

I believe that there is a key volunteer recruiting and engagement strategy from within the multisite church expansion movement, that can apply to all of our churches, this coming year.

I've been involved in multisite expansion since the early 2000s. It's been a privilege of mine to be at the forefront of this movement, not only as a practitioner, but also as a coach for many churches across the country. I've been directly involved, in the driver's seat, for 13 campuses. **Over that time we've developed a system that saw 1,500 volunteers join teams at these churches, and pre-COVID, those campuses grew to the point where we saw an attendance of 9,000 people on a regular basis.** To date, I haven't seen anything as effective as multisite expansion for attracting new volunteers, releasing those volunteers into service, and ultimately seeing them engage at deeper levels. The tactic that we're going to discuss here is a core concept in how we've been able to successfully launch so many campuses over the years.

The greatest success factor, for any location that we've launched, is both the size and health of the volunteer team. Finding a way to recruit new volunteers en masse has been a journey over these last two decades, but we've refined it into a system that I believe could apply to any church whether you're thinking about multisite expansion or not.

Here is the key insight. Most church leaders build a recruiting system that will recruit people like themselves. This is just sociologically true. **We attract people that are like us.** We build things that are good for us. We subconsciously think that the rest of the world is similar to us, but that is just simply not the case. You're a leader. You're an innovator. You are in charge of your church and what makes your church what it is, and that is the people. We have to start with this question: who are our people? **Who are the people that attend our church, and how do we build a system that will help recruit the most people to fuel the mission of our church?**

One way to look at this is with the **five categories of the adoption curve.** This is the standard deviation curve that you've seen used in a lot of different areas, but this looks at how likely people are to adopt new things in their lives. Obviously, if we're going to encourage people to go from not volunteering to volunteering, we need to think clearly about what motivates them. Understanding who people are and what they want is a huge benefit because we're trying to move them to act and do what we believe is the best for them.

The five categories of the adoption curve help us because they give a clear picture of how to think about people and the ways we should build our systems to acquire the people that we need and want to volunteer in our churches. Here are the five categories of adoption and a little bit of information about them:

- **INNOVATORS (2.5%)**
  These people are eager to try new ideas, products, and services. It's almost an obsession for them. Innovators are willing to try things just because they're new, even if they're painful. They are often first in on anything that might be nascent. If you like trying a product in its "beta" form you are probably an innovator. If you're aware that there is a phase before "beta" in product development...than you are definitely an innovator!

- **EARLY ADOPTERS (13.5%)**
  As opposed to innovators, who rely on their own internal values, early adopters rely more on group norms and values. Early adopters like to try new things, but they do need to see other people doing that new thing first. In fact, this is probably the group that we see using Clubhouse right now. (It's the "new" audio only social network du jour.) It's actually built right into that system, as it is based on the idea of groups of people working on content together online. Early adopters are often among the first group doing or using something new and are important for us if we're pushing for any change initiative in our churches.

- **EARLY MAJORITY (34%)**
  These individuals collect more information about products and services to weigh in on the pros and cons before they make a decision to use it. In the church world, these are the largest majority of people in attendance. They are slow to adopt new innovations, or to do something new, until they have collected enough information that convinces them that it's something that they would like to be a part of.

- **LATE MAJORITY (34%)**
  This group of individuals adopts new things mainly because their friends have, and they feel the need to conform. The late majority have an inherent resistance to new things but are ultimately convinced to take part when they see their friends and family utilizing them. It is critical to think about this group when it comes to adoption of ideas because they ultimately look to others to make these kinds of decisions. Trust me, you'll find a lot of these types of people in your congregation. They are followers, not leaders.

■ LAGGARDS (16%)

This last group does not rely on group norms or values, just like the innovators, but in a different way. They have such a strong internal drive towards non-conformity that they'll go out of their way to drag their feet on using any new technology, system, or idea that comes along. It will be very difficult to motivate this group to use any new innovation because for them non-adoption is actually a core value. Take notice if there are more laggards than innovators in your church.

Why is it important for us to understand these five categories?

Most church leaders are either innovators or early adopters. They enjoy new things. By definition, they see themselves as leaders. They see themselves as being first in when something new is going on. **A difficulty arises because the majority of the volunteers you're going to meet at your church are either in the early majority or late majority groups.** They are folks that have to collect information and see that their friends and family have adopted any innovation before they will be willing to join.

This is an important mindset to understand. **We need to start building our systems to take into account the mindset of early majority and late majority people and what they need to join something that we're attempting to get them to be a part of.**

This very idea has led us to build a part of our system for launching campuses that we call **Connection Events.** These events are designed to help both early majority and late majority people plug in to the new launch. I think these events could be important for you as you think about volunteer expansion in this coming year.

We've pulled together four traits of Connection Events to give you a better sense of what these are. **These are not information meetings or interest events.** Early majority and late majority people are not looking for information about new ideas as they have likely not expressed interest in those ideas. Their orientation is not towards jumping in**. I would say they actually have an inherent hesitancy and have seen this play out time and again. The thing that will move people from not volunteering to volunteering is a relational connection.** These people don't need more information, and they don't need more vision. They need connection.

Most people need to meet other people who are thinking about volunteering, or already volunteering, before they will take the leap to join a team.

They need to answer this question: "Do people like us do things like this?" They need to see themselves as the kind of people who volunteer, and so we have to surround them with groups of people like them who are already volunteering.

Connection events are primarily designed to be relational events, in a church context, that are focused on establishing ties between church members. The focus of these events should be on what's in it for our people, more than what's in it for the church. Here are the four things to think about when designing these connection events.

CONNECTION EVENTS HAVE A HIGH INVITABILITY FACTOR

I know…"invitability"…it's not a word. However, it does capture the core concept of what these types of events should be.

High invitability means that these events are the kind of thing that someone could easily say yes to. They're something fun, social, and engaging to be a part of. **It's the kind of thing that you'd be glad to put on your calendar and say, "I look forward to being a part of this."** Especially now, this is important as we've had an extended time of social distancing that has led to reduced social engagement. Our people have missed this and are looking for more ways to socially engage with each other.

These could be fun events focused on typical activities in your region. Here in the northeast, many times during campus expansion in the winter, we have put on skating parties. This involves simply renting a rink and providing some hot chocolate, and then people get to skate, enjoy each other, and get to know new friends. We want these events to be the kinds of things that people would normally do for an evening out with some of their friends. At the end of the night, we might do a small talk on the new campus or future campus events. **But the primary driver for the event is its high invitability factor.** We've included a link below for additional information on Connection Event examples that you could run as a church.

CONNECTION EVENTS GET PEOPLE TALKING TO EACH OTHER

The main outcome of the Connection Event is that people walk away knowing at least a little bit more about two or three other people. The outcome should not be that people have more information about serving at the church.

These events need to be designed to allow people to talk freely and engage with one another. They should not involve people sitting in rows and listening to us talk at them.

Subtle details are important, like ensuring that we have name tags for everyone when they arrive because they are a social lubricant for getting people to talk to each other. There can be some structure to these events. For instance, once we did a prayer event where people from the town we were launching in came together. However, instead of having people sit in rows or at tables talking with people that they knew, we divided them up into teams and they travelled to 15 different stations. While we were praying at each one of those stations, people were connecting and talking and getting to know one another.

Connection Events are more about getting people to talk with each other than listening to what we have to say.

CONNECTION EVENTS HAVE A NEXT STEP REVEAL

One of the biggest mistakes we make as church leaders is that we overwhelm people with way too much information.

We know that volunteering at our churches in the coming year is going to require a whole bunch of new information. We know that volunteering in churches now looks different than it did pre-pandemic. There will be changes and new issues. Many people only have an online connection to our churches now, and the idea of in-person activities has all kinds of new information associated with it. **The mistake we make as church leaders is that we firehose people. We think that if we give them all the information they need, they'll jump on board.** We think that if we just get up and preach a good 40-minute message, then people will say yes.

That's just not the case.

The hypothesis that we've seen work out time and again during campus expansions is that the thing that moves people from not volunteering to volunteering is establishing a connection with other people.

A relational connection with each other is what is required most.

Understanding this, we need to give people just enough information to know their next step. In the multisite world, this means we reveal one or two pieces of information about the launch, not the entire launch plan. We talk about what's coming up next, not all the details between here and the launch. As you're looking to build teams in the coming year, the same process should go for volunteer connections.

Each one of these events, as we do a multitude of them, will aim to rebuild our teams over the next year by revealing small bits of information. **Each Connection Event brings us a step closer to what the launch will look like.** Avoid the general "annual meeting feel" by not dumping a ton of information on your members. Find just one or two pieces of information to reveal at each Connection Event. That will give your events a certain amount of gravitas because you'll be able to announce new and important bits of information. You'll be able to focus on your people and actually do the announcement in a way that is exciting.

This also helps your members, particularly those in the late majority crowd. If we give them all the information up front, they will see tons of ways to shoot holes in your plan and tear it down. However, if one to two pieces of information are revealed at each Connection Event, you can deal with any questions or concerns in a constructive manner. This will demonstrate to your church members that you do have a plan that brings clarity to volunteer engagement and reduces the possibility of discouraging people from engaging in volunteering at your church.

CONNECTION EVENTS HAVE A SIMPLE CALL TO ACTION

Each Connection Event should lead people to the next logical step.

We're only asking people to take a small step forward. We're not asking them to go from not serving to serving. This is a mistake we often make as preachers. **We think if we just preach one solid message on a Sunday morning, we can convert tons of people to volunteering.** While this will generate interest in volunteering, it doesn't actually spur people to act.

In fact, we conducted a study of churches and found that less than 10% of people who completed the volunteer interest information card on Sunday mornings were actually serving in a volunteer position three months later.

What we want to do is ask people to take small steps at each one of these events. That step could simply be to come to the next event, to invite some friends, to fill out an information card, to share information on social media, or to watch a video about volunteering.

We're asking people to make micro-commitments to get them closer to volunteer experiences.

THERE'S SO MUCH MORE INFORMATION WE COULD GIVE YOU ABOUT CONNECTION EVENTS. LOOKING FOR MORE HELP?

I believe Connection Events are going to be an important piece of your church's volunteer team engagement plan in the coming year.

Your church and my church are looking for more community volunteers. Connection Events are a proven path to increase our impact in the coming days.

We've created a tool to help you develop ideas for Connection Events at your church.

Click here to download a PDF of event ideas, as well as a PDF of this article to share and discuss with your team.