

OVERCOME VOLUNTEER BURNOUT BY BUILDING CAPACITY

Vital congregations reach out to strengthen the communities where they are located. Different denominations give different names for this ministry, including mission and outreach, home missions, and social ministry. But where do congregations get the strength for mission? How do they retain that strength in the midst of providing food and clothing, mentoring individuals, or advocating community change? How do they keep from burning out? They do it by building capacity.

What Is Capacity?

Capacity has to do with the amount of resources in hand. For churches, capacity could be reflected in the number of members, size of the budget, number of buildings, amount of land, funding, number of volunteers, or equipment supporting its programs. Organizational theorists describe organizations or programs with a relatively high degree of “slack” as robust. Imagine a large, well-stocked supermarket on the eve of a hurricane whose stock gets utilized as the crowds converge on the store to fill their pantries. Normally a convenience store would do just as well, but with the storm coming in, the supermarket seems more likely to have everything buyers need.

When Capacity Gets Overwhelmed

Failure to pay attention to capacity can have disastrous consequences. In a workshop we taught together on equipping churches for outreach, the Reverend Roderic Frohman, a Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) pastor in Rochester, New York, described a worst-case scenario:

A couple of years ago at Third Presbyterian Church, our Saturday noon lunch program had a glut of unexpected visitors, probably double the eighty people we usually feed every Saturday noon. We later learned that a neighboring social service agency, which held a Saturday lunch at exactly the same

time, had shut down for a month in order to repair their facilities. The ten volunteers who served the lunch that Saturday were completely overwhelmed. Worried about not getting enough food, two guests began to fight, duking it out on a table, which fell on an elderly lady, breaking her hip. Pandemonium reigned, the police and an ambulance were called, order was restored, but our volunteers were significantly rattled.¹

The breakdown is simple to explain: a sudden surge in demand had overwhelmed capacity. A lunch program equipped to serve eighty persons experienced an influx of 160. The results not only included altercations and injuries, but also a base of volunteers who now have a sense of fear attached to their community outreach.

In the case of Third Presbyterian’s lunch program, robustness might have to do with any number of factors in addition to a hearty soup, such as (1) having more than enough volunteers (2) with ample training (3) serving an abundance of food (4) according to



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VOLUNTEER BURNOUT
UNTIL AFTER YOUR FIRST COMMITTEE MEETING.”

guidelines that are published in a clear, easy-to-read handbook (5) with an appendix telling you what to do when emergencies happen.

Sabbath Rest

What about individuals? Here, capacity has to do with the amount of time, energy, or ability to get the job done. We know why volunteers burn out. Running a program that offers food or clothing assistance can feel unrelenting. How can program leaders build capacity when the needs are so overwhelming? Remember the adage: take time to sharpen the saw. As the saw becomes dull, the woodcutter or home builder may find the project imperceptibly slowing down. When this dulling happens to individuals, we call it burnout.

To build capacity, congregations can provide a context for program activity that encourages Sabbath rest. Volunteers can be encouraged to stop the rush of activities to talk, think, study, and pray about their lives. Pastors can match the content of adult education courses to outreach programs that are currently underway in order to nourish its basis in theology. Program leaders can encourage volunteers to deepen their friendship by sharing a meal together outside of the work environment and to strengthen family life by reflecting on their ministry around a family meal.²

The Courage to Halt Operations

An example of preventing burnout and building capacity comes from Greenpoint Reformed Church in Brooklyn. They answered a crisis of morale among its volunteers by shutting its lunch program down temporarily. Serving a predominantly poor neighborhood with a poverty rate of 36 percent, the church found its food pantry and lunch program overwhelmed by a rising tide of clients. Worried about running out of food and funding, and saddened by the death of the chef and the departure of a college student intern, the pastor made a drastic decision: the program would temporarily shut down. For two months during the summer, the program closed its doors. Suddenly there was time to build capacity!

Volunteers cleaned out the kitchen and brought it up to code, visited other food pantries to learn best practices, and drafted a set of volunteer guidelines. The result? Some volunteers got angry and quit. Clients were forced to go elsewhere, and when it reopened, they did not immediately come back. Yet happily, vol-

unteers and staff discovered a newfound sense of joy in their work. The Reverend Ann Kansfield remarked, “I love being around on Wednesdays and Thursdays now. I never would have thought that managing a soup kitchen requires every last ounce of skill and brains that I have. It is the hardest thing I’ve ever done.”³ It took courage to shut down operations temporarily, but it rejuvenated the program.

Strength through Collaboration

What if leaders lack sufficient capacity to organize a project of their own and do not expect to gain that capacity anytime in the near future? In this case, try collaborating with a social service agency by providing them with volunteers from the congregation. They can still count this as part of the congregation’s ministry when it reports on activities. Collaborating broadens the impact of the work without squeezing resources. Doing so makes it possible for congregations to have a larger impact than they otherwise would have by practicing more efficient pooling of resources. Social service agencies provide a certain level of professionalism unavailable to volunteer groups working on their own. Furthermore, these volunteers gain valuable experience about best practices. If the congregation wants to continue working toward building capacity, these volunteers can provide direction and insight into what is needed and how it can be achieved.

An Enduring Ministry

Building capacity not only increases church leaders’ ability to respond to crisis, but it can create a higher sense of morale as volunteers feel more effective and better able to accomplish what they set out to do. Having ample capacity increases the likelihood of an enduring ministry. For example, congregations that regularly integrate social concerns into prayer and worship and regularly take the time to affirm the service of members are less likely to experience a dramatic ebb and flow of community engagement activities. They take time to sharpen the saw.

1. Roderic P. Frohman, presentation for “Equipping the Congregation for Outreach and Mission,” Trinity Episcopal Church, Seattle, WA, Oct. 26, 2013.

2. Ibid.

3. Genine Babikian, “A Brooklyn Church Temporarily Shuts down Its Hunger Ministry in Order to Sustain It,” *Faith and Leadership*, <https://tinyurl.com/yd43soob>.