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by Mike Harton



# The Resource Page

... creative and practical ideas

## Baby boomers, volunteerism and the future of church leadership

**N**ews flash: “Churches losing market share as boomers exit the ranks of leadership.” This could be the headline if churches continue business as usual when it comes to their *laissez-faire* practices of caring for volunteers. This is particularly true when it comes to baby boomers — that “pig in the python” generation, 72 million strong, born between 1946 and 1964.

It is no stretch to realize that churches are probably the longest standing users of volunteer services of all community organizations. From teaching Sunday school classes to staffing committees to operating the various mission efforts, churches are almost completely dependent upon unpaid volunteers. That is why the future of program and ministry leadership in churches is in jeopardy.

Jeopardy? Are people going to stop volunteering? No. Are churches in danger of losing volunteers? Yes. For years churches have found it increasingly challenging to staff programs and ministries, and that challenge will increase. The primary reason has nothing to do with lack of dedication or poverty of time, but rather the increasing opportunities for volunteering in the community.

It appears that community agencies are more in tune with demographics and trends, which leads them to be more adept at attracting and holding volunteers. This is particularly true of baby boomers, the first wave of whom are approaching retirement or have retired early with no desire to spend all their time knitting, playing golf or fishing. Indications are that this will be the most active retired cohort in history so far. High numbers of boomers are actively searching for meaningful ways to give their time in service to their communities. They want engagement,

and they want to make a difference.

Couple this with a perhaps surprising effect of the economic downturn, the conscious decision to focus on significance over success, and you get a virtual tsunami of potential volunteers. Already the value of volunteer hours runs into millions of dollars, and this statistic is growing.

The opportunities for volunteering in the community continue to grow: School-aged and adult literacy (in some areas called mentoring), English as a Second Language, helping older adults, addressing hunger and homelessness issues, teaching hobbies and life skills, and the list goes on and on.

But you may protest, these are all things that many churches do — which is true. When baby boomers evaluate the options for investing their time, however, they are affected by such things as the quality of orientation to the job, clarity of expectations, the training provided, the promise of supportive yet honest supervision, feedback and recognition, clearly stated goals, and often the possibility of short-term commitment.

How do churches stack up in these areas? Let's be honest, usually when we enlist volunteers for a task ...

- Goals and expectations are not clearly stated.
- Little or no orientation and/or training is provided.
- Real supervision is missing.
- Feedback is lacking on how well or poorly the task is done.
- There is little or no recognition for service.

Add to the list above the likelihood that volunteers fear becoming lifers (“If I accept that job, I'll never get out of it!”), and it is easy to

see why people choose to volunteer outside the church.

So what can churches do to attract and keep baby boomers (and others) as volunteers?

- Recognize and bless their service in the community.
- Make available the same benefits they find in the community.
- Present the challenge and expectations of each ministry opportunity.
- Provide orientation and training.
- Enlist their help in setting goals.
- Identify channels of accountability.
- Give feedback on the quality of service done.
- Find multiple ways to recognize their service. (Examples: Ask volunteers to give testimonies in worship and in the newsletter about why they serve. Write notes and e-mails of appreciation to them for specific acts of leadership. Treat them with a gift card. Share e-mail links related to leadership or their area of responsibility.)
- Offer short-term opportunities for service; talk in terms of weeks and months rather than in terms of years.

If programs and ministries are to survive, churches must awaken from their malaise and show potential volunteers that the opportunities provided are worthy of their investment of time and energy. No amount of guilt or appeals to spiritual motivation will substitute for meeting volunteers' expectations.

Need some motivation to get started? Visualize being able to staff only one huge adult class, having no children's activities for lack of help or else ill-equipped huge classes consisting of all ages, and few mission activities. Continue the status quo, and that's what we'll reap. **BT**

**THE RESOURCE PAGE** is provided by the Congregational Life office of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in partnership with *Baptists Today* and for those dedicated lay leaders working in the educational ministries of local churches. This month's page was written by Mike Harton, an adjunct professor at Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond and Bluefield (Va.) College and an educational coach living in Midlothian, Va. Resource Page Archives are available at [www.thefellowship.info/Resources/Church-Resources/Baptists-Today-resource-page](http://www.thefellowship.info/Resources/Church-Resources/Baptists-Today-resource-page).