

Are We Volunteers??

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Is “volunteer” the best word to use when we refer to work we do as and for the church? There is something that feels vaguely uncomfortable about it -- as though we have the option to refuse God’s calling on our lives or because the term “volunteer” sounds too modern or secular.

In this article, we will first explore the definitions and origins of the word “volunteer.” Then we will take a look at many of the Biblical passages that might be helpful. After gaining a Biblical perspective, we will consider the options in English. (For readers in other language cultures, we invite your comments.)

The English word “volunteer” comes to us from Latin, referring to one’s free will.¹ A volunteer is “one who renders a service or takes part in a transaction while having no legal concern or interest.”² Another definition is “a person who performs a service willingly and without pay.”³

As used in modern English, it is apparent that “volunteer” has a very broad range of meanings. Usually, a contrast is involved. An Army volunteer, for example, is not a draftee. A hospital volunteer is not a paid healthcare worker. A staff member who volunteers to be on call for the emergency hotline is not already on the regular schedule.

There is one point that the Army volunteer, hospital volunteer and hotline volunteer have in common: choice. Their service is optional in some way, even when they are being paid.

Choice is a fleeting element, however. Once the Army volunteer is sworn in, all distinctions fall away. Likewise, the hotline volunteer may only have options as to which weekends to serve, since hotline duty is often part of the job description. Even the hospital volunteer fits into a schedule and has responsibilities.

In most definitions, the key issue is monetary remuneration. Very often, a paycheck is the only thing that separates volunteers from paid staff. Paid staff members are hired and fired; then the paychecks start or stop. For most people, the paycheck is their strongest motivation to show up at work and do the job in a specific way. Although volunteers are “hired,” “fired,” and rewarded in many ways, there is a conspicuous absence of a paycheck. The lines for “hiring” volunteers become blurred. And even when volunteers are terminated or asked to not return, the term “fired” is rarely applied.

A second key element in defining volunteers is their position or role. In many situations, volunteer positions can be filled by any warm body. Granted, some training and/or commitment may be required, but often the organization does a quick training session (or shoves volunteers into slots) with whoever shows up. Yes, the volunteers have a “role,” but all volunteers in such cases are interchangeable.

There are non-profit organizations, of course, that have extensive training programs, long-term commitment requirements, and well-defined volunteer job descriptions. But these are the exception rather than the rule in the world of volunteers. Most organizations fall somewhere in the middle.

The final element we will address in defining a volunteer is education or training. There is a joke about the Titanic being built by professionals and Noah’s ark being built by volunteers. Skills were, in the past, very often the signature difference between volunteers and professional staff. It is still true in many organizations. A hospital candy striper cannot step into the shoes of a physician or nurse.

Modern charitable organizations, though, frequently benefit from the volunteer time of professionals -- physicians, CPAs, lawyers, and others. In today’s volunteer world, organizations often rely on the computer skills and website designs of highly skilled volunteers. Specialized charitable organizations are even created to funnel these professional skills into the field. Doctors go to under-served populations. Lawyers provide legal aid. CPAs help at-risk businesses in low income communities. Volunteers may well be the unskilled complement to the paid staff, but the reverse may also be true.

In all of these elements (choice, pay, position, and skills), the reader can picture similar situations in the church. We could hope for a clear example from the Bible, but the question was no less difficult in the New Testament church. Paul, for example, knew that he was as highly trained as any Bible scholar of his era (Philippians 3:4-6) and entitled to be paid for devoting himself fulltime to teaching and evangelism (1 Timothy 5:17-18). Even so, he was frequently self-supporting (1 Thessalonians 2:9) and declined the financial support which was due him.

Since the word “volunteer” is exceedingly rare in the Bible⁴, what descriptions do the writers of Scripture use? One of the most common descriptions of Believers is that of members of a family. God the Father is the head of the household. Family members have roles and responsibilities as “members.” In a family, no one is paid staff.

The model of the family worked well for the early church, when the church community pooled all of the members’ resources to meet the physical needs (Acts 4:35). As soon as the time demands on some individuals became inequitable, though, Paul addressed the problem (1 Timothy 5:17-18). In the Old Testament, as well, the priests devoted themselves to God’s work rather than to agriculture to support

themselves. God set up a system that took care of their needs -- essentially as paid staff.

We see, then, that the family image works well to a certain extent. There is a tipping point, though, where the time demands or focus/commitment justify the creation of paid positions. Paid staff are still family members in the congregation (and they need to always keep that in mind). Ultimately, this still leaves us with the question of what to call the members of the family who are not on staff.

Another metaphor that is often invoked when modern Christians are discussing "volunteers" is Paul's description of the Body (1 Corinthians 12:12-27). It feels odd to be called body parts! Eyes, hands, ears, noses, elbows. Somehow, though, we recognize that the metaphor is an apt description of our interdependence. Paul uses a number of different contrasting adjectives -- honorable (less honorable), presentable (less presentable), weaker -- to make his point that all members are equally valuable and equally necessary. There are no unnecessary parts in the Body.

So, while we have a dichotomy of paid staff and those who are not paid staff, the body has many different parts. Is it possible that the lesson here is that we must be cautious in lumping all non-staff members of the church into a single catch-all category?

Based on the Body metaphor, some writers are tempted to categorize all Believers (whether paid or not) with a single label such as "disciple." They question whether Believers have any more choice in their service than an ear has a choice of contributing to the function of the body.

It is important to note, though, that God's people are called many different things in Scripture: construction workers (1 Corinthians 3:12), disciples (Acts 6:2), slaves (Romans 6:18), tower planners (Luke 14:28), living stones being built into a priesthood (1 Peter 2:5), and other terms. If we look for the distinguishing feature of "choice" in Scripture, two examples stand out. One is in the Old Testament and the other is in Paul's writing.

When God gave Moses instructions in Exodus 25-31 for building the tabernacle, with all of its intricate craftsmanship, He told Moses to gather contributions of materials and funds "from every man whose heart moves him" (Exodus 25:2). God appointed the designers by name for the work that was to be done by the most skilled workmen, including Bezalel (Exodus 31:1-6). But then God put in Bezalel's heart the desire to teach others and to involve them in the work, also.

Then Moses called Bezalel and Oholiab and every skillful person in whom the LORD had put skill, **everyone whose heart stirred him**, to come to the work to perform it. They received from Moses all the contributions which the sons of Israel had brought to perform the work in

the construction of the sanctuary. And they still continued bringing to him freewill offerings every morning (Exodus 36:2-3).

The net result was that Moses finally had to tell the people to stop bringing materials and stop volunteering their time; it was far more than enough!

Everyone had the opportunity to donate the goods that were used in creating the tent, the ark, the poles, the screens, lamps, bowls, etc. It sounds like the whole community contributed it some way. But if we consider the estimates that the community was anywhere from one million to six million people, clearly they did not all hoist a hammer or employ an embroidery needle. And they did not need to -- some stepped forward to work on the tabernacle while others went about their everyday jobs of gathering manna.

As we move into the New Testament, Romans 12:1 seldom shows up in the discussion of whether we are volunteers: "Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship."

We are an offering. A sacrifice. Jesus, as the sacrifice for our sin, is the ultimate model of a sacrifice. Scripture makes much of the fact that He had a choice. His death on the cross was voluntary. The very fact that He was not required to die on the cross is the proof of His love for us (Ephesians 5:2).

Likewise, we are to be sacrifices. Our bodies are to be living sacrifices, offered to God for His pleasure. As a freewill offering, we can give above and beyond what God requires. And honestly, isn't that what grace is all about? Christ shed His blood to buy us back from slavery to sin and damnation. We love -- and give and do -- because He first loved us (1 John 4:19). We demonstrate our faith by our works (James 2:18).

So we come full circle, back to considering the best English word(s) to use for those who do the work of the church. Starting with the terms we find in the Bible, the following terms might be candidates:

- family member (brother, sister)
- body part
- construction worker
- disciple
- slave
- servant
- tower planner
- living stone
- living sacrifice
- freewill offering

While all are descriptive in some way, none have the connotations or specificity to identify the Believer “whose heart moves him” or her. Most, in fact, fail to communicate anything at all by themselves and without a context.

Christian bloggers have been tossing the question around for a while. One has suggested that church volunteers be called “conspirators,”⁵ but again, the word has extensive verbal baggage. Volunteer managers have explored the issue from a secular perspective, also without coming up with anything helpful.

The problem with using the word “volunteer” for the church is not so much what it means as with what it leaves out. In the church, each Believer has an eternal family relationship with every other Believer. As part of the Body, we are maturing and contributing to one another’s spiritual and physical health. As construction workers in the Kingdom, we are accountable for the resources we have been given and the quality of our workmanship. As disciples, we have the task of following Christ’s commands and teaching others to do the same. As living sacrifices, we willingly shoulder the burdens of others, as many volunteers do -- but we also set aside our selfish ambitions and the individualism that is pervasive in Western culture.⁶ The word “volunteer” should encompass all of these things, but most of the time it doesn’t -- even in the church.

Church volunteers should be setting the example. We should be the ones defining what it looks like when the hearts of God’s people are moved to service and sacrifice, committed to the maturing and well-being of the family and those who are beyond. Perhaps we could be called the “heart-moved ones.”

More likely, we will keep being called volunteers. It’s up to us to make that mean more in, for, and as the church.

1. Voluntary. Dictionary.com. *Online Etymology Dictionary*. Douglas Harper, Historian. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/voluntary> (accessed: October 08, 2013).
2. Volunteer. Merriam-Webster, Inc. 2003. *Merriam-Webster’s collegiate dictionary*. Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Inc.
3. Volunteer. Dictionary.com. *Dictionary.com Unabridged*. Random House, Inc. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/volunteer> (accessed: October 08, 2013).
4. 1 Chronicles 28:21 (Living Bible), 2 Chronicles 17:16 (English Standard Version), Ezra 7:13 (NIV), Psalm 110:3 (NASB), Amos 9:4 (Living Bible), and occasional references to volunteer crops.
5. *A Better Word Than “Volunteer”?* http://kinnon.tv/2005/09/a_better_word_t.html (accessed: July 6, 2013).
6. “The word ‘volunteer’ works well in a culture that celebrates the individual. ‘I’ decide of my own ‘free will’ that I will help. But in a culture that celebrates community and communion, we are really called to be ‘conspirators’”. People who breath together. (Conspire, Latin root – to breath together).” From *A Better Word Than “Volunteer”?* http://kinnon.tv/2005/09/a_better_word_t.html (accessed: July 6, 2013).

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