

WE > ME: RECRUITING AND RETAINING VOLUNTEERS FOR EFFECTIVE STUDENT MINISTRY

If I've learned anything over the last 20 years as a ministry leader, it's that you and I were not created or intended to do ministry and life alone. We need one another. To establish effective student ministries, we must build a team from the beginning. The big dreams and goals you and I have for our students can't be accomplished simply by our own giftings and stamina. It's not a "me" thing. It's about us working together for the kingdom of God.

Is Teamwork Biblical?

We know pragmatically that we can't build and maintain a ministry on our own, but what does the Bible say about building a team?

Genesis 2:18 says, "Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper corresponding to him.'" The first human relationship demonstrated the need for partnership and community. The first thing in the Garden that was not good was aloneness. Adam was not called to build society alone. He needed Eve to help him accomplish the task God had given him. Laboring together as a team was God's design from the beginning.

Exodus 17:12 reads, "When Moses's hands grew heavy, they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat down on it. Then Aaron and Hur supported his hands, one on one side and one on the other so that his hands remained steady until the sun went down." In the battle against the Amalekites, the Israelites won as long as Moses' hands were lifted, but he grew tired as the battle wore on. He needed his companions' help. Aaron and Hur supported

him until they saw victory. If you're in ministry long enough, you will eventually see that you need support as well. We need one another.

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Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 says, "Two are better than one because they have a good reward for their efforts. For if either falls, his companion can lift him up; but pity the one who falls without another to lift him up. Also, if two lie down together, they can keep warm; but how can one person alone keep warm? And if someone overpowers one person, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not easily broken." Notice the truth of verse 9—a team brings a good return for their work. Isn't that what we long for as we minister? We desire to see fruit from our efforts. The Bible is clear that we accomplish this better as we partner with one another.

Matthew 10:2-4 reads, "These are the names of the twelve apostles: First, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother; James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Zealot, and Judas Iscariot, who also betrayed him." Jesus had a team! He did not carry out His earthly ministry alone. If we try to do ministry on our own, we are going to eventually wear out. If Jesus didn't do ministry alone, why do we think we can? Look to Jesus. Follow His example.

Learning to Recruit Volunteers as Jesus Did

Building a solid team of volunteers may feel intimidating, but it just starts with one. When you get one volunteer, then you can get two, and then quickly after, three. In Mark 1:16-17, Jesus saw Simon and Andrew fishing. He told them to put down their nets and follow Him; He would make them fishers of men.

So, how did Jesus recruit people?

Jesus prioritized the right people.

When you're building a team, you don't want to pick just anyone. Jesus saw them casting their net into the sea. He looked at them. He had probably been watching them. He'd encountered them before.

When choosing who to recruit, you want someone with good character and love for God. Observe how they serve the church over a period of time and how they interact with students already. You want to consider who God wants you to prioritize prayerfully. Ask Him to give you eyes to see whose heart He is already working in to love and serve students.

Jesus had a clear vision for His ministry.

To prioritize the right people, you must know your vision. When Jesus told them to follow Him, He was clear about where He would lead them. He said, "I'll make you fishers of men."

So, what is the vision for your ministry? Once you know that, you can recruit people around the vision. Don't recruit people, then try to build a vision or change the vision once you have recruited volunteers. Keep your vision to reach and disciple students.

Jesus Himself made the ask.

You don't see Jesus depending on others to recruit volunteers for His ministry. He didn't send someone in His place to make the ask. He prioritized Simon and Andrew in Mark 1, had a clear vision of where

the ministry was going, and then He Himself made the ask.

It's personal recruiting. As leaders, stop depending on Sunday morning announcements during the worship service to build your team. The best way to build your team is face-to-face; it's personal. Email blasts and social media posts aren't going to result in quality volunteers who are bought into the vision.

People want to work and serve with someone they know, like, and trust. They assume you, as a leader, have all you need and that they're not needed or necessary. Look at your leadership. Are you personally speaking to others about how useful they could be in your ministry?

Ask God to reveal who to prioritize and ask Him to bring you a team. Then you do the asking.

How to Retain Volunteers

Getting volunteers is one thing. Keeping them is another. One of the key factors to maintaining an effective student ministry is the longevity of volunteers and ministry leadership. Short tenures make it hard to build trust. When the student leader stays in the same position long enough, he can begin to build.

Leaders and volunteers who stay committed over the long term become a trusted, steady presence in students' lives, which fosters deep relationships. If you can dig in, ride out the hard times, celebrate in the good times, and allow God to use you in the various seasons of ministry, students will be healthier, their roots will be deeper, and their reach will go farther.

Here are three steps to volunteer longevity.

1. Let your volunteers know they are valued and appreciated.

When did you last say "thank you" to your team members? "Thank you for being awesome. Thank you for showing up today. This can't happen without you."

There are many ways to show thanks, but consistently letting people know they're appreciated goes a long way.

2. Equip and empower your volunteers.

Most of your volunteers have a full-time job outside of the time they serve your ministry. They walk in a lot of times, limping. They need our support. How can you empower them to win and be the hero in the room with their small group? How can you best equip them? Find resources so you can constantly pour into them. Consistently feed them support to empower them in ministry.

3. Foster community among the volunteers.

There's nothing like doing ministry with friends, and, as their leader, you want to serve them as much as you're asking and expecting them to serve others. Build in times where you all get together and hang out. Have some time where you're just building this relationship. Why? Because longevity doesn't happen accidentally. It happens intentionally. And when you do this, they're going to stick around.

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Realities to Remember

As you consider how you'll implement these things, consider these other factors.

This takes time.

Longevity is key to building a great ministry and team. We've got to stay somewhere for the long haul to see fruit. It doesn't happen overnight. It requires intentional effort. It's work, but it's worth it.

You will encounter conflict.

Diverse people come together to volunteer and serve. There are going to be disagreements. Even Jesus had to deal with conflicting viewpoints from His disciples. As hard as it was to recruit them, you'll have to work just as hard to unify them.

Change happens.

Volunteers move to a different city as new families join your church. Turnover among your volunteer team will occur. You have to recruit constantly. As a leader, my head is always on a swivel. I'm always praying and looking. I'm always asking my volunteers if they know of someone awesome to possibly bring on and asking them who they are recruiting.

Vision is vital.

Regularly casting a clear and compelling vision helps align the team. If you keep the vision central, the mission will move forward more seamlessly.

It's worth it.

When we shift from a "me" thing to a "we" thing in ministry, things change for the good. As you add more people to the team, it will take work to constantly examine how to lead well, but it's worth it in the end.

We can't do ministry alone. We need one another and committed volunteers who will love and serve for the long haul to help see lasting fruit among the students we lead. "We" is greater than "me." May God give us the grace to recruit and retain volunteers for lasting kingdom impact among the next generation.

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Adapted from the Youth Leader Coaching Network.

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