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## **Why do they Do It? A Study of Volunteer Commitment in the Parish Setting**

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### **Abstract**

*To study factors that contribute to volunteer commitment, questionnaires were sent to members of Baptist congregations who were, or recently had been, involved in volunteering. In this setting, how well the volunteer's position utilized her/his talents and gifts and coincided with the agency's/church's mission, a person's satisfaction in volunteering, and the religious and altruistic reasons for volunteering far outweighed material rewards and the desire to have personal needs met. This article adds to the limited literature on church-affiliated volunteers and suggests areas for further study.*

### **Key Words:**

religion, volunteers, church, commitment, Baptist, altruism

Jean is a 60-year-old woman who lives in the Maryland suburbs and comes from a middle class family. For the past three years, she has driven past blighted neighborhoods and drug deals in process in order to teach quilting to senior adults in an economically depressed neighborhood of Washington, DC. After years of working with people like Jean, I ask myself, "Why do they do it?"

Margaret and Glenn, a spirited retired couple, live among extended family on a beautiful hillside in North Carolina. They frequently leave this idyllic lifestyle to help people in settings ranging from a small Indian reservation in New Mexico to a small town in upstate New York. Again, I ask, "Why do they do it?"

After more than 20 years of work among Baptist churches and agencies, I have become increasingly conscious of the important role the lay person plays in the local church as well as in denominational agencies. As the director of a Baptist neighborhood center in Washington, DC, I

depended heavily upon volunteers for service provision. This experience raised questions about the factors that contributed to volunteer commitment.

Earlier in my professional career I worked with volunteers who gave large blocks of time solely to ministry projects under the auspices of the Baptist denomination, often requiring them to relocate for a period of weeks to years. I became profoundly aware of the important contribution of church members. Most of the programs could not function without the volunteer, the lay minister. In noting the decline in volunteer commitment in some churches and the strong commitment in others, I began to question what made the difference. Why were some committed, while others were not?

The research reported in this article examined the relationship between volunteer commitment and the costs and rewards in volunteering. Volunteer commitment (the dependent variable) was defined as the value

of volunteering and the probability of fulfilling that value. The hypothesis was that, when controlling for income, age, marital status, race, education, gender, and length of time as a volunteer, there would be a direct positive relationship between the level of volunteer commitment and the rewards for the volunteers. It was also predicted there would be a direct negative relationship between the level of volunteer commitment and the cost in volunteering (factors -to personal and family concerns).

Independent variables included rewards to the volunteer and costs to the volunteer. Rewards to the volunteer included: trans-personal (religious and altruistic reasons for volunteering); social interaction (a person's need to be around people); material (the desire to have personal needs met); personal fulfillment (a person's satisfaction in volunteering); self-role congruence (how well the volunteer's position utilized her or his talents and gifts and coincided with the agency's/ church's mission); relations with staff (satisfaction of the volunteer with her this staff at the church/ agency); relationships with clients {satisfaction of the volunteer with her/his relations with the people to whom he or she ministered); relationships with other volunteers (the level of involvement of the volunteer with other volunteers in the setting); and climate (the attitude of the church/ agency toward the volunteer).

Costs to the volunteer included personal costs (personal or family concerns in volunteering), and environmental costs (costs concerning safety and availability of transportation).

### **The Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for the study was social exchange theory. Initiated by Homans (1961) and further developed by Blau (1968), exchange theory is concerned with exchanges between people. It focuses

on the costs and rewards inherent in all social relations and attempts to explain why people enter into specific social transactions. Things exchanged involve not only money, but other commodities including approval, esteem, compliance, love, and affection. Blau's work recognized fairness in exchanges, the varying value of rewards, a person's multiple goals and preferences, and the social commitments that limit alternatives.

This theoretical perspective suggests why people volunteer when, in fact, there are limited or no economic returns. Social exchange theory was used in this study to determine what rewards contributed to volunteer commitment. It was also utilized to help determine what sustained the volunteers in continuing to donate their time and talents without economic returns.

### **The Study Design**

A 15-page self-administered mail questionnaire was developed for the study. The questionnaire requested information about the respondent such as age, gender, marital status, and work experience. It also asked questions concerning the person's past and present volunteer involvement such as setting, length of time volunteered, and people served. A few open-ended items were included which sought additional data, such as recommendations for preparation for this volunteer position, the most difficult aspect of the volunteer work, and the greatest advantage of the volunteer work. The remainder of the questionnaire contained descriptive items concerning rewards and costs in volunteering. The purpose of this design was to examine the relationships between the independent variables (costs and rewards) and the dependent variable (volunteer commitment).

### **The Study Population**

The study population included Baptist church volunteers from Northern Virginia and the Richmond, Virginia, areas. These Baptist church volunteers were persons whom the pastor or staff member believed were currently or had recently been involved in volunteer activities within the church or in church-related agencies outside the church. A total of 47 pastors or church staff members submitted 1,108 names. Questionnaires were sent to all of these individuals. Of these, 628 were returned for an overall response rate of 56.7 percent. Of the 628 questionnaires, 66 were unusable resulting in a usable response rate of 50.7 percent.

### **Study Findings**

Most of the volunteers in this study were white, largely from an affluent population, had attended college, were middle-aged and married. They ranged in age from 19 to 84 years, with a median age of 54 years. Of the respondents, 16 percent were under age 40, and 18 percent were above age 69, which suggests that churches should target younger as well as older people for volunteer work. The ethnic background of almost the entire study population was white with an over-representation of white women in the study population when compared with women in all Baptist churches and in the nation as a whole. More than two-thirds of the respondents were women, as compared to just over one-half nationwide and church-wide. Of the respondents, 95 percent were white, as compared to approximately 80 percent nationwide and 77 percent in Virginia (Scan/US, 1995). More than 80 percent were married. Close to 60 percent had partial college or a college degree, whereas 16 percent had never attended college, and 25 percent had done post-graduate work. Incomes ranged from \$20,000 to \$79,999, while close to one-third

had incomes over \$80,000. Only 6.0 percent had incomes under \$20,000.

Most volunteers became engaged in volunteering because they were asked to volunteer. This points up the importance of actively approaching people concerning volunteer needs. Most of the volunteers did not have job descriptions, nor did they have contracts, an area which should be given consideration by volunteer coordinators or directors in church related volunteer programs.

Although most of the respondents had no special preparation for their volunteer positions, they found their background experiences extremely helpful. In addition, they reported they received adequate training on the job. They served mainly middle and upper-middle class persons. Few received reimbursement. If they did, it was generally for supplies. This points out that reimbursement or monetary gain is not a factor in volunteering with this population. It also points out that life experiences help in preparation for volunteering, as does on-the-job training.

### **Volunteer Profile**

According to the study data, the typical volunteer was a white woman between the ages of 40 and 59. She had some college training and was married. Her household income was approximately \$65,000. She was a church member and probably also related to religious organizations on the associational or state level. She had been a member of various committees in her church and most likely held an office in the church. She was employed full-time in a white-collar professional job.

The primary setting of her volunteer activity was the church. She had volunteered 15-20 years, her primary activity being that of educator or commission member. She initially became involved in volunteering because she was asked to do so. Her

volunteer position provided no job description or written contract, and she came without training. Her previous education and work experience proved helpful, and she did feel that she received adequate training during her volunteer experience. The people she served in her volunteer position were middle, upper-middle, or mixed class in a suburban locality. Except for occasional supplies, she received no reimbursement for her volunteering. She did not, participate in volunteering for any monetary gain.

### **Findings Related To The Study Hypothesis**

Among the study participants, volunteer commitment was high and they were committed to religious and altruistic ideals. They also experienced high levels of self-role congruence (a feeling that one's volunteer position utilized ones talents and gifts and coincided with the agency's mission), positive relationships with those to whom they ministered, and a positive organizational climate. The data show that respondents did not gain material rewards from their volunteering. These data suggest that church volunteers are often willing to accept any costs associated with volunteering as part of their commitment to the church and to God.

The study findings related to the hypotheses showed that the major variables positively correlated with volunteer commitment were self-role congruence, personal fulfillment, and altruistic and religious rewards. Personal or family costs in volunteering were not notable. Social interaction, relationships with clients, staff, and volunteers, and climate were not significantly correlated with volunteer commitments either. There was no support for the sub-hypothesis that the higher the personal material rewards, the higher the volunteer commitment. In fact, the opposite influence was found to be true.

Those who felt the most strongly committed to their volunteer involvement and to volunteerism in general had a strong sense of self-role congruence. They found their skills valuable to the agency and their interests congruent with agency goals. Volunteering lived up to their expectations and was well suited to their talents. They planned to continue to volunteer and to encourage others to do so.

Personal fulfillment was also significant in influencing volunteer commitment. Those who found in volunteering an opportunity for self-expression and personal growth felt strongly committed to volunteering. The volunteers in this study found that through engaging in meaningful work they broadened their knowledge and developed their creative potential.

According to the data, these Baptist church volunteers consider it a favorable exchange to give their time and energy to activities that use their skills and talents through which they experience personal growth and the release of creativity. These findings have important implications for church-related agencies. They need to find challenging jobs for this population of volunteers, not merely routine activities such as stuffing envelopes or answering the phone. Church-related agencies may find diminishing volunteer commitment if the talents and skills of the study group of volunteers are not used for meaningful roles rather than exclusively for menial tasks.

Volunteers who defined rewards as being beyond one's self and connectedness with God and humankind experienced high levels of volunteer commitment. The volunteers in this study volunteered to meet the needs of others and to provide a service for someone else and for the purpose of serving God by helping others. They were following the leadership of God in sharing their spiritual gifts with others and they

wished to bring joy into the lives of others and make their world better.

In this study, personal material rewards were negatively correlated to volunteer commitment. Those who volunteered in order to meet influential people, to get practical experience, to learn new skills, to get ahead in a career, or to investigate new career possibilities had low volunteer commitment. In fact, the more important these material rewards were to them, the lower their level of volunteer commitment.

Social interaction rewards did not have statistically significant influence on volunteer commitment.' The respondents were less likely to volunteer to make new friends, to have meaningful social contacts, or to be in a stimulating social environment. They were less likely to volunteer in order to feel accepted and valued by others, to be around interesting people, or to be with people they knew and enjoyed. According to the demographic findings of this study, the people who responded to this survey were well educated and well socialized and had well established social networks which may have influenced these findings. They possibly were not seeking the volunteer context for social interaction rewards.

In the overall study results, the need to feel affirmed, appreciated, and respected by the people the volunteers helped did not significantly influence their commitment. Nor did their relationship with staff or other volunteers. The volunteers in this study did not have a great need for affirmation. That does not necessarily mean they would continue to volunteer if their relationships were negative or if they were treated shabbily. The need for positive relationships may not be driving this group of volunteers, but this finding does not address the effects of negative relationships.

Climate, or the prevailing attitude of the agency toward the volunteer, was not a significant influential factor on volunteer

commitment in this study. The amount of emphasis on and respect toward the volunteer was not significant in volunteer commitment. How volunteers are treated may not be as big a factor as the sense of satisfaction from their volunteer contributions. Their commitment may be high enough that minor irritants would not cause them to quit. However, it is still reasonable to believe that a highly negative environment would drive volunteers away. While they may not demand a strongly affirming climate, it is unlikely they would have a high level of commitment if the atmosphere of the agency or church were highly negative. This needs to be addressed in future studies.

Costs, or factors which could deter a person from volunteering, were not significant in volunteer commitment. Environmental costs included driving through a dangerous neighborhood, difficulty in commuting, and commuting after dark. Given the fact that most of the respondents volunteered in suburban neighborhoods with middle or upper-middle class individuals, it is not surprising that environmental costs were not high. They probably did not encounter dangerous neighborhoods as a part of their volunteer involvement. Also, given the affluence of the volunteers, they probably had access to safe and dependable transportation.

Yet, it is somewhat surprising that personal costs were not a deterrent 'to volunteering. These costs included caring for children and/or senior adults, feeling overwhelmed by the needs presented to the volunteer, and lack of confidence in their own skills and talents. These were insignificant to volunteer commitment.

Of all the control variables (income, age, marital status, education, race, gender, and length of time as a volunteer) only length of time as a volunteer had any influence on volunteer commitment, and it

was slight. The longer the period of service as a volunteer, the higher the volunteer commitment.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The study was limited in its focus to volunteers from Baptist churches. Care should therefore be taken in generalizing to a wider population. Most of the volunteer activity of participants took place in their local church. This has only limited generalizing to other than church related agencies. In addition, names of these volunteers were obtained from church staff. Although criteria for including volunteers in this study were given to staff, the opinions of the staff were relied upon in determining whether or not these were active volunteers.

Members of non-Anglo groups were under-represented in this study. Therefore, their unique perspectives and experiences were not examined.

The study also was limited by the drawbacks of self-reported data. While there is ample evidence to support the use of this form of data collection, the content of this study was derived from the perceptions of the volunteers. It was not deemed feasible to elicit the comparative perceptions of others in the setting or to use participant observations. However, use of these alternative methods of data collection might have strengthened objectivity.

Utilization of mail-questionnaires without a supportive method of data collection, such as representative interview samples, was another limitation of this study. This procedure would have provided additional qualitative information for more in-depth study in selected areas.

### **Recommendations for Action and Further Research**

Recommendations are based on the present research. They are organized around three major content areas: methodological

concerns, contribution to social exchange theory, and contribution to the knowledge base about volunteers. Rationales specific to each recommendation are included with this presentation of the recommendations.

### **Methodological Concerns**

*Sample Base.* As noted in the study findings, two-thirds of the respondents in this survey were women, while only 51 percent of the national population and of the church population is female. Research findings show that both men and women provide valuable volunteer services. Research also indicates that there are more women than men in the volunteer force. Future studies need to be conducted to determine why women volunteer in larger numbers than do men. Factors which motivate men to volunteer also need to be investigated.

There are very few studies concerning ethnic involvement in volunteering. Efforts need to be made to determine the involvement of minorities and people from non-Anglo groups in church-related volunteer activity. Motivational factors for greater involvement in volunteering need to be determined. This study could be replicated or a similar study conducted in other communities.

*Predictors of Volunteer Commitment.* This study was conducted with Baptist church members and contains the biases of that population. Valuable contrasts could be obtained through replicating the study with a secular population or with other religious groups. Other independent variables which influence volunteer commitment might emerge. It would be especially interesting to find out whether or not religious and altruistic rewards are significant for volunteers in the secular community.

Because the independent variables in this study only explained approximately one-third of the variation (or influence on) volunteer commitment, studies should be

conducted that seek to identify other predictors of volunteer commitment, such as the types of positive and negative influences related to middle-aged or older volunteers. This has important implications for volunteer satisfaction and retention.

Most of the volunteers in this study were of the middle and upper class and volunteered with a similar client group where safety was not an issue. This study could be replicated with a sample drawn from a lower socioeconomic status who provide services in poorer neighborhoods. Would environmental costs become a significant factor?

In this study, personal costs were not significant predictors of volunteer commitment. Including items in future studies concerning family situations such as number and ages of children, single heads of households, and care-givers for parents would reveal whether or not these factors influence volunteer commitment or the ability to volunteer.

Although the study respondents were satisfied with their preparation for their volunteer positions, studies to determine the type and effectiveness of training for volunteer positions need to be conducted. The difference training makes on the volunteer's ability to function well and independently needs to be determined. It would also be helpful to know the relationship of training to length of service. Knowledge concerning types and duration of training for optimum effectiveness for the volunteer is needed.

Only 15% of those in this study had written job descriptions and contracts. Studies need to be conducted to determine why these administrative tools are not used more widely with volunteers in these settings and if they are widely used in non-church related settings. Contracts clarify roles and responsibilities and formalize the relationship with the volunteer, thus

potentially strengthening volunteer commitment. It would be useful to examine the utility of contracts and to determine what might motivate agencies, particularly religious organizations, to implement the utilization of written contracts. The importance of contracting needs to be considered by those who recruit and supervise volunteers in church-related settings.

Climate (the attitude of the church-based agency toward the volunteer) was not significant in this study. It would be useful to examine other aspects of organizational climate that might be associated with volunteer commitment.

### **Contribution to Exchange Theory**

This study extended the use of social exchange theory to the volunteer population. It showed the types of exchanges that were meaningful to volunteers. Findings in this study helped to clarify the types of exchanges in volunteer work in the study population and those that were associated with volunteer commitment.

This study showed that intangible rewards (such as utilization of a person's talents and skills and the ability to provide a needed service) can be more significant than tangible exchanges (such as payment for service) in commitment to a job. Rather than expecting material rewards or considering the costs in exchanges, the volunteers in this study were concerned with the fit between their interests and the church or agency goals. These intangible exchanges were the most significant to the volunteer.

The study findings highlight the usefulness of exchange theory in understanding volunteer commitment. Further studies need to be done to examine the significance of non-tangible exchanges in non-church-related settings as well as in other organizational structures.

### **Contribution to the Knowledge Base Concerning Volunteers**

Since no empirical studies in the past two decades could be located on volunteer commitment in the church setting, this fills a gap in the literature on volunteers. The results of this study point to the types of exchange relationships involved in the commitment of the church volunteer. It provides information about the nature of the commitment of the church volunteer and suggests significant predictors of volunteer commitment.

With reductions in funding and the increases in needs of the community, churches and church-based agencies should give greater consideration to the development of volunteer programs. Knowledge of the importance of intangible rewards to the volunteer could help church-based agencies incorporate such rewards into their program designs. The agency needs to be aware of the skills and interests of the volunteers and seek to match these with their volunteer tasks. Those intangible rewards the agency should offer can enhance volunteer commitment.

### **Conclusion**

Volunteerism has been strongly woven into the fabric of American society. The contribution of volunteers has become increasingly important through the development of the team concept where social workers work with representatives in other fields to provide the most comprehensive plan of care for the client, and because of personnel shortages in the independent sector. Traditionally, volunteers have been involved in church-related services and in recent years social workers have developed social service programs (social ministries) in congregational and parish structures. The purpose of this study was to examine selected factors that influence volunteer commitment in church-related services.

More recently, the contributions of the volunteer have become critical in the delivery of services, as needs are greater than can be met by the paid professional.

Similarly, the volunteer, or lay minister, in the parish setting is of central importance in the ongoing ministries of the church. Knowledge of the factors that contribute to the committed parish volunteer should aid in the successful development of programs that are dependent on volunteers.

From a theoretical perspective, this research extended the use of social exchange theory and showed the significance of intangible exchanges in social interaction. The data generated by this study add to the knowledge base of volunteering and should be useful to social work practitioners and volunteer coordinators, as well as to those conducting volunteer programs in church-related settings.

### **Author's Note**

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences was the computer program utilized to analyze the data. The demographic and volunteer related information was analyzed by simple frequencies and percentages and through measures of central tendency and variability. Pearson's product moment correlation and stepwise multiple regression analysis were also utilized.

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**About the Author**

Marilyn C. Nelson trained, coordinated, and supervised volunteers throughout the United States from 1970 to 1983 as missionary consultant with the Baptist Home Mission Board. Under her leadership as director of Johnenning Baptist Center and of Christian Social Ministries for the Washington; DC Baptist Convention from 1983 to 1993, over 50 volunteers committed weekly time to ministry activities. Another 150 contributed significant blocks time annually. As professor of Christian ministry for the Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond, she involves students in volunteer activities. Throughout her adult life she has been a volunteer lay minister in her denomination, filling a wide variety of roles.