

TURNING PEWSITTERS INTO PLAYERS

How to transform members from passive to active.

-A conversation with lay trainer Marlene Wilson

A principal economic law at work in the kingdom of God seems to be that the demand for ministry always exceeds the supply of workers.

Marlene Wilson works on the supply side of this law.

For more than twenty-five years, she has led workshops on how to train volunteers. For the past ten, she has focused on helping churches develop volunteer ministries. A Lutheran (elca), Wilson has written *The Effective Management of Volunteer Programs; Survival Skills for Managers; How to Mobilize Church Volunteers;* and *You Can Make a Difference*. She has served as faculty director for twenty-five years of the volunteer management program for the University of Colorado in Boulder.

What motivates a pew sitter to stay in the pew?

Marlene Wilson: Often it is a feeling that ministry is the turf of the pastor and the present church leadership.

Many people in the church have professional or technical skills of some kind. Yet I've heard pastors say, "I know what this person does outside the church. But when she arrives at church, it's as if she doesn't know a thing." That's because this person feels she is on the pastor's turf; she tends not to want to usurp power. Unless this person is asked to use her leadership skills from her job, she will backpedal.

I was a member of one congregation for twenty years and another for about eight years. Only once in each congregation was I asked to help train volunteers.

I felt a great sadness, because I know training is my gift. But the mind-blowing thing of the new congregation I've joined is that they've already asked me to train.

How does a pastor identify and develop skilled people?

I recommend developing an interviewing process for new members. Even if the church is small, the key is the process of talking.

In the interviews, the first questions to ask are:

"What are your gifts and talents?"

"What do you like to do?"

The next questions are:

"Has your experience with this congregation so far been good or bad?"

"Are there things you'd like to contribute to the church that you've never been asked to do?"

"Do you want more, less, or different involvement?"

"What are your dreams for this congregation?"

What comes out of these conversations is amazing. People share things they've never shared before.

Do lay people like being thought of as church leaders?

That depends. Part of their resistance may be the old model of leadership: They don't want to be at the church every time the doors are open. Churches need to redefine *leadership* from "How much have you done?" to "How many others have you involved?"

Their view of leadership is of someone burning out?

That's what many have experienced. For example, why do churches have a hard time recruiting small group leaders? Because to many people, leadership means "I've got to take it all over." They think, *I don't have the time. I want to go somewhere where I can be fed.*

Burnout is why a great many people who were pillars somewhere else are now pewsitters. They're not going to get used up again. They aren't saying yes to anything.

How do you prevent people from getting used up?

One key is to rethink the work in light of the gifts of the people. I want every team member to answer four questions:

1. What are the strengths I bring?
2. What are the weaknesses I bring?
3. What is my major concern for this group?
4. What is my major dream for this group?

Answer those questions, and the group will begin to know what each other is good at. Then they begin to think of themselves as a team rather than one leader and a bunch of followers.

How do you work with people invested in the way things have always been done?

When I started training volunteers, I listened to those I call the "pillars," the 20 percent saying, "We're so tired of doing everything ourselves. Why don't these other people get involved?"

I took them at their word. But when I helped the church implement new ways to recruit volunteers, the pillars wouldn't give up their hold on ministry. The pillars became the biggest block.

Many pillars are older. In many congregations, particularly smaller ones, their volunteerism is the only source of power they've ever had. To ask them to share their work is to ask them to share their power. That's threatening.

If the pillars admit there is a problem-too few doing too much of the work in the church-the pastor must say, "We need to change the way we're doing things. We're losing people because they're burning out. Too many people are exiting the back door, and it may be because there's no meaningful place for them here. Let's at least look at some options."

Should every lay person lead in some way?

No. In *Servant Leadership*, Robert Greenleaf said not everybody's gift is leadership and that to be a good follower is as important as being a good leader. Some people do not want to be leaders, don't have the gift of leadership, and shouldn't be forced or talked into it.

If we broaden the opportunities for people to get involved, the potential leaders will begin to shine. Then these potential leaders need training. They need to know the qualities of a leader, how to work with difficult people, and how to lead in different situations.

All this sounds labor-intensive. What would you say to the pastor who says, "I don't have time for all this"?

The problem is the word "I." That assumes that if it's going to be done, the pastor has to do it.

The first step is to analyze the make-up of the congregation. In many congregations, several lay people could do this. The pastor would be part of the team, but not, hopefully, its leader.

This group could survey the congregation and assess what has to be put into place, such as writing out the volunteer opportunities, talking to people one on one, and evaluating the current training for volunteers. Then the group and the pastor can decide one or two priorities for the coming year.

Won't there always be too much ministry and too few workers?

Of course. But if lay people are being developed, the pastor will not so easily become overwhelmed with the enormous amount of ministry to be done.

Copyright © 1996 by Christianity Today International/LEADERSHIP, journal. Fall 1996, Vol. XVII, No. 4, Page 41