

# CHAPTER 3

## VOLUNTEERS: *Wanted and needed in parish life*

Volunteering can make a real difference to your own life and the lives of those around you; and opportunities to volunteer come in many shapes and sizes. The London Olympics and Paralympics in 2012 demonstrated the impact volunteering can have, if properly resourced, supported and managed. The 70,000 Olympic volunteers who gave their time and energy are believed to be the key to the Games' success. The volunteer programme was underpinned by effective volunteer management and principles of good practice – including recognition – and it offers a good example of how to manage and support volunteers.

Every person in the parish is uniquely gifted to volunteer in the parish and to enable Christ's Church to grow – and every person should feel welcome to offer their gifts. Some volunteer a few hours regularly, others when called upon by the parish.

Like the Olympic volunteers, parish volunteers are key to the successful parish. And, just as bishops, priests and deacons have been given the authority of ordination to exercise leadership as servants of the People of God, so through baptism and confirmation laypeople have been given rights and responsibilities to participate in the mission of the Church.

### *Are volunteers “Father’s helpers” or are they answering a call to mission?*

There has been a change of perception in what volunteers are. Volunteers used to be the people who *helped Father out* when he needed something done, i.e. helping with the routine job of cleaning the church or laundering the altar linens. More and more today, volunteers do not see themselves as helping someone else out, but simply “being church” – helping *themselves* out, doing what they do by baptismal right, not just by permission and kindness. In the *Parish of the New Millennium*, William Bausch says they are apt to have a sense of ownership whose larger objective is the overall need and benefit to the parish as a whole. They take the initiative, relying on their personal call and charism and sense of mission without needing the constant approval of the priest.

### *What do volunteers in the parish do?*

There are volunteers doing all kinds of things in the parish, such as:

- **Parish pastoral council** who coordinate the pastoral life of the parish
- **Finance committee** who advise the parish priest on financial matters
- **Liturgy planning group** who prepare the parish's main liturgies

- **Pastoral care ministers** whose role includes visiting the sick in hospital and at home, bereavement visiting or counselling, pastoral care for families and for the separated or divorced
- **Liturgical ministries** that include a variety of roles: extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion (distributing Communion in the church and to the housebound), readers, music ministries (both musicians and choir members), altar servers, sacristans and flower arrangers; assistant presiders at parish funeral liturgies and non-eucharistic weekday liturgies
- **Catechists** who help couples work towards engagement and marriage; they help adults prepare for baptism or to be received into the Catholic Church through the RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults); they help parents understand their infant's baptism; they prepare young people for the sacraments of first reconciliation, First Communion and confirmation; they teach Religious Education to children who are not attending Catholic schools; and lead the children's liturgy on Sunday during Mass
- **Welcomers, ushers and hospitality** who welcome people as they arrive for Mass; ushering them; providing hospitality on special occasions and for coffee mornings; acting as collectors and money counters
- **Parish administrators** who assist in the parish office, answer the phone in the presbytery, help maintain the parish database and registers, prepare and produce the newsletter, booklets, website, etc.



- **Cleaners, electricians, gardeners and builders** who maintain the church and the property around it and those who care for the church and grounds.

*Parishes should encourage partnership by ensuring that volunteers:*

- have a clear understanding of their role and know who they can go to for support (often called a volunteer contact person or ministry coordinator)
- are provided with a general introduction to what is happening in the parish and what services are on offer to people
- have access to training in their volunteer role, which shows volunteers that the parish takes their role seriously
- have the opportunity to develop their work in the parish and to take on new volunteer roles
- are trained as an equal partner with paid staff in the parish
- are offered a pathway for learning to ensure both initial and ongoing formation; for example, local classes in flower arranging, musicianship, administration and leadership skills are often available at reasonable cost, while deanery training and formation may be available through the diocese
- are listened to and consulted, receiving support and feedback
- know that they can volunteer for a particular term (months or years) if they wish.

*The parish asks volunteers to:*

- carry out agreed tasks
- take part in relevant training or on-going training or in annual days of recollection
- let the volunteer contact-person or ministry coordinator know if they are temporarily unavailable or if they change their address or phone number
- let the contact-person know if they no longer wish to volunteer.

It can be helpful if volunteers receive a written summary of what is expected of them when their service commences, as well as a summary of what the parish undertakes to provide for them. Contact phone numbers of the volunteer contact or coordinator, and of the parish priest might be included with this initial information pack. Those whose voluntary work involves the taking on of a public ministry in the parish are usually commissioned for that ministry at a liturgy (possibly Sunday Mass), at which parishioners are invited to support and pray for the ministers.

An example of the “job description” one diocese uses for volunteers who lead the Liturgy of the Word for Children during Sunday Mass follows. (This could be reproduced in a parish newsletter.)

## *Diocese of [insert location]*

*Job description: leaders of the Liturgy of the Word for Children*

- Role:** leader of the Liturgy of the Word for Children on Sundays
- Responsible to:** [the parish priest/his delegate]
- Aim:** to lead pre-school and primary school children in a Liturgy of the Word adapted to their ability during Mass on Sundays

### **Main responsibilities:**

- to work with other leaders of the group and to attend regular planning meetings
- to inform the parents and the parish community of the aim and content of the liturgy group
- to prepare the venue and clear it up after the celebration of the Word
- to ensure the safety and well-being of the children
- to liaise with the priest presiding and any other liturgical ministers at the Mass
- to provide the necessary books and equipment with the support of the parish
- to work together to ensure that the Liturgy is conducted in accordance with the Diocesan Safeguarding Procedures
- to monitor good practice and implement changes where necessary to enhance both the quality of the Liturgy and the safety of the children.

### **Person specification:**

- the ability to relate with respect and ease to children and adults
- to enjoy working with children
- commitment to the essential teachings of the Catholic Church and the ethos of the parish
- a willingness to give time to the preparation of the sessions and the coordination of the group
- to be over 18 years of age if you are responsible for a group
- to undergo an Enhanced Disclosure Check from the DBS (Disclosure and Barring Service) or submit a Garda Vetting Form (ROI).

### *Meeting the needs of volunteers*

Volunteers in the parish are likely to be covered by the parish's insurance policy for anything related to the voluntary work they are doing. This includes public liability and personal accident cover. If volunteers use their own car for parish work or if they use it to give anyone a lift, they will need to check that their car insurance covers this. There is not normally a problem, as long as the insurer is made aware of the fact – and no additional premium should be charged.

If a volunteer's work involves expenses, the parish will normally reimburse these. For example, if volunteers buy flowers, or use their cars, there will be a way to submit the receipt to the parish secretary or someone else to get these expenses paid. If volunteers think attendance at a course would be helpful, or need to buy books for catechetical programmes, they should ask the parish priest or coordinator for approval in advance – depending on what is involved.

### *Volunteers' agreement with the parish*

Volunteers in the parish are expected to work within the parish's standard policies on volunteering, gender, HIV/AIDS, health and safety, child safeguarding and equal opportunities. These should be made available to volunteers by their volunteering contact or ministry coordinator. If volunteers have contact with children or vulnerable adults, they must submit to security checks, in accordance with diocesan safeguarding policy.

Volunteers' commitment of time in the parish can range from a few days each year to five days a week – depending on what volunteer work they are doing.



Volunteers should be realistic about how much they can do and shouldn't take on more than they can manage. In addition, volunteering should not seem like a life sentence! Parishes are very grateful for the time volunteers give the parish and it is important that volunteers should feel free to give up when they want to. Volunteers should tell their volunteering contact if they decide to stop volunteering so that the parish does not continue to rely on their work.

### *Conflict resolution*

Volunteers, parish priests and volunteer contacts need to know how to tackle problems if things are going wrong – and they need to know who they can discuss issues with. One of the most challenging roles of an effective leader (whether they are the parish priest or a lay leader in the parish) is that of “peacekeeper”. Resolving conflicts in the parish takes negotiation skills, patience, and a healthy dose of emotional intelligence.

A recognised model of conflict resolution model involves six basic steps and three golden rules. Susan Steinbrecher,<sup>1</sup> a mediator and speaker in leadership training, tells us that, in any dialogue, there are two fundamental needs that must be met – the ego need and the practical need. The ego needs are: to be listened to, valued, appreciated, empathised with, involved, and empowered. The practical need refers to the obvious: the reason for having the discussion that focuses on the conflict that needs to be solved.

To address both needs, there are the Three Golden Rules of Engagement:

1. Listen and respond with empathy.
2. Be involved; ask for the other person’s opinions, ideas and thoughts.
3. Maintain and affirm self-esteem.

Keep in mind that if people don’t feel that they are heard and appreciated, they will not be motivated or resolve to change. It’s about compliance versus commitment. Without question, the person involved

in the discussion or conflict resolution will be far more committed to the outcome if they have shared in the decision-making. As you go through the following six-step process, look for ways to weave in the golden rules: listening and responding with empathy, maintaining or affirming self-esteem and involving the person or people.

1. Be respectful in your discussions.
2. Be clear about the issue.
3. Discuss how the conflict (or problem) affects you, your group or the community.
4. Ask for the specific cause of the conflict (keeping in mind the ego needs).
5. Ask for the solution (keeping in mind the practical needs).
6. Agree on the action to be taken.

For example, at a newly formed liturgy group meeting which was preparing for the Easter Vigil, it became clear that the organist expected to plan the liturgy and to choose the music which she would play and her choir would sing. She argues that they’ve always done it. There was no need for specially printed booklets: the leaflets that had been used for years were just fine – and she’d put the hymn numbers up on the board, or the choir would sing for the congregation. But, there was a new liturgy group in the parish, whose role was to plan liturgical celebrations in partnership with the musicians and all other liturgical ministers because liturgy is bigger than

the music alone. They wanted to make a booklet for the Easter Vigil so that the whole community could participate in the liturgy. Add to the mix another music group in the parish, which uses a keyboard, a guitar and drums. They play contemporary music drawn from the scripture of the day, as opposed to the more traditional music of the other group.

The discussion can easily get off on the wrong foot if each of the music groups feels superior to the other, or that their choice of music is better than the others. It can help enormously if you begin by being clear about the issue(s) and invite each of them to say how they think the problem can be solved. It is worth inviting the others present to discuss how the conflict (or struggle) has an impact on both of the groups; and how it affects the parish community (since the whole community comes together on this occasion and their preferences are divided). By asking both groups what they think the cause of the conflict is, you are meeting their ego needs to be listened to, valued, etc.

By asking them what the solution might be, you are meeting their practical need. Hopefully, they will come to the conclusion that there is room for both the more traditional and more modern at the same celebration. Getting the choir and the folk group to lead the singing together might also enhance the music – and, by practising together, a good partnership between them and respect for one another could develop. They may even conclude that they are “singing from the same hymn sheet” – and what they both have in common is their desire to enhance the liturgy and serve the community!

When this kind of heart-centred approach to conflict resolution is engaged, more often than not, it can make the difference between positive and negative outcomes. Leaders in church and in business benefit by learning this kind of communication, which comes from a place of respect for self and others. In promoting conflict resolution in the parish, it can sometimes be helpful to seek the advice and help of an independent mediator: your local diocesan office or pastoral planning department can usually supply useful contact numbers.

In his encyclical at the beginning of the new millennium Pope John Paul II wrote:

*The Church of the Third Millennium will need to encourage all the baptised and confirmed to be aware of their active responsibility in the Church's life. Together with the ordained ministry, other ministries, whether formally instituted or simply recognised, can flourish for the good of the whole community, sustaining it in all its many needs: from catechesis to liturgy, from the education of the young to the widest array of charitable works.*

*Novo Millennio Ineunte, 46*



### POINTS TO REMEMBER

- ✓ We all have an important role to play in our parish and in our Church.
- ✓ Every person in the parish is uniquely gifted to volunteer in the parish and to enable Christ's Church to grow – and every person should feel welcome to offer their gifts.
- ✓ One of the most challenging roles of an effective leader is that of “peacekeeper”. Resolving conflicts takes negotiation skills, patience, and a healthy dose of emotional intelligence.

### POINTS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION OR GROUP DISCUSSION

- ▲ Reflect on the role of volunteers in your parish and on the importance of their role.
- ▲ How are the needs of the volunteers in your parish met? Is there a volunteers' agreement? Does everyone feel they are welcome to offer their gifts?
- ▲ Think of a “peacekeeper” in your parish, family or work environment and reflect on how s/he resolves conflicts.



### Reflection

*Teach us, good Lord,  
to serve you as you deserve;  
to give and not to count the cost;  
to fight and not to heed the wounds;  
to toil and not to seek for rest;  
to labour and not to ask for any reward,  
save that of knowing that we do your will.*

*A prayer of St Ignatius Loyola*



### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Susan Steinbrecher and Joel Bennett, *Heart-Centered Leadership: lead well, live well* (Sustainable Path Publishing, Hurst, Texas, 2014).