

## *Volunteer Labor, Is It Worth What You Pay For It?*



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An often-asked question of churches considering a building project is, "should we try to elicit our members to volunteer their labor for some aspects of the project?" The unequivocal answer is, "maybe, but it all depends..." While I really don't intend to be evasive, the truth is, there are multiple issues involved in volunteer labor. We have worked with well over a thousand churches in building programs. The biggest majority of those churches have used volunteer labor to some degree during the project. For some churches the use of volunteers has been a great blessing and has built camaraderie as well as saved the church money. In other instances, volunteers working on projects have caused division in the church and cost the church more money than if they had hired professionals to do the job properly the first time. So what makes the difference between a good experience with volunteer labor and a bad experience?

First of all, perhaps the most critical factor is the degree of complexity the task the volunteer is trying to accomplish. Certainly, any person volunteering for a task should be able and qualified to complete that task. For instance, don't ask Joe to wire the 800 amp electrical service in the new church based on the fact that he was able to fix the toaster in the old church kitchen. Tasks with a high degree of complexity should be reserved for licensed professionals with the expertise and manpower to get them accomplished. The church should also be careful about asking volunteers to engage in activities involving extreme heights or other dangerous activities. While insurance will often times cover the initial costs of medical treatment, if a volunteer is injured to the degree that they miss an extended time at their job, it could be devastating to them financially and they could end up unemployed.

How the task impacts the overall schedule of the project should also be a factor in considering volunteer labor. There are also several tasks that don't necessarily require a great deal of skill but have a big impact on the project schedule. Although this did not occur on a Myler project, I heard of an instance where a church told their General Contractor that they would install all of the insulation in the sidewalls. The pastor had determined that this was a fairly easy task and could save the church a couple of thousand dollars. The General Contractor contacted the pastor on a Friday and told him that the insulation would have to be completed no later than Monday evening because the crew would be there to start hanging the drywall on Tuesday morning. You guessed it, through a variety of circumstances, no one showed up to help with the insulation. On Monday, the

pastor contacted the General Contractor and told him to go ahead and hire it done. It took the General Contractor several days to locate someone to do the insulating. The church was then back charged \$1200 a day for 6 days of delaying the project.

While a church should be careful of the kinds of tasks delegated to volunteer labor, there are several tasks that can be accomplished very successfully. I would also like to add that many churches have found volunteer labor on projects have helped develop deep friendships among the volunteers. This is especially true of men who sometimes find it difficult to open up unless they are swinging hammers or shoveling dirt.

Some tasks that are often assigned to volunteers include painting, landscaping, and jobsite clean up. When considering what volunteers should be asked to paint, once again, keep in mind the complexity of the area to be painted as well as how it will impact schedule. For instance, in most cases it would not be appropriate to ask volunteers to paint the ceiling of a very tall sanctuary. Likewise, be careful of committing to painting if it is going to impact how soon the carpet layers can get finished.

Landscaping and jobsite cleanup are probably the most common tasks assigned to volunteers. Neither has a high degree of technical difficulty nor do they usually impact the project schedule. If you decide to do the landscaping, make certain you fully understand what all "landscaping" entails. In some instances, landscaping includes a considerable amount of earthwork such as backfilling around the building and final grading of the project as well as laying sod or seeding acres of ground. You might want to hire this amount of work out to a professional and allow your volunteers to focus more on planting shrubs and flowers.

In short, if done properly, volunteer labor can be a rewarding experience for churches. If you decide to rally your volunteers to help with your building project there are a couple of things you should remember. First of all, make certain that you designate a person to schedule and oversee all the volunteers. If you fail to do this, it is likely that the first day of work you will have an abundance of people walking around trying to figure out what to do. If the project is unorganized, people will begin to feel that they are not needed and then will not return to help at a later time. Keep everyone organized, making sure that you have adequate help to finish the task but not so many workers that they get in each other's way. Also make sure that you have adequate materials on site so the volunteers are not sitting around waiting on someone to run to the lumber company to get materials.

Make sure you recognize every volunteer that takes part. The elderly woman who shows up with cookies or cold drinks is just as important as the man who shows up with a truck full of tools and the expertise to hang doors in the new educational wing.