

# The Importance of Encouraging One Another to All Kinds of Good Works in All Kinds of Places

by Rebekah Burch Basinger

At every possible opportunity, a member of the Sunday school class of which I am part voices his disappointment with the church's refusal (in his opinion) to honor volunteer activity that takes place outside the boundaries of the congregation. "Just once I'd like to hear a good word about volunteer coaches or all the other people out there who help make our community work," he complains. A few heads nod, but usually his comments go unanswered. Recently, however, I have found myself identifying with his frustration over the way in which the church segregates the sacred from the secular, and especially so when it comes to talk about volunteer service.

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As a case in point, I think of a recent Sunday morning service in which our congregation prayed over a group of youth and adults bound for a week in Appalachia with the SWAP program. Please don't get me wrong. I have nothing against SWAP or the practice of asking God's blessing on the work of specific individuals. However, as I watched the team members return to their seats, I couldn't help thinking of other volunteers who were present that morning. What about the young person serving as a volunteer counselor at a camp for teens with mental retardation? Or the couple who are organizing a fund raiser for the local youth soccer association? And what about the retired teacher who reads for the regional Blind Association? These too are good works, and yet they – and so many other important volunteer activities – go unblest. By failing to encourage one another to all kinds of good works in all kinds of places, we reinforce a false dichotomy between "Christian" and "worldly" behavior. And that's too bad.

Robert Banks, a theologian and member of the Fuller Theological Seminary faculty, writes, "In the world of family, work, and civic life outside church gatherings, it is ordinary believers who play the pri-

mary role in bringing a Christian perspective and way of life to bear upon its largely different world view and values" (Redeeming the Routine: Bringing Theology to Life, p. 31). The volunteer efforts of persons of faith may be the only glimpse of Christ's image that unchurched individuals see. Being out there, active in our communities, can be a powerful form of evangelism. Yet, unless parishioners are encouraged by the church to think of their everyday involvements in the community – including volunteer commitments – as opportunities for witnessing to the reign of God in their lives, it is not likely they'll think this way on their own. And again, that's too bad.

The words from Matthew 25, "whatever you did for one of the least of these, you did for me," are a beautiful reminder that all acts of kindness which are motivated by Christ-filled hearts bring glory to God, regardless of the venue in which they are performed. Unfortunately, this is not the message most often communicated by our choices about which kinds of volunteerism we honor within the church and which we ignore. The challenge for the church is to find ways to celebrate and encourage volunteer service within and without of the congregational setting.

The following suggestions are provided as possible starting points for churches that wish to chip away at the wall that some Christians have constructed between the secular and the sacred. The suggestions are divided into two categories. The first group focuses on how we might recognize good works already being done by members of our congregation. The second group of suggestions points to the need of providing information to want-to-be volunteers who are unsure of how to get started or where their skills might best be put to work.

## Celebrating Good Works

- Schedule an annual commissioning service during which the work of all volunteers within the congregation – regardless of where they serve – is dedicated to the glory of God and identified as an extension of the ministry of the church.

- When members of the congregation are given a leadership role within volunteer organizations, highlight the assignment in the Sunday bulletin or church newsletter and make mention of the appointment during the worship service.
- Host an annual volunteers' dinner and encourage members of the congregation to share stories of God's work in their lives through their various volunteer assignments.
- Prepare an "honor role of service" bulletin board that features the volunteer activities of different members of the congregation each month, taking care to include a diversity of volunteer assignments.
- The testimonies of God at work in individual hearts through volunteer activities are especially helpful as we struggle to make the best and most appropriate use of the time, talent, and treasure which God has entrusted to us. Make room for these testimonies during worship times.
- Provide personal contacts, phone numbers, meeting space, transportation, or whatever it may take to help turn good intentions of parishioners into action.

Numerous studies in recent years have verified what most of us have known all along — religious commitment is one of the leading sources of motivation for acts of caring and kindness, and regular church attendees are more much more likely than other people to get involved in volunteer activity. Robert Bellah, writing in *Habits of the Heart*, states that "religion is one of the most important ways in which American's 'get involved' in the life of their community and society" (p.219). What better way to testify to God's good work in our lives than by living it out in front of our neighbors as we serve side-by-side with them as volunteers. As congregations lift up and honor the whole range of volunteer activities with which parishioners are involved, we expand the church's scope of witness and outreach and we testify to the Lordship of Christ over every aspect of our lives.

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## Educating to Good Works

- Prepare a directory of volunteer opportunities and place it on file in the church's library. Or if the church has a web-site, create a volunteer page and include links to community service organizations and other resources for volunteers. Whether the directory is in hard form or virtual, keep it up-to-date. Also, identify those organizations with which members of the congregation are presently involved.
- Reinforcement for want-to-be volunteers comes about through sermons, classes, and fellowship groups that formally and informally encourage believers to put their faith into practice through all kinds of good works. Make available to Sunday school teachers and group leaders resource materials that encourage parishioners to think theologically about every aspect of their lives - including their volunteer commitments.