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Ways to Build Strength In Participation

Motivate

- Lift up lay involvement as Christian ministry, not volunteer work.
- Explain the rationale for church activities. Remind people why what they are doing is important. Connect service opportunities to the larger vision of the church.
- Communicate clearly the expectation of active participation when people join the church.
- Reinforce the expectation of participation regularly from the pulpit.
- Encourage persons to serve where they have gifts and passions. Make spiritual gifts assessments available and make use of the results.
- Help congregants understand the time they give to ministries as an expression of stewardship.
- Teach stewardship of time to counteract “busyness.” Just as with financial stewardship, persons need to make giving time to the church a priority, not an afterthought. Encourage “first fruits” commitments of time.
- Know that those who give the most time to the church also give the most financially.

Communicate

- Prepare a comprehensive listing of ministry opportunities with descriptions and contact information. Keep it up-to-date.
- Develop job descriptions for key roles. Keep them up-to-date.
- Create an attractive flyer or “one pager” for each ministry that tells its story and how to get connected.
- Lift up a different ministry in worship each week, celebrating its accomplishments and recognizing participants.
- Tell the story of what your church is doing together in ministry. Document activities with photos and journals. Encourage participants to share their testimony.
- Report the results of your ministries and lift up success stories.
- Have an information center that is a visible connection point for visitors and others who want to learn about ministries. Staff it on Sunday morning.



Organize

- Develop a system or data base for member participation. Record interests, skills, spiritual gifts, leadership roles, etc.
- Develop a leadership team for lay mobilization. In some churches, this takes the place of a traditional nominating committee.
- Start new ministry teams and groups often. Despite their best intentions, ongoing groups have a tendency to become cliquish. Newcomers are far more likely to feel comfortable joining something new.
- Review the schedule and format of church activities and events. Try new approaches that might appeal to those not yet active, for example weekday breakfasts, downtown lunch gatherings, weekend retreats, etc.
- Ask of every ministry: "Does it meet a need?" "Does it make Disciples?"
- Be mindful of the need to sunset ministries or groups that no longer serve their purpose. Don't invest energy in trying to keep a dying program alive.
- Avoid pet projects that only involve a few people.

Connect

- Relationships are key. Most people serve because they are asked. Personal invitations are the most effective method of getting someone involved.
- Make worship a primary portal for involvement. Have a participation form in the worship bulletin every Sunday listing immediate opportunities to serve.
- Make getting started easy. Create easy entry points -- short-term service opportunities requiring a minimal commitment. Allows people to jump in and get their feet wet.
- Have an intentional system that helps all new attendees and members become involved in groups and activities very soon after they start coming to church.
- Interview new members. Have them complete an interest survey.
- Avoid mentor, sponsor, or buddy programs for newcomers. Although commonly used, they are seldom effective.
- Work toward having each church member/attendee involved in at least one small group – Bible study, affinity group, or ministry team.
- Remember that choirs, service teams, and even administrative committees are also "small groups." Train leaders to make these experiences spirituality formative, rather than exclusively task-oriented.
- Emphasize small group participation during Lent. Choose a Lenten study curriculum for use by all small groups in the church. Publicize this study opportunity widely and use the Lenten period to recruit new participants into the small groups.
- Link study group topics to sermon series.
- Assess whether "pen and paper" recruitment methods, such as time and talent surveys or pledge cards, are effective in your congregation or whether a more interactive approach is desirable.
- Use your annual stewardship campaign as a way of generating commitment to activities.
- Have a ministry fair or open house to connect people with groups and ministry teams.



- Organize a “Great Day of Service” and invite people to commit a single day to helping with ministry projects. Showcase your ongoing work. Encourage people to bring friends.
- Provide opportunities for families to be in ministry together, especially parents and children.
- Follow up with church members periodically – especially the less active – to take their pulse and ask, “How are things going?”
- Recognize that sometimes people need a break. Give permission to say “no” when necessary.
- Understand that Christian service occurs through vehicles other than church programs. Empower people to serve beyond the church.

Equip and Affirm

- Provide training for ministry participants and leaders. Reinforce their role as ministers and servant leaders. Teach them to interpret and communicate their experiences through the lens of discipleship.
- Help leaders and participants appreciate how service in the church differs from responsibilities in secular settings.
- Conduct an annual retreat for leaders.
- Intentionally include newcomers in leadership.
- Reinforce the need for openness in leadership roles with a rotation system.
- Experienced leaders should be encouraged to recruit a co-leader and mentor that person.
- Encourage church members to think of their involvements in the context of their personal spiritual growth. Help them chart a deliberate plan for spiritual growth.
- Move away from the “committee” mindset, to the more collaborative and interactive “ministry team” mindset.
- Make time for affirmation and appreciation. Develop a systematic plan to publicly recognize all groups and ministries teams over the course of the year.
- Say “thank you” often.



Some Additional Resources

- Bugbee, Bruce, Don Cousins and Bill Hybels. *Network: The Right People ... In the Right Places ... For the Right Reasons*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994.
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- Christensen, Michael J., ed. *Equipping the Saints: Mobilizing the Laity for Ministry*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000.
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- Dick, Dan R. and Barbara Miller. *Equipped for Every Good Work. Building a Gifts-Based Church*. Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2001.
- Hamilton, Myrlene. *Being the Body of Christ: A Handbook for Mobilizing Your Congregation*. Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1994.
- Howe, Leroy. *A Pastor in Every Pew: Equipping the Laity for Pastoral Care*. Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2000.
- Mallory, Sue. *The Equipping Church: Serving Together to Transform Lives*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001.
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- Mathison, John Ed. *Every Member in Ministry: Involving Laity and Inactives*. Nashville: Discipleship Resources. 1992.
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- Wilson, Marlene. *How to Mobilize Church Volunteers*. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1983.

