



## Judy Urban: Bringing New Life to Your Congregation

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Many congregations are struggling to keep existing members and attract new ones. Today's faith communities are reexamining everything in an effort to more fully engage existing members and draw in potential new members.

The understanding is growing that congregational leaders need to focus more on engaging the gifts and passions of their members in the ministries and mission of the church. In fact, this must be a main focus of all leadership in church work – namely, to equip the people of God for ministry. We, as congregational leaders, affect how ministry gets accomplished by the way we invite volunteers into ministry, by the way we encourage, support, supervise, thank, and celebrate volunteer ministers.

Viewing our leadership positions from this perspective means that everything we do, every decision we make, is geared to answering the questions: "How can I grow the ministry of this church?" "How can I assist the people of this congregation to better carry out their baptismal call to spread the reign of God in the world?" "How can I say 'yes' to the ministry, dreams, passions and gifts of many different people, while at the same time following best practices in leading the ministry work I am responsible for?" *This has to be a grounding principle that all staff and lay leadership embrace in order for ministry to flourish.*

#### **Discernment and Development of Gifts and Talents**

The healthiest, most alive, most successful churches are based on this understanding. They incorporate the gifts of all the people into well-designed ministry opportunities. This focus will be a big challenge for the paid staff and pastors. Staff members no

longer can be seen to be the only “doers” of ministry. An equally important role for them is to be equippers of the people for effective ministry.

This starts by creating ways to assist people in identifying their gifts for ministry. Not everyone knows or believes that they are gifted. Not everyone can identify their gifts. A theology of gifts must be woven into the fabric of the parish, into its very culture, to instill in all the members an awareness of the fact that they have been gifted by God, and, through baptism, all of us have been called to use our gifts to bring about the reign of God in the world. Even those who have a good understanding of their own gifts may have difficulty figuring out what are appropriate matches for their gifts with the ministry opportunities available. Processes for assisting people to identify and match their gifts need be put in place. These include such things as:

- gift discovery classes;
- gift inventories and gifts data banks;
- personal interviews with trained staff and volunteer ministers that assist individuals to identify their gifts, and then match them with available ministry opportunities;
- excellent position descriptions for all ministry opportunities available;
- ongoing communication efforts to inform about and highlight the gifts helpful for particular ministries; and
- examples (story telling, bulletin boards, videos, witness talks, weekly email newsletters) of ministers – lay and ordained – using their gifts to make a difference in the people’s lives, in the life of the church, and in the broader community.

### **Building a System**

Assisting people to identify their gifts is important and one of many components of a comprehensive system designed to support the ministry of the people. Other components include planning, designing ministry opportunities, recruiting into ministry, interviewing, matching, training, supervising, supporting, evaluating, managing data, and managing risk. Building on a theological foundation, I call this system Shared Ministry. It is ministry because it is service performed under the auspices of a faith-based community. It is shared because all members of that community are called to contribute their unique set of gifts and available time to the work of furthering the reign of God. Each person has a part to play. According to their respective roles and gifts, pastors, paid staff members, and unpaid volunteer ministers collaborate in this important work.

Building such a system is about changing the culture of a faith body. It requires commitment, continual attention, and patience. Early in the process, the community needs to realize that they require a person whose focus will provide that commitment and attention. Changes this broad and deep do not happen by accident. The community must plan for and commit resources to bringing it about.

The rewards are many. The community comes alive with many more people engaging in the ministries of the church. Because people are serving out of their gifts and interests, they experience joy, in addition to interesting challenges. Excellent training and support contribute to a successful experience. People feel that their gifts are appreciated and meaningful. The more people feel an integral part of their faith community, the more likely that their financial contributions will increase as well. Most importantly, participating in ministry gives people the opportunity to grow in their relationship with God and with the faith community.

Here are some questions to ask in determining if a shared ministry system would be valuable to your congregation:

1. Are only a very small number of people working as volunteers in the ministries of your congregation?
2. Are you losing members and having difficulty getting new people to join?
3. Are there few, if any, position descriptions for each of the volunteer ministries in your church?
4. Are the pastor, paid staff members and lay leaders willing to share power and support a more collaborative model of leadership?
5. Is there a lack of uniform screening processes for all those involved in ministry to children and vulnerable adults?
6. Are volunteer ministries operating in silos, each as entities unto themselves, with no understanding of being part of a larger whole?

*Judy Urban is an experienced practitioner and national consultant to churches on building effective systems for calling forth and utilizing the gifts of all the people in the ministry and mission of the church. Her book **New Life through Shared Ministry** is available from Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, and on line.*

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