

CHAPTER FOUR

TEACHER BURNOUT AND TURNOVER

For the very first time John Larson had his Sunday School fully staffed. John had been the elementary Sunday School director for three years at Winfield Church. When he accepted the position he thought he'd have time to build and train the staff. Instead, it seemed like his job became nothing more than finding people to plug holes in the dike called Christian education.

Unfortunately, the month was April, and although the church had a full complement of teachers, John knew that by summer several people would relinquish their teaching assignments. As John reflected on his situation, he began to view staffing as a revolving door. In spite of all his efforts to shove people into the door, just as many seemed to fly out.

John's experience is not unique; it is shared by many program directors. New teachers are hard enough to find, so when these new recruits only serve short tenures, leaders become discouraged.

Interestingly, teacher turnover rates vary from congregation to congregation. While teacher burnout and turnover plagues some churches, others are relatively unaffected by the problem. The difference is related to a fundamental principle of staffing: the church that retains its staff has little or no need to find new staff.

Most people naively think that staffing is primarily an issue of *recruitment* (finding enough people to serve). However, the key issue in staffing is *retention*, keeping teachers motivated and satisfied with their teaching, so that they gladly serve year after year. Let me illustrate. At Jefferson Church the 1st & 2nd grade class is staffed by three people who have served together for eight years. At North Woods Church six couples have staffed the preschool departments for over fifteen years. The boys club at Bethlehem Temple is led by a team of men who have been together since the club's inception three years ago. The program leaders in these churches spend little time in recruitment because their retention of staff is very high.

When we think of teacher burnout and turnover, our focus is usually on the volunteer. But wait a minute! Let's look more carefully and ask a question. *Why* is that workers are frustrated, overworked or losing commitment? Maybe the problem doesn't solely lie with the teachers. Perhaps program directors have contributed to the situation. Maybe the church is getting what it has paid for—reaping what it has sown.

A poor retention plan creates the need for a more intense recruitment plan. On the positive side the converse is also true: A good retention plan reduces recruitment needs.

Churches that implement several intentional retention practices which build teacher motivation and help volunteers enjoy multiple years of service. As you evaluate your church's retention plan, consider the importance of: proper recruitment; meaningful service; realistic tenures; available substitutes; team teaching; relevant training; regular communication; frequent encouragement and helpful advocates.

Proper Recruitment

A good retention plan begins with proper recruitment (see Ch. 1). A *positive approach to recruitment* cultivates an atmosphere that esteems service. Programming is realistically staffable. Records are maintained for coordinating people's ministry. Genuine warmth, concern, and thoroughness characterize contacts with potential workers. Willing recruits are assisted with early training. And the whole recruitment endeavor is bathed in prayer.

A good recruitment plan also takes advantage of a *networking approach to staffing*. This strategy is very simple, yet many churches overlook its possibilities. Stated simply—staff programs with people who already have close ties to one another. Folks who enjoy being with each other, are more likely to serve long-term together. For example, an attempt to invite two additional workers into the junior high class should include asking the friends of those already serving in that department. Their relationship is not only helpful in recruitment, but more importantly, it's a factor that will keep them working as a team over the long haul.

There are at least three networks to pursue in this type of relational staffing. First, consider *natural friends* to work together in a ministry. The reason Faith Presbyterian's preschool department has been strong for ten years is because the couples who serve together are all in the same life-stage and all natural friends.

Second, consider *relatives* in a networking approach to staffing. While commitment levels, gifts and abilities vary, a family team approach has many advantages. Perhaps the greatest benefit is that the family members teach through their interaction, as well as through their instruction. In addition, working together in a specific ministry helps a family combat the pace and

race which is pushing many apart. For example, in one club program, a father and his teenage son both work with younger boys. In another church, the children's coordinator recruits couples to staff programs.

Third, *new people to the church* serve as another network for staffing. While caution should be exercised in appointing new people too quickly, there is also a danger in waiting too long for them to prove themselves.

People can only sustain so many relationships, and older members already have their circle of friends. Consequently, new people usually can't crack into those relationships. I frequently hear the statement: "I've been attending the church for a year now, and I still don't have any friends here."

A good way to draw these folks into the church community is by teaming them in various ministries. Different jobs require different skills and greater depths of maturity. Relatively newer people to the church can assist in a club program, open their home for youth activities or minister through music. Wise program leaders will encourage newcomers to serve together in *ministry teams*.

Meaningful Service

People tend to avoid things they do poorly, yet eagerly involve themselves in discussions, sports activities or tasks with which they feel comfortable. While some folks grudgingly agree to serve, it's the person who feels fulfilled in teaching, who joyfully continues their service for multiple years.

When my children were toddlers they had a plastic toy into which they could place various shaped objects. The wedge, circle, oval, cross, square and rectangle were designed to fit through corresponding openings. In a similar manner, and of greater importance, program directors must likewise match people to proper ministry openings.

Sometimes volunteer shortages lead them to force some people into a wrong ministry slot. Unfortunately, this quick fix usually leads to long-term failure. However, when people are put into positions of service based on their gifts, desires, temperament and background, they frequently enjoy a longer tenure of service. The word "joy" is significant. Teachers can tell if their service is meaningful through an inner assurance and contentment that what they are doing is correct. Proper recruitment and meaningful service are related, and together they reduce teacher turnover.

Realistic Tenures

Reasonable lengths of service encourage teacher commitment. Earlier we saw the value of using *appointments to service* for specifying the length of time a worker is expected to serve. These teacher contracts discourage turnover within the contractual period. A teacher who has agreed to work one year with the fours-and-fives class, for example, will probably fulfill her commitments. At the end of the year teachers are given the choice of continuing in that class for another specified period, changing ministry areas or taking a break from service. Churches that honor the requests of teachers build credibility with their volunteers and are more successful with subsequent recruitment efforts.

While it is counter productive to use a monthly or quarterly terms of service (see Ch. 1), many churches are staffing on a nine-month school term cycle. A main group of workers is recruited to serve for the nine-month school year, while another team is formed to work just in the summer months. In this three-one arrangement many of the regular staff are willing to serve year after year. For example, Blair and Pat King are public school teachers who work on Sundays in the toddler nursery at their church. Since school is out for the summer and their own children are grown, they like to travel from June to August. While most of the teachers at their church have accepted one-year contracts, Blair and Pat asked for the three-one arrangement. Since they were willing to work for nine months year after year, the Discipleship Commission gladly accommodates their schedule. Realistic tenures of service that provide several months of ministry, but also offer a break in service, encourage teacher stability.

Available Substitutes

Within the contractual period, teachers may still need occasional breaks. Schedule conflicts, vacations or illnesses require the use of substitutes. An empathetic program leader who willingly schedules substitutes cultivates appreciation and loyalty in their volunteers. Mini-breaks also refresh workers for the long haul.

A program leader knows whether or not a teacher's request is valid. Teachers who are chronically absent need to be exhorted, but even the confrontation can be positive. "Fred, we've talked about your frequent need for substitutes in your fifth-grade class. I know you love the kids, but perhaps this is not a good time for you to be teaching. I'd love to have you on the teaching team, and I suggest you pray about whether you can finish this term, or if an appointment in another year might be better for your current schedule." This approach is not a threat, but realistically helps the person assess whether or not he personally can handle the current commitment.

Some churches ask teachers to find their own substitutes. Unfortunately, this procedure lessens accountability to their leader, and

permits a greater frequency of absenteeism. In fact, many program directors do not know until an actual Sunday that a teacher is absent. When program leaders assume responsibility for contacting substitutes, they keep abreast of what is happening within their departments. Furthermore, they can regulate how often particular substitutes are asked to serve.

Three good *sources for substitute teachers* are: 1. people who have shown an interest in education, but have declined a teaching assignment; 2. professional school teachers; and 3. responsible youth and children.

The recruitment process normally uncovers *people who are open to the possibility of service*, but decide they cannot undertake the specific commitment. After graciously receiving their decline, a wise program director will inquire whether they are willing to teach on a substitute basis. The frequency of service, the amount of lead time and available material should be clearly explained. When people are assured that they'll not be asked more than once a month, many will agree to serve as substitute.

(2) *Professional school educators* are also good resources for substitutes. School teachers are typically exhausted after a long week of teaching and are not eager to work with children again on Sundays. While some do help in Sunday School because they feel responsible to use their expertise, others prefer a ministry in another area of the church (like leading in worship or working on a committee). However, many are also willing to work on a once-a-month basis as a substitute. Professional school teachers are usually flexible, needing less time for preparation. When there is a short notice for a substitute, a school teacher can move into the class situation more comfortably than a person who is unfamiliar with the teaching-learning process.

(3) A third source for substitutes is *spiritually growing teens and children*. While I affirm the predominant usage of adults as teachers, a program leader should not overlook the service of young people to assist in children's ministry. In one church, for example, an eleven-year-old boy worked with his father in the three-year-old church time program. In a similar situation a nine-year-old girl assisted with the story time and table activity for kindergartners. Many churches have used teens to work alongside adults in the nursery. This practice has several benefits: adolescents are allowed to serve (all Christians need this to grow); children observe role models of older boys and girls and the pool of potential substitutes is widened.

Some churches use *video cassettes and DVDs as substitutes*, or for special programs or during the summer. While this practice reduces the total number of staff needed for a program, it has several limitations. Videos actually reduce student involvement with both the lesson and each other. Videos may also weaken the shepherding ministry of the teacher. On the positive side, videotapes are good for a change of pace, and are helpful in

short-term situations. As a supplemental tool for a competent teaching staff, videos can make a healthy contribution.

The good practice of having available substitutes will not in itself eliminate teacher burnout and turnover. But using people to step in and carry the load when time off is needed is part of an overall staffing game plan that tells teachers, "We understand, and we'll help you with your class this week." Since team spirit is part of building a long-tenured staff, then having available substitutes is an essential part of that process.

Team Teaching

It's easy to understand why Lucy Peterson feels the weight of her ministry. She has taught fourth-grade girls for three years in a small room of a home adjacent to the church. Each week she tells the Bible story, helps the students with their workbooks and then draws them into a learning activity. Only Lucy knows what goes on behind her closed door, and rarely does anyone come in to help her, give advice or offer encouragement.

By contrast the Johnsons and Copelands work together in a third-and-fourth-grade class. These couples teach twenty-four children. They are crowded in their 600-square-foot room. Nevertheless, they manage well with three round tables for teaching centers. Sandy Davis works as the team leader, greeting children, taking attendance and conducting their large-group times. Her husband and Ken and Jan Copeland each teach and shepherd a group of seven to nine children.

Each week the students enter their classroom and study with their regular teachers. Usually the Bible lesson is at tables, along with the workbook activity. Sometimes the whole class gathers together to worship or share what they have been learning. Other times, the students move directly from their regular small groups into one of three learning activities. These Bible learning activities, selected at the monthly planning meeting, offer the children a choice of three activities correlated with the lesson.

Team teaching heightens student interest and involvement, but equally important, it fosters a staff camaraderie and accountability rarely available to the solo teacher. Each team member is needed, and one's very presence is an encouragement to the others. When one person is absent, the team can seek a substitute, or just combine groups. Since they are working together in the same room, all are aware of the problems and needs of students. For example, if Billy's behavior is disruptive, moving him to a different group within the same department may prove helpful.

When teachers feel isolated, they are more likely to get overwhelmed, without anyone knowing of their frustrations. Team teaching shares the weight of ministry over several shoulders within a class. In addition, the by-product of fellowship experienced by working together draws workers into

longer service. People who enjoy working together are usually willing to retain their ministry assignments.

Relevant Training

The importance of good training has been presented in the previous chapter, but its relationship to teacher turnover is also worth emphasizing. Teachers who feel inadequate and incompetent are rarely interested in multiple years of service. When people are naked, they want to hide, not be exposed. Good teacher training clothes people with the knowledge and skills necessary for confident teaching.

Training sessions must be meaningful, and they must be offered in a variety of formats. They should encourage total participation, demonstrate flexibility and build a spirit of camaraderie. And they will need sufficient finances to make them top quality (see Ch. 3).

Both group training and individual assistance are beneficial to the novice. Observing good teaching models is helpful, and working alongside a lead teacher to improve on specific techniques is also productive. Relevant, meaningful training content will reduce teacher burnout.

Training helps people become more competent in what they do. When teachers sense an assurance that what they are doing is making an impact, they develop confidence. And competent and confident teachers are less likely to quit after their first terms to service.

Regular Communication

Regular communication is necessary for developing a positive ministry atmosphere, and therefore essential for long teacher tenures. Occasionally a worker will mention how an article that was shared was meaningful; it was the encouragement needed at that particular moment. This positive example reinforces the fact that good communication is profitable.

Negative experiences also illustrate the importance of good communication. For example, some churches have offended teachers by not informing them about upcoming changes. It is not uncommon for program directors to make changes in the time of Sunday school, the locations of classes or even the curriculum without asking for teacher input. A minimum courtesy is to let teachers at least know that those decisions are under review. A lack of open communication will lead some teachers to drop out, or worse, keep them disgruntled and negative while still serving on the ministry team.

Let me encourage the use of two communication tools for developing a healthy team spirit. First, articles and notes in *regular publications* such as

the newsletter or worship bulletins foster good public relations with the congregation as a whole. They also serve to bond the teaching staff together.

Second, *special mailings* to the educational faculty help teachers feel significant, and part of an important ministry team. For example, periodically I would mail *The Shepherd's Staff* to our workers (see samples at the end of this chapter). Six times a year all of our discipleship teams would receive this letter, which included some personal thoughts, special happenings in our educational team and reprints of practical articles. The content of the letter was helpful to our teachers, but even more valuable was the regular reminder that they were a team, the staff of the Chief Shepherd. Regular communication promotes camaraderie, which in turn strengthens a teacher's commitment to service.

Frequent Encouragement

Teachers appreciate an informative newsletter, a helpful article or a teaching tip. But I have noticed greater responses of loyalty to me, the church and a particular teaching assignment when I have taken time to encourage teachers personally. Frequent encouragement of teachers inspires retention of staff. I'm not suggesting a manipulative stroking of people, just to keep them serving. Flattery does not motivate people; rather a lack of sincerity turns people off. But honest appreciation expressed for a good attitude or a job well done goes a long way. Positive comments from parents should be passed on to teachers on a regular basis.

Frequent encouragement can take many forms. Some program leaders make phone calls just to find out how things are going and to share a word of thanks. Others use a written note to frame an uplifting thought. An occasional booklet with a personal note also demonstrates concern for the worker.

Timely words can cheer the spirit: "Frank, you look a little discouraged. Is there something troubling you that we can talk about?" The sincere words, "I'll pray for you," are reassuring to a teacher, especially when we inquire later as to how things turned out. An arm around the shoulder, a hug or holding hands as we pray for one another or our students also communicates caring. A teacher who feels valuable to a specific ministry is more likely to remain in that area of service.

A Helpful Advocate

Many teachers feel frustrated; some even feel like giving up teaching, because they do not have someone to intercede for them regarding a need. One teacher needs a larger classroom; another simply needs markers for the board. Discouragement arises over materials that are always late, unrealistic

teacher-student ratios or simply a burned-out light that is never replaced. Countless “little foxes” rob our workers of the joy they deserve in service.

When volunteers are recruited, and then stuck off in a corner to fend for themselves, they begin to feel taken for granted. This attitude leads to a feeling of being used, then into bitterness and eventually into withdrawal. Once teachers have mentally and emotionally relinquished their responsibility, they will soon leave the classroom. A few gallons of paint are not that expensive; mounting a new whiteboard is not that difficult. But the typical teacher does not usually have the clout to move the “powers that be” into action. Whether teachers are facing poor acoustics or chronic student behavior problems, they need someone to whom they can turn for assistance. The program director must be the advocate to intercede for these workers. If the director is not able to get action directly, then he or she can take the request to a supervisor, a committee or perhaps a pastor to see that the problem is resolved.

A helpful advocate is perceived by the teacher as more than just someone providing on-time materials; the leader is seen as someone genuinely concerned for the worker’s welfare. Again, a teacher who feels cared for is more likely to serve over the long haul.

Conclusion

Why is it that one church in a particular town has an annual teacher turnover rate of 75 percent, while a similar church across town (same denomination and size) has a turnover rate of less than 5 percent? It’s not an issue of luck; nor is it an issue of one group being more spiritual. The reason Lakeside Church has long teacher tenures is that its leaders work hard at a comprehensive retention plan.

None of the nine principles studied in this chapter will independently eliminate teacher burnout and turnover. Proper recruitment, but no training, hinders retention. Frequent encouragement of teachers, but not providing them with substitutes, or interceding for them when they have a need, seems shallow and insincere. But when a church’s staffing plan includes all of these principles, teachers will experience joy in their service and closeness in their team relationships. Teachers who find fulfillment in their ministries will likely retain their positions for many years.

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A Check list for Retention

Does our church have...

- Proper Recruitment
- Meaningful Service
- Realistic Tenures
- Available Substitutes
- Team Teaching
- Relevant Training
- Regular Communication
- Frequent Encouragement
- Helpful Advocates