



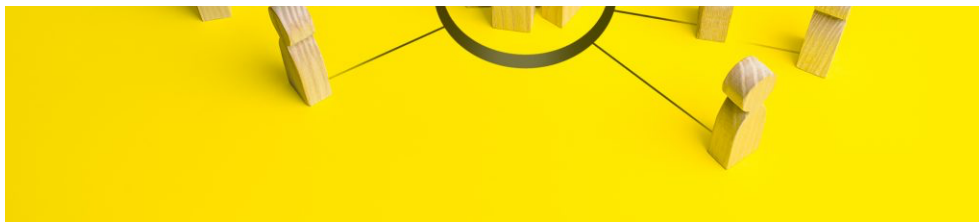
# Inviting, Recruiting, & Building Team of Volunteers

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Ever wondered how to not only recruit volunteers, but retain them? This is everything you need to know about building a rock star volunteer team!





The first paragraph of a blog is normally where I'd build the tension about why having leaders in your ministry is important & how it's tough to recruit volunteers. But, let's be honest. We all know that, so I'll save your time. Recruiting is one of the toughest roles of leading ministry & even tougher with what the last couple of years has looked like.

But, there are some strategies that might be helpful in the midst of this recruiting volunteers this season, and if you haven't started recruiting for the fall of 2022...you need to start.

## Let's Talk Recruiting

Before we jump into the practical, can we talk semantics for a minute?

**We should stop recruiting volunteers to join programs and start inviting people to lead through relationships.**

Those are two very different ideas. Two very different missions. And it's very necessary for you to start with what you think about both of those missions before you try to recruit volunteers to carry those missions out.

Well-oiled or not, programs are machines. Relationships are living, breathing things. Programs can only take a kid or student so far. More than that, programs can only take a small group leader so far. But relationships will take kids, students, and small group leaders much further.

And what about the word **recruiting**? It tends to give the perception that there's a hole we're trying to fill. It doesn't accurately describe what we're actually trying to do in ministry. When a person volunteers to lead

a small group, he or she isn't just filling a spot that needs to be filled in order for the ministry to work. And, thinking that way sells the mission short.

## Focus on Inviting, Not Recruiting

Realistically, the word recruiting is ingrained in the Western church. I'm not sure it's going anywhere soon—and maybe it's not worth the effort. But in our thoughts and in our language, I want to encourage us to think less about recruiting and more about *inviting*.

Inviting sends a different message. Which is why it requires a different type of strategy. It requires casting vision with a picture of a preferred future and a clear goal in mind. Inviting says, ***“Here is what we’re trying to do, and we want you to help us make it happen.”***

Ultimately, recruiting volunteers tends to perpetuate the myth that programs are the most important thing to lead people to growth. An *invitation* perpetuates the reality that relationships are actually what lead to growth.

## Strategies for Recruiting Volunteers

You might be thinking, “Okay, I get it. Small group leaders are important. But I can't find any, and that's why I'm reading this!” I understand your frustration. Without a doubt, I've been there too. And the truth is, I don't have an end-all solution. Neither does Google for that matter. What I can offer are ideas and lessons accumulated from over 12 years of full-time ministry and countless conversations with leaders. Maybe all of these strategies won't work for you. But I bet some of them will take your recruiting—ahem, I mean inviting—to the next level.

## Leverage your leaders

I'm sure when you were growing up and your parents complimented you, you'd respond with something like, "***You have to say that because you're my dad.***" When we talk to someone about how amazing our ministry is, I think we can get the same response from people—at least internally. "***Of course you think it's great. You're in charge of it.***" That's why the greatest resource for recruiting volunteers to join your ministry is your existing leaders.

Your best leaders will recruit your best leaders.

See, your circle is limited. Your influence is limited. But the circle and influence of all of your leaders combined is vast. At least once a year, lead your volunteers through a process that has them thinking about those in their circle who might be a fit. Then, equip them on how to reach out to those individuals.

### Ideas for Leveraging Leaders

Try something like this:

Ask them to think of two people in their circle who might be a good fit as an SGL. Then ask them to pray over those names.

Have them text both names to you—not to follow up with, but to pray for.

Ask them to connect with those people (via text, email, phone, etc.) over the next two weeks to let them know that, as a team, you're all praying for and looking for new leaders and that their names came up. They can share why they currently serve as SGLs. And while there isn't any pressure, they would love for those two people to think it over.

After two weeks, your SGLs can follow up with those people to ask if they're interested in learning more about what it would look like to get involved. And if they are, those names can then be passed along to you, a coach, or another key leader.

If you (as the youth director, key leader, etc.), receive a name of someone who is interested, get them a copy of Lead Small. Ask to meet them for lunch or coffee after they've read it.

This system may need to be tweaked for you in your context, but in a general sense, this is a great way to prompt your current leaders to invite their friends to join them.

## Give them a taste.

Fear of the unknown is a pretty huge factor for all of us. If we don't know what to expect, there's a good chance we will keep our distance. Especially before we make any long-term commitments. Not only do you need to cast a compelling vision to potential leaders, but you have to give them a place where they can experience a glimpse of that. You must give them an opportunity to observe from a distance and dip their toes in the water.

The key is to invite them to participate in something that will give them a chance to begin building relationships with other leaders and students in your ministry. Maybe this is a weekend trip you need some extra chaperones for. They don't even need to have a volunteer role to watch how you do things. Watching allows them to observe without pressure. After the event or trip is over, be sure to follow up with a chance for them to ask questions and debrief the experience.

At my previous two churches, we did a four-week event called The Race. To pull it off, we needed a lot of extra adults to be team leaders. This was the perfect ground for recruiting volunteers. It was a short-term commitment—only four weeks—and had a low responsibility factor. Volunteers just had to be one of eight or so adult leaders on a team. It was also a blast, so it usually wasn't too hard to find adults who were not regular youth leaders to join in.

After receiving a little training, we had adults showing up for the event, having a blast, creating memories, and building relationships with our students. Most of the adults who helped out would return each year for the event. But only a handful got more involved than that. If you're like me, you still see that as a huge win. A new volunteer is a new volunteer.

For many, The Race was a chance to break the fear of what it's like to get involved. Once that happened, they started to build relationships with some of the students. From that point on, they were hooked. As it turns out, the kids and students in your ministry are also a great tool for recruiting volunteers. So be sure to create on-ramps for potential volunteers to experience the joy of being a small group leader by seeing the relationships and the impact firsthand.

You can also do this by sharing resources like I suggested. I hope you've read [Lead Small](#). If you haven't, please stop reading this right now, and start reading that instead! It's a comprehensive job description for small group leaders based on five principles that every SGL needs to know.

Know anyone interested in getting involved as a volunteer? Give them a copy of the book. Once they've read it, schedule a time to get together to discuss it. Even if they haven't shown up for a program quite yet, the book will give them a taste of what the role requires, what the expectations are, and the specifics of the vision you're asking them to join.

The fear of the unknown keeps us from doing a lot of things. So give people a taste of what becoming a small group leader might look like for them. It'll remove that fear of the unknown.

## Change the culture

“Culture” is one of those buzzwords we read a lot about in books or hear about in leadership conversations. But we might not really know what in the world it means. I get it. It can be nebulous. But the reality is, culture is important. So, what's the culture of your ministry?

One of the best ways we can measure culture is by asking some honest questions.

Do your small group leaders want to be there?

Is there a sense of camaraderie and fun among your leaders?

Do your volunteers feel appreciated?

Is the return for their investment of 3–5 hours per week worth it?

Below are some of the words that you should hope to hear from your volunteer leaders if asked what they think about your ministry . . .

Fun

Laughter

Grace

Prepared and equipped

Consistency

Appreciation

Communication

Defined roles

Relational focus

But if we're being honest, here are some of the words that might be a little more accurate . . .

Panic  
Anxiety  
Guilt  
Confusion  
Lack of clarity  
Program-focused

When we try to help people understand the urgency of the needs we have for leaders, it can sometimes come across as a desperate panic. And panic doesn't help anyone. A wise friend and co-worker of mine used to always say, ***“Be the non-anxious presence in the room.”***

Even when you are in great need for a role to be filled, the wrong person is worse than no person at all. And the right person might be so repelled by your anxiousness that they can't quite discern whether or not it's a door that God is calling them to walk through or a trap waiting to spring. And what if, because of all the panic and anxiety, those volunteers actually say yes out of a sense of obligation? Guilt is a guaranteed way to end up with a non-committal leader who won't have much of an influence.

As the ministry leader, *you* set the tone. And *you* are the best example of the culture you're creating in your ministry. Be sure the tone you set is attracting the right people.

It can be challenging to create culture. In fact, it's often easier to change programming or attempt remodeling a youth room. And maybe those things are necessary. (Although, would Goodwill even accept some of those couches you have in your student space?) I'd argue that creating a healthy culture among your leaders is more beneficial in the long run—especially in regards to recruiting small group leaders.

## Be honest with the ask

Have you ever agreed to do something only to find out you apparently agreed to do way more than you thought? I think that's a consistent issue we have in ministry. We get so desperate for people to show up so we can pull off a program that we undersell and play down what we're really asking them to do. Typically, this ends up in one of two ways.

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Just a few weeks or months in, your new volunteers are frustrated that the commitment ended up being more work and time than they were told. This is often coupled with a lack of equipping and resourcing to fulfill the role successfully. The result is an eventual resignation. Not only have you lost a volunteer, but you may have also lost any potential leaders who are in their circle of influence because they're probably not going to offer the most glittering recommendation for your ministry.

2. The other result of underselling the ask is that individuals never even say yes in the first place. People are attracted to being a part of something bigger than themselves. They want to make a difference. When we short change the ask in order to make it sound easier, we can turn someone off completely by keeping from them the aspects they might find most appealing. Most people would rather give two hours a week to something that matters than one hour a month to something that doesn't.

So, when the time comes when someone shows interest in getting involved, be honest. Don't sell the mission short. And don't sell that potential volunteer short either. Don't be afraid to ask for a three year commitment from your middle school small group leaders or four years from high school leaders. And don't be afraid to ask for a weekly commitment instead of a once a month commitment. Be honest with the ask, but also be sure the culture you've created and the quality of the ministry makes the investment worthwhile.

## Celebrate good times (come on)

The needs you need filled will not attract your greatest leaders. **Vision** will attract them. While sharing mission statements, dreams, and ideas helps to cast vision, few things will do it better than telling stories and celebrating what's happening in the ministry. It's a healthy and invigorating practice for your church in general. But it also creates a huge boost for potential volunteers.

What are you celebrating? Who are you celebrating with? Where are you sharing stories?



## With your volunteer leaders . . .

Weekly emails. Facebook groups. Group texts. Quarterly trainings. Your leaders need to know the impact they're having. Shared impact and shared wins will move your current leaders to invite others because they will want other people to experience it too.

## With church staff . . .

Maybe you're a full-time staff member, and you have weekly opportunities to share stories and celebrate what is happening. Perhaps you're a volunteer, and the opportunities don't come so clearly or so often. Whatever the situation, look for ways to let the rest of the church staff know what you're celebrating in your ministry. Wins are important and deserve to be celebrated. So whether it's with just your senior pastor or a staff of 20, make sure they know what you're celebrating. Who knows? Your senior pastor or someone on the worship team might know someone they think would be a good fit to serve in your ministry.

## With others in your ministry . . .

The kids and students in your ministry are a great source of things to celebrate because they know best what wins they've had. So give them a chance to share the stories of what God is doing in their lives. Maybe this happens during a weekly teaching time, or student testimonies, or social media stories.

## With parents . . .

When you communicate with parents, it should be more than just details of the next event, trip, or fundraiser. Be sure that the parents of the kids and students in your ministry know about the fun their kids are having and the life changing moments they're experiencing. This way

having and the life-changing moments they're experiencing. This way, parents can celebrate too. Suggestions for potential volunteers don't only have to come from current SGLs or church staff.

## With the church . . .

Get creative and find ways to celebrate your youth in front of the church family. Use social media. Create highlight videos from trips, and ask if you can play them before the weekend service starts. Give your senior pastor some great stories to add to his sermons. The more that the church as a whole sees their youth ministries are alive and moving, the more that they'll want to get involved themselves.

## Retaining Volunteers is Greater Than Recruiting Them

Andy Stanley says, "Whatever gets celebrated gets repeated."

I think he's onto something there. Make it a part of your weekly rhythm to seek out stories and things to celebrate.

### **Retaining > Recruiting**

#### **Retaining SGLs is better than recruiting them.**

Will you always need to recruit? Yes. You'll always have new positions to fill or new energy that needs to be added. However, if you become better at retaining your current leaders, you'll be able to recruit far more strategically without having to rely so heavily on recruitment.

Much of retaining has to do with the kinds of things we've already talked about. But I think this idea is too important not to give it its own category.

## Here are some of the greatest ways you can retain . . .

Create a healthy culture

Celebrate your wins

Consistently equip your leaders

Make it fun

Appreciate volunteers

Ask for multi-year commitments based on natural seasons, inviting leaders to move up with their students as they grow within that phase (consider breaking these timeframes up as grades 9–12, grades 6–8, grades 3–5, K–Grade 2, etc).

For more ideas on how to shift your focus on retention over recruitment, check out the book [The Volunteer Project: Stop Recruiting. Start Retaining.](#)

## Systemize it

Learn to systemize each of the things we talked about. When we don't start recruiting volunteers until there is a need, then we're already too late. It must be an ongoing process. After fall recruiting volunteers, one of the most important seasons for recruiting volunteers will most likely be late winter or early spring. If you wait until summer to recruit, well . . . we all know what summer attendance is like. Every year, plan out your recruiting strategy for the next year. Put dates on the calendar. Create job descriptions. Have resources like Lead Small available for potential new leaders.

You may not need to do everything we've talked about. But grab an idea or two from here and do something to take your strategy to the next level. It's such a worthwhile endeavor. The better you develop systems for the times and ways this will happen, the more effective it will be.

As we said earlier, there is no more important volunteer role in your church than a small group leader for kids and students. And if we believe that, even just a little bit, then our actions, words, and motivations need to follow suit. We need to be committed to designing, building, and maintaining strategies and systems that help us effectively invite new small group leaders to join us.

## Tools for Recruiting

# Tools for Recruiting Volunteers

Finally, two of the best tools for recruiting volunteers out there would be [When Relationships Matter](#) & [Lead Small](#). They're not even necessarily books on recruiting. But they are resources that will make you a better Recruiter. Lead Small is, in my own words, the manifesto for being a Small Group Leader. It's the book you give to those you're trying to recruit helping them understand the big picture of being a shepherd of teenagers, not a chaperone.

[When Relationships Matter](#) is essentially the leader handbook for building a Lead Small kind of culture. If you are the person leading the student ministry, this book is for you. We also have an Orange Masterclass based on this book called [Creating a Small Group Culture](#). It will take you step by step through creating a plan to recruit and train leaders plus help you build a culture potential leaders want to be a part of.

Volunteers,

## **Brett Talley**

### **WRITER**

Brett Talley is an XP3 Orange Specialist with Orange after 11 years in full time ministry. He's been married to his amazing wife since 2004. They have three amazing and hilarious kids who constantly keep them busy and laughing. He loves baseball, golf and makes amazing turkey melt sandwiches (if he has the time and ingredients, otherwise they're just average). Connect with Brett on twitter & Instagram @brettryantalley for pictures of the cutest kids in the world.