

THE NEW VOLUNTEER

**Sermon by Karen Hilfman Millson
St. Paul's United Church, Orillia, ON
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I re-watched the movie Patch Adams the other night.
Have you seen it?
It's a great movie based on a true story.
Robin Williams plays the character of Patch Adams ...
a critical casting choice that made this amazing story come alive.

The story begins
with Adams admitting himself to a psychiatric hospital.
While there,
he discovers that the arms length professional care
that the medical staff offer the patients
does little to help transform the lives of those needing help.
Adams decides to check himself out
and become a doctor.

The early years of his training are filled with adamant rules
that the someday doctors
not interact with patients until their third year.
Patch refuses to wait –
he's becoming a doctor to interact with people
not text books,
to spend time in the hospital not the library.

It's not long before the nursing staff cherish the joy
and the laughter he brings
as he volunteers with the crankiest of patients
and makes the children with cancer feel good about life,
with the balls on the end of syringes
used for big red noses
and bed pans for tap dancing feet.

Adams is repeatedly reprimanded for his volunteer work
even though, or perhaps because,
he is able to reach out and really touch the lives of the patients.
Adams passion for really caring for people in a holistic way
which included laughter –
became the foundation of a hospital that he built
that more doctors than they'd ever need
volunteered to be on staff for.

Patch Adams caring was first expressed when he was a volunteer.

Take a moment to think about
all the incredible things volunteers do
that make our community a place of caring,
a place of creativity,
a place of compassionate education...

A few years ago in this church we did a tally.
There were some 850 volunteer opportunities in this church
that some 460 people offered their time and talent to do ...
and that's just in the church.

When you let your mind wander out to the wider community –
you literally see volunteers everywhere –
at the hospital,
as runners, as support to staff, as administrators,
as a welcoming friendly helpful face –
in nursing homes reading stories or sitting with people, -
at helping hands and other organizations
there are the team of volunteer drivers ..
plus there's the school volunteers,
the English as a second language volunteers,
hospice, Telecare, the service clubs who reach out and raise funds,
all the cultural events of music and drama,
the sports teams for our kids
and on and on goes the list of the multitudes
who help create a world of cares and creativity.
Volunteers are the lifeblood that creates community –
that creates our community, our country, our world –
as a caring place.

When people offer themselves –
their time, their talents, their passions –
for the sake of the greater good –
we are seeing saints in action ...
Definition of a saint ... "One who lets the light shine through."

When the stewardship team decided on this theme for today
they contacted Kathy Manners from our church
and asked her to work with me in preparation for these reflections.
Kathy made contact with a person to get resources
that would be helpful for the theme –
which I'll draw from in a few moments.
But I also asked Kathy if she'd write down her thoughts
on volunteering
because most of our conversations

have been around her longing to find appropriate
and significant volunteer opportunities
to engage her children so that they develop
an awareness of the gift of volunteering.

Kathy writes: From my perspective as parent and volunteer:

Volunteerism is a partnership
Between the organization and individual.
They both need their boundaries and expectation.
We have gone to help out\
And the organization does not know how to use us.

Organizations need to tap into the family for help.
Many organizations are unprepared to use children.
My best experience has been with “the sharing place”.
We committed last Christmas to volunteer as a family
For 6 weeks every Friday.
The organization got to know my children
And they came back this summer and volunteered every week.
By doing it as a family, we had lots to talk about at dinner.

As a volunteer I have limited time
To commit to long projects
So I like the “drive by” opportunities.
This is why the United Way volunteer consulting opportunities
Work for me...usually 1-3 days for a piece of work.

I also know that boards are finding it difficult to choose
Who should be on boards since
They are getting wonderful applications
From retired people who are moving up here from the city.

I have been reflecting on the high school requirement
For students to do 40 hours of volunteering.
For most children,
Getting the 40 hours in 4 year is simple
And so should be expanded.
Social service agencies
Could do a better job of tapping into this market.

Over the past 15 years there has been significant research
done on volunteers in Canada.
(and that’s some of the information Kathy found for us).

Did you know that people contribute more than a billion hours of volunteer power in this country?
7.5 – 8 million Canadians volunteer each year – though that seems to be declining at a rate of 2% per year. However the number of hours people are volunteering is increasing – it is now at a rate of 160-180 hours per year. It's important to note though that 67% of all the volunteer work in Canada is done by only 5% of all Canadians – 67% of all the volunteer work in Canada is done by only 5% of all Canadians and that the people who volunteer the most tend to be connected to a church or religious group suggesting that being part of an intentional faith community – expands our awareness of the need to reach out and share, to reach out and care.

One of the lay resources that I have been reading this week on volunteering in Canada comes from the “Graff-Reed Conversations”. Linda Graff is a non-profit management consultant and Paul Reed is the senior social scientist at Statistics Canada. They are concerned because, as Reed notes, the lions share of volunteer time is being done by a civic core – a group of deeply committed volunteers who put in many hundreds of hours each year, and this “civic core” primarily comes from older folks – people who are 60-65 and older – people who have what Reed calls a “magic combination” of idealism and free time. But now they are passing on. Many of those folks have given large amounts of time over an extended period of time in very committed volunteering. There is a shift in younger generations toward short term, episodic volunteering and away from commitment volunteering. There is also a shift toward greater contribution of time to activities concerned with recreation and hobbies such as keeping sports organizations going in the community. Graff & Reed note that there is a very, very serious Canada – wide problem in finding people who are prepared to serve as board members on voluntary organizations (which makes Kathy's comment about having almost too many volunteers for Boards with long time Orillia people plus new folks not offering.)

The question is being pondered by many
whether or not the Baby Boomer generation
will become the new civic core –
but one major polling company in Canada
gathered information that suggests
that better than ¾ of baby boomers
have no interest in volunteering.

However –
it may be that they just don't want to volunteer
the way they've seen the amazing volunteers of the past do it.

There is awareness
that the way people volunteer is changing
and so opportunities need to change
to respond to the next generations
so that the legacy, the care principles and values of that civic core –
can continue to be met –
even if those values –
that legacy, is met by different methods.

Paul Reed – the social scientist from Statistics Canada –
says this about volunteering:
“My argument is that volunteering isn't just a pleasant add on part time activity.
It is essential to our social order.”
He uses two metaphors to describe the impact of volunteering
upon our community and in our lives – vitamins and yeast.

“If you think of how our health as individuals is affected
by taking important vitamins and nutrients”...
They represent a very small portion of what we eat
yet without them we become debilitated...
“Think of yeast “ –
a very small portion of a recipe for making bread,
but without it the bread is nothing.
Without it – it will look like a flat soda cracker.
That's what I think volunteering is –
something that is very small in quantity
that is very large in impact.

Linda Graff observes
that as ones who recognize the positive impact of volunteering.
We need to recognize
that we don't have a recruitment problem –
what we've got is a job design problem.

The new volunteer is looking for something different.
She notes that we're still trying to offer long-term work
to a work force that's looking for short-term meaningful positions.
We also need to be aware that when we ask people to volunteer –
we're asking them to give one of their most precious commodities.

It is well documented that if given a choice –
most people would take more free time than an increase in pay.

So when people volunteer
Graff suggests that we have to respect the precious gift that is being offered
and we do that – by having the work place really ready,
training in good shape and making sure things are ready to go
so that “volunteers understand we need them and value them.”

One of the shifts in volunteering that has happened
that is often not named is that volunteers are,

Graff says,

“looking to gain more back for themselves
in exchange from the time they give.

What they are looking for
varies with the volunteer but it often includes things like –
skills, broadening horizons,
they want to meet new and different people,
feel productive, feel like they've made a tangible difference.
Volunteers need to know that their work makes a difference ...
and that their efforts connect to the mission of the organization
and furthers the collective effort.”

As I have reflected on the changing landscape of volunteers,
even just in the years that I've been here –
there are some things I am aware of:

1. that it is critically important to get to know people
so that their gifts and interests can be matched
to opportunities to serve.
2. that people have a wide variety of different needs
as to how they will become involved in volunteering,
for example: for some it is critical to be asked ...
while others feel that they don't want to be asked –
they want to offer
and so their needs to be a variety of ways
for people to volunteer.
3. that there are people who have incredible skills and
knowledge
that they'd like to find a place to share
and we need to be open to offers of things
we might not have been asking for –

and then decide whether or not the offer fits the mission
and values of the church and if it does –
find ways to support it.

4. that is may be time to at least start investigating
some of the new governance styles that are being used –
that acknowledge that people are not as willing to be elected
for multi-year committee commitments
in the same way we once were.

5. that sometimes tasks need to be let go of
until a new volunteer sees the need with fresh eyes.

There's a story of a church
who couldn't get anyone to take on the task of parking lot
organizer for Sunday morning
after the long time faithful volunteer had died.
Within three weeks of having no volunteer –
several people offered to take on the task
because they realized its value and its worth.

As People, we need to know we are making a difference ..
that our efforts add to the overall mission –
goals of our community.

We need to feel good about the ways we are sharing our gifts.

While we may not have a full system figured out
that allows for the broad spectrum
of needs of both volunteers
and the needs of the world around us
that enables us to ensure that St. Paul's will continue to be a dynamic,
welcoming and supportive place for the journey through life –
we do know that people are changed,
lives are transformed
when we engage in volunteering for the sake of the greater good.

Today we celebrate all who volunteer,
all who reach out and care,
all who share.

Today we celebrate all the saints that came before us
and gave us the legacy of St. Paul's
of being bold in vision,
of a delight in the arts through music and drama,
a commitment to solid biblical scholarship,
a passion for social justice
and of having dedicated and committed volunteers
who welcome others into sharing this ministry that is all of ours.

Thanks be to God – that we are not alone! Amen.