



equipping, resourcing, and educating today's youth ministers

## Four Ps

By Hank Hilliard

I recently heard in a seminar that there is an average of 30% annual turnover in youth ministry volunteers. If this statistic is accurate, then I feel blessed to have had a much lower percentage in my experience hovering around 10-15%. Either way, turnover among volunteers is high. Throw in that the average tenure of a youth director is just under four years, and you have a recipe for a disjointed, unorganized mess of a ministry. More importantly, students do not get to experience the joy and awesomeness that comes with forming healthy, long-lasting, Christ-centered relationships with adults.

I love the question Duffy Robbins raises:

How do we persuade normal, well-adjusted, contented adults that their lives will be more rewarding and pleasant if they agree to spend several hours a week with teenagers listening to music that is too loud, driving vans that break down too often, taking part in retreats on which they will get too little sleep, and working with teenagers who too often act as if they are totally ungrateful? Good question.

An even more important question is, "Once we persuade them, how do we keep them?" Hopefully the following will offer some help in answering this question.

## Four "P"s

### Purpose

For those of you who are married, remember when you were dating your spouse? If you are single, think of someone you have dated. Remember the first couple of dates? If you were the one planning the date, you made elaborate plans to be romantic and have everything go just right. You always tried to look and smell your best. You brought little gifts. You wrote love notes and songs. Now, I have a pretty good marriage, I think. But is there room for some more romance? Um, yeah. Four kids, two jobs, and lots of other life happenings cut into that. Dates now are infrequent and are planned as we pull out of the driveway. Gifts are quite a bit more practical, and my guitar sits in its case somewhere in the spare bedroom closet.

To retain volunteers, the youth director must remain in an atmosphere of proposal. As their leader, we should continually be courting them. Marriage is wonderful...for two people who love each other and have made a commitment to put in all the hard work and effort it takes to stay together and in love. It's not so great in retaining volunteers.

Volunteers need to experience affirmation regularly. With the pressures and continual failures we have in ministry, volunteers need intentional affirmation that what they are doing matters and that their best is enough.

Volunteers need celebration. Not only do we need to celebrate our volunteers successes in ministry, we need to celebrate simply who they are as a person. When dating someone, we are in continual celebration. We celebrate one-month anniversaries of our first kiss. Two-month anniversaries of when we first said I love you. One-year anniversaries of our first date, kiss, I love you, and more. We are in constant celebration. This same spirit of celebration can be brought to our ministry. It can be done formally through recognition nights or awards, or informally through phone calls and letters.

### Prepare

"Most have the will to win. Few have the will to prepare to win." - Bobby Knight. Everyone wants to succeed. Why are so few willing to prepare to do so? Because it is hard! I remember announcing to my volunteer team a few years ago that our theme for the year was going to be "Leaders are learners." Not very original, but it was needed. I was frustrated over the contentment and "know-it-all" attitude many of our adults were displaying. My frustration deepened when after a passion-filled speech about our need to continually grow in our knowledge and skills I received eye-rolling and I am pretty sure there was even a yawn in there.

Youth Workers can never know enough. We can never learn too much about ministry, the Bible, youth culture, building relationships, or the 287 other things we need to know to effectively minister to teenagers. As the leader of the ministry, it is your responsibility to prepare the other adults in the ministry. Even when they think they know it all. Even when you think they don't know anything.

**Training:** Provide regular in-house training opportunities. Since no doubt, you are continually growing and expanding in your knowledge of youth ministry, don't hog it. Share it. Share what you are learning and invite them into that learning with you. Bring in people from your church who have expertise in counseling or group building to work with your team. Provide training in youth culture, youth group policies and procedures, confidentiality rules and reporting laws, listening skills, giving talks, and more. Some can be deep and foundational while others lighthearted and fun.

**Evaluation:** The director should evaluate each of the volunteer team members annually. For the most part, people want to know how they are doing. They care about doing a good job. Use this as a time to address concerns or shortcomings, but also, make it a time of praise and celebration. If the person has done a good job, let them know. Have a couple of youth they are close to fill out an evaluation or have them write a brief letter to the person. Also, allow the volunteer to evaluate you, their leader. Remain open and avoid becoming defensive if negative things are shared. This evaluation can be done formally with forms and other paperwork, or informally over lunch.

## Provide

Leaders must provide for those whom they lead. The volunteer team looks to the leader to provide them with foundational necessities. Much like parents provide food, shelter, clothing, and love to their children, leaders must provide the basic necessities to those they lead.

**Leadership:** Volunteers need to know that there is someone in charge. They need a leader who will advocate for them and who will have their back in difficult situations. They need a leader who they can trust and who they feel is looking out for the best interest of the group. You are their leader. They are leaders in their own right, but you are their leader. Lead them.

**Stability:** If a leader wants volunteers to be committed and dedicated, then the leader must first live with these characteristics herself. They need a leader who is not planning to jump ship at the first sign of stormy seas. If you want volunteers to stick around, you must plan to sticking around a while yourself.

**A place to belong:** Adults are looking for a place to belong as much as teenagers are. Make your ministry team a place where the members feel they belong. A place where people know them and love them for who they are. Offer regular opportunities for volunteers to build relationships with one another and with the youth. If a volunteer feels he fits and belongs, he will stay.

**Opportunities for Growth:** People get frustrated when things seem stagnant. People tend to leave when they feel they are not being challenged or are not growing. Offer opportunities for your volunteers to grow in their faith. Host yearly retreats or getaways for them to grow in their faith. Challenge your volunteers by pushing them past where they are comfortable. Keep their ministry fresh by giving them new ministry opportunities within the current program or by letting them start something new.

## Protect

When I was in college, I played in a summer baseball league. I hadn't even played baseball since 8th grade, but I had several friends playing, including some on the Varsity squad. We traveled all over Alabama that summer to play teams with all kinds of college players and even some retired semi-pro players. Because I was out of my league, I knew I was not going to play much, and was fine with that. I was looking forward to my duties as bench rider. One of these duties was warming up the pitchers while the catchers got dressed in their gear. The first game I began to run out in just my fielder's glove. A friend grabbed me and told me I better put on the chest protector and take a catcher's mitt. I thought he was crazy. After all, I was just catching warm up tosses. Once I squatted behind and the first pitch came at me, I understood why my friend recommended wearing protective gear. Whitey was a knuckleball pitcher. That first pitch came dancing through the air, right past my glove and smack into my chest at about 60 miles an hour. So did the next 5-6 pitches before the real catcher got out there. I needed protecting from the balls and from myself. Our volunteers need protection as well.

**From other adults:** Parents of youth, old biddies who complain about everything from the temperature in the sanctuary to the color of the altar cloth, and even other members of the ministry team are all prone to throw a knuckleball from time to time. These knuckleballs come in all sizes, speeds, and directions. "My daughter came

home crying from that small group meeting. What is that leader doing in there?" "Those kids sitting with that youth leader were passing notes in church today. The preacher is gonna hear about this." "That game we played tonight was so stupid. Why did you let him lead? All the kids think it was a stupid game too." In these situations, our volunteers need a leader who will protect them and defend them from these side and back door attacks. Volunteers stick around when they know they do not have to face accusations and criticism alone.

**From students:** I want to let you in on a secret - not all youth group kids are smiling, loving, angels in blue jeans. Oh, you already knew that? Students will from time to time attack a volunteer, over something minor, that for some reason triggered an exaggerated response. There are times when volunteers are wrongly accused of something or a youth or group of youth have it out for an adult in the ministry. These times call for the very firm, but tactful intervention of the leader. Volunteers, who feel the leader always chooses the kids over them, will not stick around long.

**Themselves:** My friend protected me from myself. I was completely content to run out and catch with no protective gear. He didn't allow me the option. This was not a lesson to be learned the hard way. This was a danger I did not see and needed someone who did to step in and protect me from my own stupidity and ignorance. Volunteers need protection from themselves on occasion. As the leader, you need to keep track of your adult volunteer's struggles and difficulties. If they are going through a major life change or family struggle, they may need you to step in and recommend taking a break. If the volunteer is taking on too much and you see trouble approaching, you need to step in to help stave off burnout.

Keeping volunteers for the long haul in ministry is by no means an exact science. It is more of an art, and art does not always follow a clear set of rules. However, these basic principles will help you as you design your plan for keeping volunteers involved in the ministry for years to come.