AN ANNUAL STRATEGY FOR LEADING CHILDREN'S VOLUNTEERS

Once in a while, we'll ask a whole bunch of church leaders this question: "What's your biggest struggle in ministry?" Every time we ask, we get hundreds of responses back, and do you know what one of the most common answers always is? **Volunteers.**

As we read through those responses, we saw some variation of the same questions over and over again, like …

- How do I recruit more volunteers?
- How do I train the volunteers I already have?
- And how do I get them to stick around for more than a few months?

We've been there.

RECRUITING VOLUNTEERS IS HARD. No matter what you do, asking people to serve sometimes feels like pulling teeth.

TRAINING VOLUNTEERS IS EVEN HARDER. Once you've got volunteers on board, what exactly do you do with them? What do you teach them? How do you help them grow?

RETAINING VOLUNTEERS IS THE HARDEST. Imagine if every volunteer you had ever recruited was still serving with you today – you'd probably have way more than enough volunteers for your ministry. But instead, people cycle in and out of our ministries so fast that it seems like we're constantly recruiting new volunteers. It can be kind of exhausting.

Whatever your biggest volunteer problem is, we can all agree – **we all want to grow our volunteer teams.**

But here's what we've learned about growing our teams: **if we want to grow our volunteer teams (in numbers *and* effectiveness) simply recruiting more volunteers won't solve our problems.** In most cases, a lack of volunteers isn't really the problem. A lack of volunteers is often a *symptom* of a much bigger problem. So if we want to grow our volunteer teams, we need to start by identifying — and solving — that bigger problem.

The secret to growing a volunteer team isn't a quick fix, a great marketing campaign, or a series of guilt trips. **The best way to grow your volunteer team is to create a culture where volunteers love to serve.**

But how? Just like you work hard every week to create programs that connect with kids or teenagers, you need to focus on creating systems and strategies that connect with your volunteers. No matter how many volunteers you're leading right now, we hope this strategy we're about to unpack **will give you a framework for leading volunteers that you can replicate and improve year after year.** With this Annual Volunteer Strategy, you'll learn a system for investing in volunteers in seven different ways throughout the year.

If you're familiar with Grow Curriculum & Annual Strategy, some things in this post might sound familiar to you. That's because everything we do in Grow Curriculum is based on the strategy we're about to break down for you! **But don't worry if you've never used Grow in your ministry before. You can still steal our strategy!** Take the ideas you find helpful, ignore the parts that don't quite fit your context, and combine them with the unique language, vision, and strategy of your church.

Okay, are we ready? Let's get started!

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7 WAYS TO INVEST IN VOLUNTEERS

1. VOLUNTEER EVENTS

If your ministry is like most children ministries, you've probably got plenty of events on your calendar already. But the vast majority of those events are probably designed for kids. That makes sense, of course, but here's the thing: just like events are effective tools for engaging and inspiring kids, **the right event can engage, inspire, and mobilize your volunteers in new ways, too.**

An event is a major vision-casting opportunity – an environment you'd want every volunteer to attend. In kids ministry, we recommend keeping this simple and **planning just one volunteer event each year:** a Volunteer Kick-Off to start the school year!

All the best events are clear about what they are and who they're for. So as you work on the details of your Volunteer Kick-Off Event, be sure you stay focused on the main goal: to get your volunteers off to a great start this school year! **This kick-off event should be fun, inspiring, and helpful.** But, most importantly, it should **remind your volunteers of the core values of your church and ministry** because *every year*, your volunteers need to be reminded of the big picture.

There are other reasons besides vision-casting to get your team together too, but we'll talk about those next!

So put a Volunteer Kick-Off event on your calendar each August (or whenever you start your school year). And if you're using Grow Curriculum, you know we've created the event guide and all the resources you'll need to make it happen!

2. VOLUNTEER MEETINGS

Sharing vision and inspiration with your volunteers is probably pretty important to you as a ministry leader, but volunteers need more than just inspiration. **Your volunteers need practical training all year long!** They need resources to help them do their specific jobs better and navigate the specific issues they're facing with kids right now. That's why it's so important to schedule meetings with your volunteers throughout the year that train them on specific topics.

Our recommendation is getting together with your whole team, all together, at least every other month — that's at least six times a year. But if you're following along with Grow Curriculum's Volunteer Strategy, you know you already have three other reasons to get together throughout the year:

- A Volunteer Kick-Off Event to begin the year.
- A Christmas party to celebrate the holidays.
- An end-of-the-school-year party to celebrate the end of another ministry year together.

So that leaves at least three times a year when you'll want to connect with your volunteers in an official training capacity. But, of course, you can always meet more often if you'd like!

Before the beginning of each school year (but after you've already planned out the rest of your ministry calendar) take a look at your annual calendar to determine when you may want to meet with your team. Consider …

- When will you have new influxes of volunteers who will need an **orientation to your ministry?**
- Do you want to do **weekly huddles** before or after your weekly program?
- What **important topics** do you want your team to be trained on?
- What kinds of situations might require a **meeting you can't plan ahead for?**

When you're deciding how often to meet with your team, don't go overboard though. You want to schedule enough meetings that your volunteers have all the

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training they need to succeed, but not so many that they feel overburdened by your ministry schedule and requirements. **Save your in-person volunteer meetings for the really important stuff: the times when you want to teach, discuss, and spend time with your team.**

If you're using Grow Curriculum, you know we've created meeting guides for these kinds of situations already. But whether you use Grow or not, here's how this could look on your ministry calendar each year:

- **JULY—AUGUST:** Orientation meetings with new volunteers
- **OCTOBER:** A meeting on the topic of your choice
- **FEBRUARY:** A meeting on the topic of your choice
- **APRIL:** A meeting on the topic of your choice
- **AS NEEDED:** Meetings to address crises or transitions impacting your team

3. VOLUNTEER DISCUSSION GROUPS

When we think about training and leading volunteers, we probably picture environments where we (the pastor or church leader) are doing the training and leading. That should be a necessary part of our volunteer investment strategy, but it's not the only way. **Sure, you've got a lot of wisdom to share with your volunteers, but have you ever considered that your volunteers have a lot of wisdom to share with each other?** That's where these Discussion Groups come in.

The premise of a volunteer discussion group is pretty simple: invite a small group of volunteers (about ten people) in a similar area of ministry to join you for coffee and dessert (or chicken wings and soda) so they can share some of their biggest wins, struggles, and lessons learned.

Since we recommend doing Discussion Groups **during months when you don't already have a volunteer meeting or event scheduled**, take some time at the beginning of the year to decide how often you'd like to meet with your team. If you have more than ten volunteers, you probably want to schedule a few of these, so everyone has a chance to speak during their Discussion Group time. On top of your pre-scheduled Discussion Groups, you may also want to host an impromptu Discussion Group during pivotal moments for your team, like **during a ministry transition, during a crisis, or after a big event.**

If you're using Grow Curriculum, you know we've created discussion group guides for these kinds of situations already. But even if you don't use Grow in your ministry, here's how this could look on your calendar each year:

- **DURING THE YEAR:** Mid-Year Volunteer Discussion Groups
- **TOWARD THE END OF THE YEAR:** End-of-Year Volunteer Discussion Groups
- **AS NEEDED:** Discussion Groups to address crises or transitions impacting your community, or to debrief big events

4. VOLUNTEER TOOLS

You probably do quite a bit to train, encourage, and inspire your volunteers. You probably give them great ideas, share helpful resources, and give them tips on how to disciple kids. But you know what? Sometimes, in order to do their jobs well, volunteers need more than just words. **They need a physical, practical, tangible tool they can take and use.**

When it comes to the tools you give your volunteers, you'll be most effective in equipping your team when you **establish a predictable annual rhythm** — something strategic instead of random. That means every year (especially at the beginning of the year), volunteers should know a little bit about what they can expect from you and your ministry. If you're using Grow Curriculum, you know we've created a few of those recurring resources for you already, like …

- A **volunteer handbook** to help them understand your ministry's philosophy, strategy, and policies.

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- An **annual volunteer survey** to help you better understand how to appreciate and communicate with each volunteer.
- **Volunteer business cards** to give volunteers a way to remind kids and parents who they are and they can be reached.
- **Volunteer goals** to help them stay on track all year long.
- **Volunteer t-shirts** to make getting dressed for church nice and easy.
- **Volunteer tip videos** and **video scripts** to give volunteers a practical piece of advice each month (or however often you decide to send them).

Having a set of tools that you adjust, redesign, and repeat each year will keep your ministry on track and help your team stay engaged all year long.

As you go throughout your year, you will probably discover your volunteers could use a few tools you didn't foresee. Maybe a volunteer even gives you a great suggestion for a new tool during one of your Volunteer Discussion Groups. **Whenever you create an annual plan, remember to stay flexible.** Ideas, needs, and problems will probably come up as you go, so be ready to create or find new tools for your volunteers whenever you need them.

Here's how this could look on your ministry calendar each year:

- **EVERY YEAR:** Provide all your volunteers with a new batch of tools for the year
- **EVERY MONTH:** Send Volunteer Tip Videos in your first volunteer email of the month
- **EVERY WEEK:** Send more helpful resources in your weekly volunteer emails

5. VOLUNTEER CONVERSATIONS

We're big believers that **meeting regularly with your volunteers one-on-one is pretty important** — not just for your volunteers, but for you and your ministry, too. It's important for your *volunteers* because they need to know you care about them . . . and spending time building relationships is a great way to communicate how much you value them. It's important for your *ministry* because it will give you an opportunity to evaluate how well your volunteers are doing in their roles. And it's important for you because it will give you an opportunity to hear how you and your ministry can better help and equip your volunteers to do their jobs better.

The premise of a one-on-one conversation with a volunteer is pretty simple: every year, you should be scheduling a time to connect, one-on-one, with every volunteer at least once. During those conversations, you'll be asking **questions that will allow you to evaluate your *volunteer* and will allow your volunteer to evaluate *you* as well.**

If you're using Grow Curriculum, you know we've created four different Conversation Guides to help you navigate four very different kinds of conversations:

- The **Onboarding** Conversation Guide will help you learn about a new (or potential) volunteer as you integrate them more fully into your volunteer team.
- The **Check-In** Conversation Guide will help you check in with any volunteer on your team, no matter their role, for giving and receiving feedback. This is the Conversation Guide you'll use most often!
- The **Troubleshooting** Conversation Guide will help you navigate difficult conversations when volunteers aren't meeting your expectations or are behaving in ways that concern you.
- The **Offboarding** Conversation Guide will help you kindly and clearly remove a volunteer from your team when it is no longer the right fit.

While you can't plan ahead to put these kinds of conversations on your calendar, you can put together the resources you need (like the conversation guides Grow Curriculum provides) well in advance!

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6. VOLUNTEER COMMUNICATION

When we think about training our volunteers, we often think about in-person meetings or big events. But if we want to keep our vision in front of our volunteers all year long, we have to think about training in a different (and more consistent) way. That's where communication comes in. Whether you prefer to communicate with your volunteers through email, text messages, social media posts, or phone calls, the point is that you **stay in touch with your team every week.**

At the beginning of each year, do a quick survey of your volunteers so you can ask about their favorite ways to be appreciated and communicated with. Do they want emails? Text messages? A private Facebook group? Good ol' snail mail? **When you understand how your volunteers prefer to communicate, you can create a more effective communication strategy.**

Regardless of how you decide to communicate with your volunteers, we recommend making weekly volunteer emails the core of your communication plan and then using other methods (like texting, a private Facebook group, or other social media channels) to repurpose that content. We even created Grow Hubs, a communication platform for kids ministries, to help you communicate with volunteers more effectively.

If you're using Grow Curriculum, you know all of these resources are already provided for you — but if you're starting from scratch, here's how this could look on your ministry calendar each year:

- **EVERY YEAR:** Survey volunteers about their communication preferences
- **EVERY MONTH:** Each month, here are a few ways to consider communicating with your volunteers …
    - Choose a topic of the month — you might want to tie it into what you're teaching kids, if possible. Then share related resources and ask related questions all month.
    - Spotlight one volunteer from your team in your emails and on social media.
    - Share a story of a win in your ministry.
    - Share a fun or inspiring video or two.
    - Share at least one helpful article or resource recommendation.
- **EVERY WEEK:** Send volunteers an email. Then use social media, texting, Grow Hubs, and any other method of communication your volunteers prefer to re-communicate the information you sent in the weekly email.

7. VOLUNTEER CELEBRATION

We don't always think about celebrating or appreciating our volunteers as a form of volunteer "training," but maybe we should! Because here's the thing: **what we celebrate gets repeated.** So when we celebrate our volunteers for following through on the vision and expectations we've set for them, we're reminding our whole team about what matters most. Plus, celebrating our volunteers (not just for their achievements but simply because of who they are) models the kind of love and care we hope they'll give the kids they're leading and investing in.

At the beginning of each year, we recommend doing a quick **annual survey** of your volunteers so you can ask about their favorite ways to be appreciated. We also recommend setting aside two days each year to simply celebrate your volunteers with a party:

- **A Christmas party** in December.
- **An End-of-the-Year party** at the end of the school year.

On top of the big gestures you make each year to appreciate your team, there are **smaller things you can do each month** to let your volunteers know they're cared for. Every month, we recommend doing a few things:

- **SAY HAPPY BIRTHDAY:** Make it part of your monthly rhythm to celebrate your volunteers' birthdays. You don't have to do anything elaborate — a text, social media shout out, or a card should do the trick. But to make sure you actually remember to do it, put a

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reminder on your calendar to check for upcoming volunteer birthdays on the last week of every month. If you're using the Grow Weekly Planner, we'll remind you every month!

- **CELEBRATE A HOLIDAY:** Sure, you know the obvious holidays, like Christmas and Easter and Halloween. But do you know about Unicorn Day? Or Paper Airplane Day? Yeah, that's what we thought. But don't worry. We've got you covered. Each month, choose a weird holiday to inspire some new creative ways to honor your volunteers (or just have some fun together) every month. These celebrations will rotate between three different kinds of celebrations:
  - **Food,** because food is a whole love language.
  - **Fun,** because having some fun together lets your team know you actually like them.
  - **Encouragement,** because your team needs to know you see their hard work — and you're thankful for it.

And, of course, if you're using Grow Curriculum, you know all of these resources are already provided for you. You just need to use them!

AN ANNUAL VOLUNTEER STRATEGY

Okay, maybe this seems like a lot to do, but it doesn't have to be! Like you, we know that our time each week is limited, and no one has endless hours to spend on leading volunteers alone. That would be nice! But it's just not reality.

But here's the good news: there is a way to structure your volunteer strategy so that you do **the least amount of work** for **the biggest impact.** That's what the Grow strategy is all about.

In case you missed it, check out this article about planning an entire year of ministry. It'll show you how all seven of these methods for investing in parents might look on your annual calendar, alongside an annual strategy for your:

- Teaching
- Discipleship
- Weekly Environments
- Events
- Families

We've said this before, but we've got to say it again! These ideas we've talked about are nice … but **these *ideas* only become a *strategy* when you put them on your calendar and turn them into actions.**

When you have an annual plan to turn your ideas and goals into a strategy, you'll make a much bigger impact.

So whether you use Grow Curriculum or not, **we hope you'll** steal our strategy! We developed it over lots of years of ministry, with input from lots of church leaders and lots of trial and error. Take it, tweak it, and make it your own. We really hope it helps you be just a little more awesome at what you do this year!



For even more resources like this one, try a free trial of Grow Curriculum and Annual Strategy for your children's or youth ministry. It's everything you need for a more strategic year of discipleship, teaching, environments, events, volunteers, and families!

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