



VOLUNTEER COMEBACK:

ADVICE TO HELP YOU REBUILD YOUR TEAMS

BY DR. JASON YOUNG



Today we are honored to have a guest post from Dr. Jason Young. He is director of guest experience at Buckhead Church and North Point Ministries, a nationally known network of churches with 36,000 people in average weekly attendance. He has also worked with numerous organizations, including Ford Motor Company, Life.Church, and Chick-fil-A.

His latest book [*"The Volunteer Effect: How Your Church Can Find, Train, and Keep Volunteers Who Make a Difference"*](#) would be a great resource to pick up for your team to read through this fall!

Comebacks. You've likely watched one on TV or perhaps witnessed it in person. Regardless of the scenario, the associated emotion and excitement are contagious. The sound of the cheers of the crowd as a person or team makes their comeback is unforgettable.

Remember when Tiger Woods was on a winning streak for many years until his choices off the golf course caught up with him? Stacked on top of that, came several injuries and surgeries that sidelined him for a long time. We all wondered, "Would he ever return?" I remember watching him, in person, at the 2019 Masters and being in awe of his discipline, effort, and focus. He made a comeback and did so with a vengeance.

Remember Ramona Pierson? She was a mathematical genius and member of the Marines. One day when she was running with her dog, she was hit by a drunk driver. She spent months in a comatose state with 104 broken bones, a brain injury, and punctured lungs. When she woke up 18 months later, Ramona was blind and living in a nursing home. Having a lot of support from others and showing enormous grit and focus, she regained her sight; made it to the Olympics; earned her PhD; started and sold a company; and improved MRI machines to help surgeons perform precision operations on soldiers with head wounds.

You know what we see and don't see about a comeback? We rarely see progress. Our view of the comeback is often limited to the result. Why is this important to understand? **The result is not the goal.** Yes, having a clear direction and destination is important, but the comeback journey is what creates those results. People can't really appreciate what others do when making their comeback. They only see the result and celebrate. What about the pain in the process that nobody sees?

You can relate, right? You were dealt some blows over the last 18 months. There was this global pandemic, called Covid-19, that forced you and many other church leaders into navigating the unknown. Perhaps your challenges started before then but were exacerbated by your church temporarily closing its physical doors. When you reopened, something was different. Perhaps there were a number of these moments and responses, but one thing was undeniable: there were a lot fewer volunteers.

Can we agree that volunteers are the lifeblood of our church? Remember when you had volunteers helping care for the babies so parents could attend a church service? Remember when your guest services volunteers showed up to welcome guests? I could go on and on across every area of the church. You get it. Remember when your church building reopened but many of your volunteers did not return? In fact, your church building has probably been open for months, but still your volunteer numbers are low. Even worse, you are unable to open some of the rooms for children, or guests enter doors that remain without a welcoming volunteer. You simply do not have enough volunteers to create a remarkable experience. You are not alone. A lot of leaders in churches are also asking:

"How do we get our volunteers to come back?"

What if I told you that having all the volunteers come back is not the goal? What if the goal is to seize the opportunity to rebuild a healthy volunteer culture? Instead of being frustrated with getting volunteers to serve again, recognize the blessing of ministry reset. Through the efforts of your extra labor, something beautiful is born. Maybe it is possible that not all of your volunteers should return to your ministry. No, I am not being harsh. It's possible, however, that some of your previous volunteers were more of a drain on the ministry instead of making it better. Perhaps, they are burned out; hanging on because they do not know how to conclude their service; becoming entitled, or a host of other reasons. This is when change is necessary to improve your ministry's effectiveness for the glory of God.

To that end, here are eight actionable ideas that you and your team could start right away.

1. EXPERIENCE > TASK LISTS

You are building an experience and not simply giving volunteers tasks to accomplish. Don't forget to factor in emotion because that is a natural driver for volunteers. Yes, tasks must get done but volunteers are not there to check things off the list. Instead of giving people tasks to accomplish, start with the question of "how do I maximize someone's experience that will lead to a feeling of significance and spiritual growth?"

2. EMPATHIZE: YOU AREN'T THE ONLY ONE WITH A LOT GOING ON

People are distracted right now. Don't be offended if they don't say yes the first time you invite them to be a volunteer. People have their own issues amid the global pandemic, and there is a lot competing for their attention and emotion. Stay connected and not simply because you want something from them. Care for them regardless of whether they say yes or no.

3. FOLLOW UP!

In 25 years of church work, the most common mistake I see is the church not following up with people after a single ask. By failing to follow up with a potential volunteer: (1) you're not letting the person know what to expect if they join your team; (2) you are more about tasks than the person; and (3) you are giving them permission to treat other potential volunteers or even guests in the same transactional manner.

4. CREATE AN ONBOARDING STRATEGY

Build an onboarding plan that makes sense to volunteers and is easy to follow. Volunteers want to know the next steps and how they are progressing? If you can create an onboarding experience that includes these questions, you are on your way to starting well.

5. MAKE IT EASY TO SAY YES!

Create low-risk entry points. For many volunteers, they are easing back into a routine and that includes volunteering. Some who crave community following the isolation of the pandemic will be volunteering for the first time. Instead of asking for a huge commitment or even giving them lots of responsibilities, start with a short-term commitment or a role that is less demanding. If someone is eager for more, great! But make easy asks.

6. CARE, AND MEAN IT

Care for your volunteers. If this season taught us anything, the lessons of helping people feel seen, known, and valued should not be forgotten. Even more so, volunteers need to know if they matter and if you care about them. In my experience with churches and with organizations like Chick-fil-A, I've learned that the most important thing we can do as an organization is take care of the people who take care of people.

7. DON'T GO "BACK"; IT'S REALLY GOING "BACKWARDS"

Avoid doing the same things you did prior to Covid. Be in the moment. Consider initiating a new idea or process. Fix or tweak something that is good but could be better. Give yourself permission to stop doing something simply because you did it that way in a previous season of ministry.

8. VOLUNTEER ENGAGEMENT IS NOT A PROGRAM, IT'S AN ORGANIZATIONAL PRIORITY

Keep your supervisor updated on your plan and progress. Communication is always important but even more so as you and your ministry team rebuild and retool.

Whew. Time for a deep breath. You have experienced trauma over the last 18 months, and now you are figuring out how to move forward. Welcome to the team of leaders who are doing the same all over the country. Whether you have five volunteers or thousands, you have been invited to reimagine what a volunteer ministry could be. Will every former volunteer comeback? No. Should they? Probably not. Can you have a thriving volunteer ministry again or for the first time? Yes. Your current season of ministry with volunteers can be better than ever. To paraphrase something I read once:

Don't forget that it takes great strength, dedication, and resilience to relaunch with a new idea or pick up the pieces and start again – the comeback is always compelling viewing.

To rebuild a ministry to volunteers overnight is unrealistic. Honestly, it is impossible. What you can do is to keep it real. Remain committed to moving forward. I was alone in my office not long ago and found myself holding a black dry-erase marker while standing in front of a blank whiteboard. After some time, I wrote out the following as I thought about the volunteer comeback:

- Pain – say it out loud (to yourself or a trusted friend) that this season hurt or still hurts
- Pray – talk honestly to God about how you feel, what you need, and ask what He wants
- Possibilities – write down what could be with hard work, resilience, and focus
- Purpose – write on a sticky note that your life and ministry have purpose
- Plan – build out a short-term strategy and include a few trusted leaders
- Proposal – relaunch your vision with your volunteers
- Potential – read your plan out loud and allow what is in the making to excite you
- Promise – tell yourself and God that the result is up to Him

Reimagine volunteer-driven ministry in the church you serve. Remember they are God's volunteers, not yours. Now imagine how much more God wants to mobilize volunteers for their good and His glory. After all, we are talking about His church. So, do your part. Then, let Him do His. The result will be better that way. I promise. So does He.

I am cheering you on,

Dr. Jason Young