

Chapter One



It's Only Natural: An Atmospheric Approach

Sierra Madre Congregational Church
Sierra Madre, California

It doesn't take you long at Sierra Madre Congregational Church to realize that service is everybody's business. Ministry within the body of Christ is not reserved for a select few. Rather, it's the expectation of the congregation that the average Christian will get involved in service.

"Every member is a minister" is a saying heard in many congregations, but at Sierra Madre Congregational Church, they really practice it. Perhaps it's because the pastor himself frequently asks the congregation, "What is the motto of our church?" The congregation responds out loud, "At SMCC, every member is a minister" It's not uncommon for him to ask that question a couple of times a month, whether during the message or at some other time in the service.

It is within this environment that Larry Mills, minister of Christian education, oversees a leadership team that invites volunteers to serve. Larry tells us about the ministry at Sierra Madre.

A Pervasive Atmosphere of Service

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Our children’s minister once commented that she has had the easiest time recruiting people to serve here of any church she has been a part of. I would have to concur. Something has developed that makes recruiting very easy for us at Sierra Madre Congregational Church.

My philosophy of ministry is spelled out in the acrostic, COME: Character, Organization, Message, and Evidence. I want people to come to Christ, to *come* into a relationship with the body of Christ, and to come forward in response to an invitation to serve (Matthew 4:19). Once they indicate a willingness to serve, it is my responsibility to match them to a ministry opportunity within the organization. Once they are in the structure, their job is to teach the unchanging message of hope and direction found in the Scriptures. The *evidence* that we are doing something right at Sierra Madre is that people are involved throughout the church. They are doing something for the kingdom in service to the Lord.

I think a healthy atmosphere for service begins with our staff. The collegiality of our staff and the fun that we have together project to the rest of the church body that ministry is inn. There is joy in serving Jesus! The congregation notices our commitment to serve and our appreciation for one another.

Being a part of the body of Christ suggests that a person is not fulfilled until he has a ministry or area of service. Since an atmosphere of service exists at Sierra Madre, we find that people *expect* to be approached about ministry by one of the Christian education staff members. Of course, I have urged our staff not to approach anybody until they have bathed that encounter in prayer. We believe that the Holy Spirit is at work preparing people for the contacts we make.

We do very few public announcements about our needs. There is no general SOS for help. Instead, our pastor freely celebrates the good things that are happening throughout the church by having a “look what God is doing” time during the services, which includes testimonies from teachers and students. Due to this positive atmosphere, most people that we approach about serving usually respond with, “Oh, I have been thinking about that. That is something that I would like to try. Tell me more.”

Pushing People Out of the Nest

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One of our goals is to push people out of the comfort of their nests. To help us do this, every teacher of an adult class has the responsibility of encouraging his class members to find an area of service. Nobody has priority “rights” to anybody in his class. We have found that when somebody leaves a class to teach or fill another area of service, additional people invariably show up to fill those vacated seats. This is not because we’re a huge church. In fact, we meet in a small, crowded facility. But people recognize that good things are happening at Sierra Madre and that’s attractive—it draws them in deeper.

We have young people who are beginning to understand that they, too, can be part of ministry. Even fifth and sixth graders have ministry opportunities. Roles for young people beyond participation in the youth choir include being tutors, mentors, nursery assistants, child-care helpers, and teachers’ aides. We have a program called TICS: “Teens in Christian Service.” We help teens implement what they are learning. Involvement in ministry is the graduation point for them.

Pastoral Support

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One advantage I have here at Sierra Madre is that Pastor Richard Anderson is pro-Christian education. He knows how tough the job is. More importantly, he has a tremendous love for the church and believes in involvement and service. Thus, our motto: “At SMCC, every member is a minister.” The pastor wants to see people grow beyond being sponges. He sincerely desires their growth through serving in some type of ministry.

Evangelism and discipleship are also much on the pastor’s heart. He believes that Sunday school teachers, youth workers, camp counselors, VBS workers, and all of the Christian education volunteers must embrace evangelism and discipleship.

The pastor feels confident about coming to our teachers meetings, knowing that the teachers are all behind him. He senses that they are pulling for him, and he will pull for them. This good tension of mutual support and loyalty is a key element in our healthy atmosphere for recruitment.

A Whole Network of Spotters

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There are five of us who constitute the Christian education leadership team: the children’s director, youth pastor, singles’ pastor, women’s ministries director, and myself. We are the main recruiters, but we involve a *whole network of lookouts for volunteers*. Even our choir members are spotters. Periodically, I ask the choir members and ushers if they have noticed people who attend regularly but are not involved. Since the choir members can scan the congregation from the choir loft, they see people who have been sitting in the same spot for weeks or months and pray for them. We have had several instances where choir members have prayed for somebody in the congregation and that person has then come off the bench and gone to work. People have come to

us without knowing why and said, “I have a feeling that I need to get involved. How can I get involved?” So our choir members, ushers, and Christian education leadership team are all spotters.

Sunday school teachers are our best public relations specialists. Education workers who have had a good experience—and most of them have—are our best recruiters. They talk about ministry opportunities to other people in their classes and throughout the church family.

We receive names of prospective workers from spotters who pass the names along to us and from the registration cards we use each Sunday. Throughout the year, we update our congregational *computer database* where we have the names of those who have indicated their interest, experience, and desire to work. When people come two weeks in a row, they are added to our database.

Increasing Ministry Awareness

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An *annual forum* is made available to the whole church on two consecutive Sundays. (We do everything on a two-Sunday basis because we have such a high attendance turnover. Nothing is handed out for only one Sunday because it misses half the congregation.) During that forum, we provide a *booklet describing all of our regular ministry opportunities*. That booklet is also a regular part of our pastors’ six-week *membership class*. I lead the session on spiritual gifts and service and use that as an opportunity to ask people to consider involvement

In our Christian education program. When it is over, every new member has seen the booklet. taken a spiritual gifts inventory, and been challenged to consider possible areas of ministry

Approaching Prospective Workers

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Whenever we have a hole in the youth ministry or the children's ministry, or need to replace an adult Sunday schoolteacher, we go to the database. We get a printout with the names of people who have indicated experience with or interest in a particular ministry. Then we talk about the need in the Christian education staff meeting and pray about it.

Let's say I am looking for an adult teacher. Now that I have a name (or names) of a prospective worker, I either go directly to that person or *make an appointment* to meet with him in a restaurant or in my office. It is an informal time when we get to know one another and share ministry philosophies and opportunities. At that time I am prepared to give him a job description and describe some of our procedures. Then I give him time to think about it—usually a week, but never longer than two weeks. I seldom use the words “pray about it,” but that is what I am hoping he will do.

That brings us to a *second interview*. If he is still interested in the position we talked about a week or two earlier, I specifically discuss what is involved. I want everything said up front in this second interview so that there are no surprises. I let him know that my expectations of his involvement include more than just preparing a lesson, teaching it on Sunday, and occasionally socializing with the class members. He has to know the details of the job.

First, *we go over the job description in more detail*. Usually he will have said yes before I go into any depth on the job description. If he is hesitant but I feel that with a little more explanation he may say yes, then I continue to detail the task. If his response is a polite maybe, perhaps not wanting to disappoint me, I don't push further. Serving has to be a call of God. If I sense that his hesitation has anything to do with disappointing me, the

case is closed. I don't go any farther. But if he genuinely wonders about what he is getting into, then I go on with the explanation and try to reassure him.

After detailing the job description, I spell out *the importance of participation in training opportunities*. People will not come to the teacher training sessions or special meetings if they are not told that this is part of the job. Then I present the actual teaching process.

When discussing *the time commitment*, I explain that teaching children will take maybe four or five hours a week, including teaching the class. Working with young people will take seven or eight hours a week, including calling, being out on Wednesday nights, and being with them on Sunday mornings. Teaching adults will take twelve hours a week of preparation (they prepare their own curriculum) and presentation, as well as attending class leaders' meetings.

The next step, the *observation step*, means going to classes to observe teachers in action. The prospect may be asked to help pass out papers or distribute Bibles, or he may not do anything but watch. To assist him during this Step, I give him an observation form that guides him to look for things such as how much time the teacher talks, when she changes the tone of her voice, and how much involvement the students have. He can also watch for different teaching methodologies. If the prospect is interested in teaching children, he can observe how the teacher deals with the child who is seemingly a little out of line. He will do that observing for a couple of weeks.

During the *follow-up interview*, I ask him what he thinks. We look over the observation form, answer any of his questions, and make sure he understands his responsibilities. We talk over any questions or fears he may have. Based on his concerns, I frequently provide a resource, such as a video, to help allay those concerns. I go over how to use the curriculum, both its preparation and presentation, especially with those who

will work with children. When the prospective worker voices a willingness to assume a teaching role, I ask him to complete a volunteer application.

None of these meetings lasts over an hour. If the prospective worker has come this far, he has filled out the application, completed the observation step, and had his questions answered. If his answer is still yes, then I have an assignment for him.

Protecting Our Children

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There is another point that is critical to the recruitment of volunteers. Our culture and society require that we deal with the issue of child abuse. So far we have not had a problem with this in our church, but I always introduce it during the first meeting that I have with prospective volunteers and go into it in more detail in the second interview.

There are *three key questions* we ask prospective volunteers on the application. The first

Question inquires whether they have any handicaps. Largely that is for involvement with children, especially areas where they may have to lift children. The next question asks if they have ever been convicted or accused of any domestic violence, abuse, or crime related to children. If they answer “yes,” they have to cite what their involvement was. It is something that our lawyers have told us is helpful and not discriminatory. Our third question has to do with whether they have a criminal record. We require everyone who works with minors, children, and youth to complete this question.

We follow through with a *criminal record check*. We also check their references. In the event that we were to have any problems with a volunteer, we could show that we were not negligent and the volunteer had been thoroughly checked out. If

there was any false information, it was on the volunteer’s end and not the church’s.

The prospective workers bring back the form to the second interview. We have had a few people who have questioned, “Do I have to fill this out?” It is troublesome to them. But when we give them examples of situations in other southern California churches, no one has refused to do it. Once they understand the rationale for it, that it is for the protection of our children and the church, they gladly answer the questions.

Since we have performed criminal record and reference checks on the lead teachers, we do not require the same background checks for those who serve on a rotation basis, such as parents in the nursery. However, we do ask them to fill out the application form because we want the rotation parents who are working in the nursery, toddlers, and creepers rooms to be aware that we are watching and there are guidelines. This has been well received by parents because it gives them a sense of security, so we have not had any resistance to signing the form. This is something new for us. Our whole staff has signed on; now it’s a process of having new people do the same.

A One-Year Commitment

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When recruiting teachers, we don’t talk of commitments longer than one year, but silently we are praying that they will e with us for a long time. Normally we don’t take anybody on for less than three months, unless of course, they are doing a short-term assignment. Adult Sunday school teachers are encouraged to teach at least forty-two Sundays a year. During the summer, we continue to have classes except the sixth grade, which joins the junior high class for the summer. So anybody who is a sixth-grade teacher only serves nine months out of the year; otherwise, teaching is a twelve-month commitment.

We make note of when a teacher comes on, which is not always in September. When it comes close to the anniversary date, we arrange to have an interview with her. If she is doing well, we celebrate and ask how she feels about this opportunity. If we are happy with her and she stays on, then we have a teacher for another year. But if she says, “I have done my year, I feel good about it, but I think that I need to be with my husband in adult Sunday school,” that’s fine. We praise the Lord with her, pray with her, and say thank you. *We give her the option to return when she is ready.* Maybe she can come and help for a week, or can help in another short-term opportunity such as Vacation Bible School, camp counseling, or substitute teaching. On the other hand, if we have had good communication and sense that this ministry “fit” just isn’t right, we will both know it and we can have an amicable separation or reassignment to another area. If we need to find a replacement, we try to have a lead time of two months before the end of her tenure.

Staying in Touch With Their Peers

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At Sierra Madre, we are concerned that teachers maintain contact with their own adult peers. We do several things to *encourage identity with their life-stage groups.* First, we alert their adult Sunday school classes that they are teaching, making sure their names remain on class rosters. We urge their Sunday school classes to invite them to any extra activities or social events and to maintain a shepherding relationship with the teacher, which is very satisfying thing for the volunteer. It keeps the teachers’ identity and relationships with their adult classes

We also challenge the class to adopt the children or youth that their class member is teaching as a missions/prayer project. As a result, virtually every class has an *adult class that is praying for the teachers and students.* It provides relational ties to the church at large. Occasionally, teachers may even bring their class to their

adult class to sing a song or quote a verse. Of course, that is always a big event. With our multiple services, that doesn’t always work out, but when it does, there is a positive response.

Supporting Our Volunteers

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There is one other important thing that I share with prospective teachers. I have three things that I feel are important to my job when it comes to these volunteers. I call them my three “S’s.”

The first “s” is *support.* I am here to support them. Whether it is children’s workers or youth workers, they are going to get the benefit of the doubt in any kind of sticky situation. If it comes out that they were wrong, we will deal with it. But I am here to support them.

The second “s” is *supply.* Their service shouldn’t cost them their own money. It might cost them time. It might cost them some stress. It might cost them some sleep. But it should not cost them any money. We try to provide whatever they need including curriculum, resources, and training. A good example of support and training we provide are our SALT meetings—Sunday school, Adult, Leaders, and Teachers meetings—which we have four times a year. Our logo is a salt shaker. At these meetings, we have a time of vision casting. We talk about our goals and the church. We talk about something that should stretch us. We provide skills training using videos, demonstrations, or any number of things. And sometimes we just have the teachers talk about the things they are doing to encourage one another.

Third, and here we stretch the alliteration, is “*celebration.*” This has two dimensions:

Evaluation and appreciation. Each evaluation is a kind of celebration of the good things that God has done in and through

their ministry. For me, it's a celebration even when we talk about areas where they are lacking and I can help with those growth areas.

We even view the close of a service assignment as a celebration. If this teacher is not the right person for the job, we will have had enough contact that she knows where we are coming from. It is a mutual decision to end that teaching or volunteer situation. Maybe it is just that someone is not a third-grade teacher and ought to be working in another area of ministry. Because of our efforts to clearly communicate with volunteers from the beginning, I have had few problems releasing people from a specific task or reassigning them. I have only had problems when the explanations and expectations were poorly communicated and it was a surprise to the teacher.

“Selebration” is also appreciation. We try to express appreciation to our people both individually and corporately. We try to remember them with thank-you notes, or words of appreciation and pictures in our biweekly communications piece. We list teachers' names in the

Bulletin and remember their birthdays. On the second Sunday in September, we celebrate our public, private, and Sunday school teachers by including all of them in the same prayer. We have never had anyone upset to be included in prayer with our volunteer Sunday school teachers. They have something in common as Christian educators, and the recognition is appreciated by all. So at least two or three times a year all of our teachers will get some recognition. I don't think you could find a happier bunch of teachers.

Christian teaching is an educational endeavor that has no graduation point. It has a coronation; we die and go to Heaven. But we do not have a graduation the way we do at the end of twelve years of school or four years of college. The best type of graduation for any student is to move from just learning about God to serving God when the Spirit nudges and says, “It's time.”

It's great to be nearby as a Christian education director to help that student “graduate.”

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If there's a key word to describe the Philosophy of volunteerism at Sierra Madre Congregational Church, it is atmosphere. The atmosphere that permeates this church is that “every member is a minister.” Anyone who attends SMCC for even a modest amount of time is impressed with the concept that the average Christian serves. In this type of environment, people are not surprised to be asked to consider a specific ministry in the church. In fact, if no one offered you an opportunity to serve, you might wonder if something was wrong with you. Any congregation that can develop this type of healthy atmosphere for volunteerism will find more people responding affirmatively to invitations to minister.



Ministry Resources:

The following materials are used at Sierra Madre Congregational Church in their Christian education ministries. Permission to use and adapt these resources in your congregation is granted. Duplication or distribution of these copyrighted materials for resale is prohibited.

These materials include:

- [Application for Children's/Youth Ministry](#)
- [Procedures for Volunteers Working with Minors](#)