

Chapter Five



Seeing Is Believing: A High-Visibility Approach

Ward Evangelical Presbyterian Church
Livonia, Michigan

Picture yourself seated in the auditorium of Ward Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Livonia, Michigan. Corporate worship is the reason for the morning service. But on this spring Lord's Day, prior to a prayer of dedication for teachers, you are startled by a parade like none you've ever seen before. Long lines of children process through the auditorium. First the preschool children come down the center aisle by classes. They are followed by older preschool children, then young elementary children, and then upper elementary students. Wave after wave of children move down the center aisle, moving left and right and filing out the side doors. Music is playing in the background. You're amazed, perhaps staggered, by the sheer volume of children in this congregation.

The children's walk-through at Ward Church helps the congregation see how large a mission field they have right before them. And the Christian education department uses these visible opportunities to invite people to experience the joy of investing their lives in the lives of others. The Reverend Hal Edmonds, pastor of educational ministries, tells us how Ward Church invites volunteers to minister.

A Lesson From the School of Hard Knocks

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When I first graduated from seminary, I was called to be the minister of education and youth at a church in southern California. When I arrived at this church, I discovered that the pastor whom I thought I would be working with had left. A new pastor had been assigned to the church by the annual conference. By the time I moved from Pennsylvania to southern California, the new senior pastor had been there only three weeks, so he knew as few people as I did. The church secretary handed us a list and said, "These are all of the vacancies that we have to fill in the Christian education area. The first thing you will want to do is fill all of these vacancies because until they are filled, those ministries will not be happening."

A period of time had elapsed from when the previous minister of education had left and I had arrived, so any teachers wanting to make a change had dropped out. So there we were with a lot of vacancies. The secretary gave us a pictorial directory of the church members, walked us through the pages, and told us who some of the likely workers might be. With that the pastor left on a three-week vacation.

I was left alone, not only to fill those places but also to fill the pastor's role while he was away. My number one priority was to preach on Sunday morning, Sunday evening, and Wednesday night. Second, I had to fill all of those vacancies.

I sat down and called all of the likely candidates. I begged, cajoled, and cried. I did all kinds of things. Three weeks later, when the pastor returned from his vacation, I had filled every one of those jobs. He was excited about that and wondered how in the world I had done it.

However, as the weeks and months rolled by, I discovered that I was refilling those same jobs. At that time, I was not wise

enough to realize why I had to keep refilling the same positions. Then one day I was reading Oswald Chambers' book, *My Utmost for His Highest*. One of the devotionals had to do with Jesus asking Peter the question, "Do you love me?" Then He said, "Feed my sheep." Chambers made some statements about servants feeding sheep. He made the observation that a need only represents the opportunity for ministry.

God used that experience to show me that simply filling jobs is not what recruitment is all about. Real recruitment is helping people discover the ministries that God has for them and finding their place in the body of believers. That revolutionized the way I approached recruitment. My job is to present needs, to help people understand what the positions are, and to encourage them to pray and seek God's will. In discovering their ministry, they open their lives to fulfilling their work in the body of believers.

When people find this kind of fulfillment, they are no longer just helping out poor old Hal Edmonds by doing a job. They embrace true ministry and fulfill a function in the body of believers that God has given specifically to them. They discover that service is a sacred trust. I have found that when I am able to help people make this discovery, I do not have to keep filling the same jobs over and over again.

That happened many years ago, but it is the foundation of my thinking when it comes to helping people use their spiritual gifts and filling all those vacancies we have in Christian education.

Eleven Fifty and Still Growing

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At Ward Church, we have a very broad program. Our leadership team is responsible for filling more than 1,150 different ministry spots within our Christian education program. We quit counting after we got to 1,150, so I know it is in excess of that. That doesn't mean that there are 1,150 people in these jobs;

however, it does mean that there are that many different jobs to fill in order to cover all of our bases.

We do not have one recruiting strategy. Some churches try to use only certain ages for certain classes. We are not that sophisticated. We try to recruit any way we can. Sometimes one way seems to be more effective than another. Recruitment is always on my mind. I can never sit back and say, "There, I am finished for this year." I try to recruit for at least a year's period of time, but I want people to be thinking long-term rather than how quickly they can get this over with.

Workers for the Harvest

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It seems that every church is faced with the challenge of finding enough workers for the harvest. At Ward Church, we teach that *recruiting is everybody's business*. Every teacher needs to be on the lookout for others who could teach. However, the teaching assignment is not everybody's business. While we want people to be on the lookout for potential teachers and to make recommendations to us, our age group directors make the actual assignments and work with people in the final recruitment process. We have a tiny tots director, an early childhood ministries director, and a director of children's-level ministries, first through sixth grade. In each division, the director clears the names of prospective workers.

If the youth staff and the early childhood directors get the name of the same person, they are all free to present their ministry opportunity. We ask the prospective worker to choose the ministry where he feels that God is leading him. *The foundation of prayer must underlie everything that we do in recruitment*. We encourage people to pray for our staff and the new workers. We are helping people discover ministries from God, which is a sacred trust. So people are not just responsible to the Christian education staff;

they are responsible to God for their performance. Therefore, we pray for the teachers and that they will serve to the best of their ability.

Heightening Awareness of the Importance of Teaching

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Our Christian education department uses many means to heighten awareness of the importance of teaching. We go into our *membership information* classes and present the teaching opportunities. We give an overview of these various opportunities for ministry. We have a *ministries booklet* that gives ministry descriptions and lists the requirements for each of those ministries. Also, in the membership information classes, we give a *spiritual gifts test*. We have what we call spiritual gifts counselors who meet with the people and answer their questions. We help people identify the areas where they are best equipped to serve.

We also believe that recruiting is helped a lot from the pulpit. Not that the pastor actually recruits from the pulpit, but it is his attitude toward our ministry that helps the recruitment process. For example, from time to time he might pray in the pastoral prayer for the folks who are serving and teaching, or he might encourage people to use their spiritual gifts as part of the sermon application. That certainly helps.

We try not to recruit people for specific tasks through a general want ad approach. We have found that the people who usually respond to these ads are not the ones that we feel ought to be there. Nevertheless, we periodically provide a listing of opportunities to keep the awareness level high so that church members know there is a place to serve as God calls them. One way we do this is with *bulletin inserts* that tell people how many workers are serving in different areas and what our needs may be. We do *video documentaries* in our classes and then periodically

run those videos in the church's hallways. As people pass by, they can stop and see what is happening. Visibility is so important, and any avenue that heightens awareness is worth trying.

Sometimes we find long-term workers among people who have previously served in shorter assignments. After experiencing the joy of serving, some are more open to a long-term assignment. Vacation Bible School, for example, is one program where some people volunteer because it is not an ongoing commitment. Working on children's rallies or going on retreats are other good examples. We keep our eyes on these newly involved folks. If we see that they are good with children, we challenge them with additional opportunities.

Developing Potential Volunteers

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We are always looking for people who seem to work well with children. If we get a person's name and she has indicated some interest, then the coordinator for that area will contact her and try to discern whether or not she really does have an interest.

When we contact a prospective worker, *we invite her to come and see our ministries.* She can observe a class or look at our curriculum. We explain our passion for children, our philosophy of ministry, and the details of service. Then, if she is still interested, we have both videos and cassettes that she can use to become more acquainted with what we are doing. She can also view sample class sessions or actual training tapes. She learns how we teach children, age-group characteristics—a whole series of things.

If she still shows interest, an experienced master teacher will take that potential teacher under her wing. The prospective worker will observe a class session, even sitting alongside the teacher during the instruction process.

We also invite prospective workers and parents to *teacher training classes*. A parent may attend because he wants to know how to communicate better with his children. We feel that people can become better parents if they come to a training class. These events are primarily for skill development, but at the conclusion of a session, if someone feels that God is leading him to serve, we want to help that person take the next step.

Sometimes a person is approved, committed, and ready to teach, but we do not have a spot available. That doesn't happen as often as we would like, but it does happen. Other times we rush the process a little more because the need is greater. If we do not have a spot for someone, we usually find a spot such as an assistant in a department. Some who have had more experience are ready to go right away. Others need a little more time.

We often use teenagers in our children's ministry. Students who want to work in our ministry are required to participate in training. We offer a child-care clinic for those interested in working with infants and toddlers. If they prefer to work with early childhood, they must complete a junior teacher training class. When students are certified, showing that they are qualified to care for children, they are appointed as apprentices and used as junior teachers.

We do not use teenagers unless they are also involved in the teen program. Some youth like to hide out from their peers because they don't feel comfortable with their group, but we feel that it is important for them to be involved with people their own age. We do not use teenagers unless we feel they are mature enough to work with the children. Of course, this is a value judgment that our coordinator must make. When we step back and look at our ministry over time, we find that some of our best young adults teaching today began their ministries when they were still in their teens.

Serving Commandments

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We ask all of our workers to *sign a covenant* every year. They do not have to be church members, but they do have to be regular participants in the church family for at least six months. This general covenant talks about the quality of their life, their Christian character, and the fact that they are born again. They promise that they will not teach contrary to the stated doctrines of the church and will use the curriculum provided for them.

At Ward Church, *we seek a one-year commitment to service*. We recognize that people's lives and schedules can change; events happen that require people to leave before their commitment has been completed. Nevertheless, we want them to be thinking in terms of the school year plus the summer.

We recruit so that our new faculty is in place when the school year begins in the fall, so we do our heaviest recruitment during the summer. If we know in the spring or summer that a teacher will be leaving, we really like to have somebody come in and work with that teacher for at least a few weeks and to be in place before the new class arrives.

We recognize that people need to take vacations. They need to have times when they're not available to teach, and we make allowances for that. We use *substitute teachers* who help out when the regular teachers need a break. However, we do ask teachers to take their responsibility seriously and be faithful to their annual commitment.

Since many of our teachers work with minors, we ask them to complete a *background character form* and give us permission to secure a *criminal background check*. We want to know whether or not they have ever been perpetrators of any types of child abuse whether emotional, physical, or sexual. The background check, which is done through the Michigan State Police records, is required of anyone in the church who may work with a minor. If

there are no problems, they are placed on a list that allows us to use them.

Assuring a Positive Experience for Teachers

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When we recruit teachers, we not only want a commitment from them, but we make a commitment that we will be there to assist them. *We promise to help them do the best job they can possibly do.* We firmly believe that effective teaching starts with relationships, so we encourage teachers to build positive relationships with their learners. That means we, as leaders, have to build effective relationships with our teachers if we expect them to build effective relationships with their learners.

It is our responsibility to *provide all of the curriculum and resources that they need.* We also *provide training for both new and continuing teachers.* We assist them in learning how to use the curriculum effectively, and try to help them understand the age-group characteristics of the children they are teaching. We do *pre-service training* to give them help with teaching techniques and *in-service training* throughout the year. These are done by age-group levels, allowing us to deal with the needs of that particular age level. Teachers can also participate in a voluntary certification program called “Royalty.” Special recognition is given to teachers who complete their five-point enrichment program.

Twice a year we put on a *resource fair* for early childhood and elementary teachers. Learning activity suggestions from our curriculum are worked on in advance. All of the supplies and materials are there along with the people who have prepared them. This helps new teachers and workers know what the material is going to look like and how it should be used.

The development of new teachers is also enhanced when we pair them with experienced teachers. In our children and youth

ministries, we run our programs on a team basis. *Teachers function together as a team,* so that they are not lone rangers. We have found that when teachers pray together and become concerned for each other, they are more likely to continue in ministry for a longer time.

Periodically we *prepare lessons together.* Teachers bring their assignments and they work together in departmental teams. As they work in their groups, they learn how to tell the Bible lesson, how to do the memory work, and decide who is going to lead the singing and prayer time.

I once heard a Christian education veteran say that leaders shouldn’t be making first-year mistakes over and over again. Instead, we need to be learning so that we are making second-year mistakes, then third-year mistakes, then fourth-year mistakes. We become more expert as we develop our gifts and skills.

Affirming Our Teachers

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We try to affirm teachers in a number of different ways. We give simple gifts and notes of appreciation. We have had seasonal parties, such as a holiday banquet at Christmas and an old-fashioned summer picnic. We hold appreciation dinners and programs. If they are sick, we visit them; if there is a death in their family, we send flowers. We find every way possible to affirm their work.

Occasionally we give them reminder-type gifts. Our logo, an apple with a heart in the center, is printed on all our gifts; for example, we had coffee mugs made with our logo and Henrietta Mears’ statement, “First I learn to love my teacher, then I learn to love my teacher’s God.” All of our teachers are given one of these mugs.

We also provide them with canvas bags to put their Sunday school curriculum in. They carry the bags back and forth to church. At first I didn't think the bags were a very good idea, but the women on our staff thought it was a wonderful idea. I didn't think the men would carry them. Despite my misgivings, we went ahead with the idea and had the apple logo and the words 'Ward Church Christian Ed Department' printed on the bags. I was surprised that the men carry those bags just like the women do! The bags have helped people recognize who the teachers in our church are.

A couple more gift examples include some chocolate hearts on a lollipop stick that we gave to our teachers around Valentine's Day. Each lollipop was accompanied with a little thank-you note. Another time we bought big, red apples. We went into the classes and departments, expressed words of appreciation for the teacher, and presented each teacher with a nice big, red apple. It was our way of saying, "Thank you for being available to teach."

We believe that teachers who feel appreciated and affirmed will in turn affirm the children they teach. And we want our members and children to see how important our teachers are to the life of our church. "Seeing is believing," and at Ward, we continually keep in the spotlight the good things that are happening through our volunteers.

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Ward Evangelical Presbyterian Church does an excellent job of keeping both the needs of children and the joys of teaching before the congregation. Frequently they highlight what is happening in the lives of children through their ministries. Likewise, they elevate the role of teaching, encouraging their teachers through many expressions of appreciation.

The leadership team at Ward Church demonstrates the principle that the more visible a ministry is, the more likely it is that people will consider the possibility of a call to that area of service. The more highly valued a program is, the more it will appeal to people. And the better known a recruiter is, the more likely a prospect will think about the ministry opportunity.



Ministry Resources

The following materials are used at Ward Evangelical Presbyterian 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:

- [Children's Walk-Through Procedures](#)
- [Christian Education Goals](#)
- [Teachers and Parents: A Partnership](#)
- [Guidelines for Discipline](#)
- [Ward Christian Education "Royalty"](#)