



The Volunteer Revolution

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This Is What I Was Made For

For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus
to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

EPHESIANS 2:10

SSOME YEARS AGO A NEW STAFF MEMBER OF OUR CHURCH ASKED me how I had the gall to ask people who are already busy at work or in the home to get involved as volunteers at church.

“I mean, don’t you feel a little guilty doing this?” he asked. “Isn’t it hard to heap such a burden on people?”

He had a point. But I knew of a bigger point:

“During the next few months you’re going to meet people who stand at drill presses, ten hours a day, five or six days a week. When they go home at night, few of them sense the pleasure, meaning, and purpose of life they’ve heard advertised in commercials for beer or computer systems. They’re godly, conscientious people, and they feel thankful for their jobs. But they don’t find satisfaction for their souls at the drill press.

“And you’re going to meet fine, hardworking people in real estate who show thirty homes a week. If they’re lucky,

one buyer will make an offer, but they're not lucky every week. Many are extroverts who love showing property and helping families find the right home, but even then they probably don't arrive home at night filled with deep inner joy because of their latest showing.

"You'll meet insurance salespeople who have been selling policies for twenty years. While they feel grateful that the insurance business puts food on their table and sends their kids to college, the thought of selling one more policy likely doesn't float their emotional boat.

"You're going to meet car dealers and stockbrokers and bricklayers and police officers and plumbers who, despite their commitment to their careers and jobs, are honest enough to admit that their secular vocation does not offer enough meaning to satisfy the deeper needs that stir in their souls.

"Some of them love their jobs; they feel stimulated and energized by their work. Some of them even leave their workplace each day knowing that they have honored God by their work and their love for people. But few of them would say: *This is what life is all about.*"

I looked directly into the eyes of my young friend. "You and I get to invite these people to be used by God in ways they never imagined. We have the opportunity to empower them to develop gifts they didn't know they had. We can cheer them on as they courageously assume new levels of Kingdom responsibility that fill their hearts to overflowing. And we get to see the look on their faces when they realize God has used them to touch another human being.

"No," I said, "I never really feel guilty inviting people to become volunteers in our church. Never."

ON A MISSION

When the writer of the book of Ecclesiastes decided to determine his purpose in life, he started by accumulating a vast sum of money, only to discover that it didn't provide the meaning he had hoped for. Then he sought power, attained it, and discovered that it too failed to satisfy. Next came a scandalous pursuit of pleasure. Then fame and celebrity. Finally, at the end of all his efforts, he uttered his famous words: "Vanity, vanity, all is vanity." Or as another translation says, "All of this is like chasing the wind."

We were not created to chase the wind.

We are created to join God on a mission. Some people think of God as hanging around beyond the edges of the universe somewhere, listening to really good worship music. The Bible sees it much differently. It teaches that God is at work 24/7, all over our world, filling his followers with grace and mercy and power to reclaim and redeem and fix this broken planet.

It's as if God has work gloves on. And he calls us to roll up our sleeves and join him with our talents, our money, our time, and our passion. He wants his mission to become ours. "If you're into chasing the wind," he tells us, "you can keep right on doing that. Or you can hook up with me, and together we'll transform this hurting planet."

What would it feel like to lay your head on your pillow at night and say, "You know what I did today? I teamed up with God to change the world"?

The desire to be a world-changer is planted in the heart of every human being, and that desire comes directly from the heart of God. We can suffocate that desire in selfishness, silence it with the chatter of competing demands, or bypass

it on the fast track to personal achievement. But it's still there. Whenever we wonder if the daily eight-to-five grind or our round-the-clock parenting tasks are all there is to life, that divine desire nudges us. Whenever we feel restless and unsatisfied, the desire whispers in our soul. Whenever we wonder what a life of real purpose would feel like, the desire calls us to something more.

A TRANSFORMED WORLD

Jesus made it pretty clear what God's idea of a transformed world would look like, first within the community of believers called the church and then as the values of that community spread out into the world:

- When he said we should *love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength, and our neighbor as ourselves*, he was calling us to trade a ritualized religion for a genuine love relationship with God and to offer to others the same kind of attention, honor, and compassion we give ourselves.
- When Jesus punctuated his teaching with *concern for the poor, the powerless, and the oppressed*, he was describing a new value system.
- When he said, *Take up your cross and follow me*, he was telling us in graphic terms that following him would require sacrifice, hardship, and death to something selfish inside of us.
- When he said, *Go into all the world and preach the gospel, baptizing in my name and telling people all that you have heard from me*, he was making it clear that his will for us includes the call to worldwide mis-

sion. Our call to love our neighbor as ourselves includes our neighbor across the globe as well as the one next door.

The transformation God longs for transforms everything: marriages, families, friendships, economic and political systems. It lifts up the humble, humbles the proud, and draws people together across racial, social, and cultural divides. It calls us to live in such a way that, as pastor Rob Bell from Mars Hill Bible Church says, *love wins*—in the discussion with our spouse, in the conversation with our neighbor, in the encounter with a stranger, in the decision we make, in the response to one in need, in the attitude toward our enemy . . . in the choice we make to serve.

A POWERFUL MOMENT

When I ask long-term volunteers when they became “lif-ers” —people who decide to serve in God’s mission for as long as he gives them breath—they almost always point back to a specific serving moment that sealed their commitment. “In that moment,” they say, “I felt the God of heaven and earth use me, and I discovered that there’s nothing in the world like that. It beats anything else I’ve ever experienced!”

Whether they taught a child how to pray, guided someone toward faith, helped a husband and wife reconcile, served a meal to a homeless person, or produced an audio tape that puts the Christian message in somebody’s hand, they knew their lives would never be the same.

Acts 13:36 speaks about the Old Testament character David. It says simply, “And David served the purposes of God in his generation.” I love the clarity of that single sentence.

David didn't waste time chasing the wind. He devoted himself single-mindedly to God's mission and died knowing that his one and only life had served its highest purpose.

A PARTICIPANT OR A SPECTATOR?

I've never been a great athlete, but I've played enough to learn that when it comes to sports, it's a lot more exciting to be a participant than a spectator.

For five years in the early '80s, I played with a group of friends in a park district football league. Most of the teams we played against had big guys in construction jobs who hit the bars hard after work. By the time they got to the park, they just wanted to hit people hard.

We church guys weren't big or inebriated, but with speed and deception we did rather well. Several times we won the Tuesday night park district championship.

During those same five years, I served as the chaplain for the Chicago Bears football team. Several times the team gave me premier tickets for games at Soldier Field during the Bears' spectacular charge toward the Super Bowl.

Sometimes on Sunday afternoons or Monday evenings I'd be at Soldier Field, in seats on the fifty-yard-line, watching the world championship Bears cream their opponents. I'd try to focus on the game, but I'd see somebody catch a spiraling pass . . . and I'd wish it was Tuesday night so I could be catching one myself. I'd watch somebody throw a beautiful block . . . and I'd recall the cruncher a big guy put on me the previous week. Despite the bruises I had to show for my participation, I wished I could trade Soldier Field for the hard-packed field at the park district. I wanted to be *in* the action, not just watching it.

My current recreational passion is sailing. Three times, by God's grace, I've had the opportunity to watch the premier sailboat-racing event in the world, the America's Cup. Seated on the deck of a friend's boat in the spectacular waters just north of Auckland, New Zealand, I saw the top racing boats and crews under sail on one racecourse.

But the whole time I thought, *I'd rather participate in one of our local Lake Michigan regattas, on my used, banged-up sailboat with my eight buddies, than be a spectator at the America's Cup Finals.*

Spectating never compares with the thrills and chills of being in the middle of the action. I'd much rather get a little beat up participating in a regatta than sip a lemonade from the comfort of a deck chair on a spectator boat. And I don't think I'm the only one who feels that way.

Every local churchgoer has a choice to make. He can park in his usual spot in the church parking lot, make his way to a comfortable seat in a favorite row, watch a good service, chat with friends, and then go home. That choice makes for a nice, safe Sunday morning experience. Or he can throw himself into an adventure by rolling up his sleeves, joining a team of like-minded servants, and helping to build the local church God has called him to be a part of.

I get letters and emails all the time from volunteers who have discovered that serving is far more satisfying than spectating. Here's an example:

Three years ago you challenged me to get involved as a volunteer. I was hesitant at first, but you wouldn't let up. Now I can't thank you enough. The meaning I derive, the sense of ownership I feel, the friendships I have built, the spiritual growth I've

experienced—it's all directly related to finding my niche in serving. I will be grateful to you for the rest of my life for inviting me into the game.

Scattered throughout this book you'll find dozens of excerpts from actual emails I've received from volunteers at our church and elsewhere who found the purpose of their lives when they finally committed themselves to serving.

Most of them didn't find the perfect volunteer niche overnight. A lot of them served faithfully in less-than-ideal situations before they discovered what they're really good at. Some of them didn't have a clue where to start. But they started anyway. They experimented. Even though they felt scared or thought they had little to offer, they decided to take a first small step.

A few of those you'll read about tried through the years to silence the voice calling them from self-absorption into servanthood. But God didn't quit. And now they have become the most enthusiastic proponents of serving.

One man wrote the following:

My life used to be about one thing: me. I was a self-serving guy who had neither purpose nor passion. I was leading a miserable life, throwing away time and money on beer and cheap thrills. Then one day I walked into a church and heard the message of Christ: Give your life away to others and you will find your life. I didn't have much to give up so I decided to give it a shot.

That's when my life started to change and Christ became more real to me. I started serving teenagers and found a purpose . . . a reason for my existence.

It was twenty-one years ago that I wandered into that church. Today my life is richer than I ever believed it could be. Serving others made the difference. It was one of the best decisions I ever made.

Here's the experience of a woman named Marty:

Two years ago I started volunteering in our ministry for children experiencing divorce. I had been divorced myself and clearly remembered what it was like for me as a single parent, struggling with all that was happening in my life and having very little energy left for my children. When I heard about this ministry I was convinced God was calling me to get involved.

Every week I see children come in struggling with anger and fear and leave with hope and peace. How I wish my own kids had been served in this way.

So many people hesitate to volunteer because they are afraid of failing. I felt that way too. But when we let God lead us to where he wants us to serve, we find an incredible sense of satisfaction and joy. I wouldn't give that up for the world.

Why don't I feel guilty asking people to volunteer in the local church? Because I know that what Marty says is true. People who let God lead them to where he wants them to serve find "an incredible sense of satisfaction and joy."

What about you? Is it time for you to get up from the grandstands, crawl over a couple of benches, suit up, and get out on the playing field? I guarantee, it's far more exhilarating to be a participant than a spectator. Why watch others change the world when you can join them?

Your move.