

RECRUITING CHURCH SCHOOL TEACHERS

Recruiting volunteer church school teachers is a problem that many priests and/or church-school directors face each year. The problem is really two-fold: [1] recruiting new teachers and [2] keeping the ones you already have.

Dealing with the problems of recruiting and keeping teachers requires evaluating both the recruiting techniques and the parish church school program itself. Many times the techniques and the program may have some aspects that contribute to the problem rather than to the solution.

Example 1: If someone being recruited protests that he/she doesn't know enough to teach, the response may be: "Don't worry. You'll learn as you go along." Before using this technique, recruiters need to ask how is the church-school program constructed to help teachers "learn as they go along"? If "learning as they go along" simply means that teachers can read the assigned texts and teachers' guides and learn enough to get through each lesson, perhaps the program can be expanded to include a little more help.

Consider [1] providing a qualified person to whom teachers can turn with specific problems, [2] monthly teacher-training meetings, [3] funds for teachers to attend teacher training conferences outside the parish or for inter-parish workshops, [4] a good resource library where teachers can find answers to their questions, and [5] books for self-study. These support systems can help raise the quality of religious education while giving recruiters specific points for selling teaching to those who protest they "don't know enough to teach." If these support systems operate, they also tend to cut down on turnover by decreasing

the teachers' feelings of being alone with no one to turn to for help and guidance.

Example 2: Some recruiters approach people to teach by saying, "Teaching won't take much of your time." But teaching does take time! Fostering the idea that teaching should not take time undermines the church school program. It leads to teacher frustration when they discover that teaching takes more time than they were led to believe. Frustration can lead to dropouts. It is much fairer to the teacher and to the church-school program to give prospective teachers an honest and accurate description of the job and the time it takes to teach. Borrowing an idea from business - the job description - can do this.

A job description for church-school teachers can include a general description of the job, the specific responsibilities, the abilities needed, any training necessary and how it can be secured, the person to whom the teacher is responsible, the term of service, and the time requirements of the job.

Writing a job description helps the parish church-school program because it requires those involved to think about the expectations held for teachers. It helps recruiting because the recruiter can give prospective teachers a realistic picture of church school teaching. In preparing the job description, however, those involved should be thorough. For example, specific responsibilities might include not only teaching a weekly class but also planning the lesson, attending teachers' meetings, taking part in the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church, etc. Time requirements would then be tied to these responsibilities. For example, one hour teaching weekly, 2 hours weekly preparing lessons, 1.5 hours

weekly attending Liturgy, 3 hours monthly attending teachers' meetings, etc.

Example 3: When prospective teachers keep saying "no" to the recruiter, some recruiters resort to saying, "But nobody else wants to teach. Somebody has to do it." This may appeal to someone's sense of obligation, and the recruiter just might make the person feel guilty enough to accept, but then we have two other problems. The first part of the statement is not good advertisement for church-school teaching, and the second part is not an enthusiastic vote of confidence in the person being recruited. Recruiters need to be more positive. It may be that nobody wants to teach, but that is not the prospective teacher's problem. It's the recruiter's problem.

Sometimes recruiters are so aware of what teachers have to give - time, effort, study - that they don't focus enough on what they can get from teaching. Any teacher will tell you that one learns a lot when teaching, i.e., about the Orthodox Faith, about people. One also becomes more involved in the church community. Each year there is a new group of students to share with and mold. There are times when there is great closeness, sharing, joy, and learning. Somehow the kids become "your" kids. And teaching can be fun! Most importantly, teaching is more than a task. It's a ministry to which people are called. This call is to follow in the steps of Christ and teach the faith that leads to salvation. It takes commitment, time, and an openness to learn, to experiment, and to stretch oneself.

We cannot fool people about these requirements. The parish can clarify its hopes and expectations, and ask teachers to share them. The parish can provide help so teachers can meet these expectations. The recruiter's dream may be to find 20 extraordinarily qualified church school teachers in the parish standing in line to

teach, but the reality is that we must find the few committed people whom we can teach and shape and help reach their potential. But we must give them the necessary facilities, training and moral support.

Adapted from an article by the same name that appeared in THE WORD, June 1992, pp. 14. PMO (1/7/00)

Personal Note: These are a few important items from my personal experience.

- ❖ Look at the gifts and talents that each potential teacher has to offer the church school program and let them know it.
- ❖ Share your personal vision of the teaching ministry and the rewards it has brought you.
- ❖ Look for those individuals who live out their faith. They are the examples we need in the classroom.
- ❖ Look for the "teachable" individual. This person can be guided into becoming a great teacher because he/she is open to the work of the Holy Spirit.
- ❖ Always tell the potential teacher that we are involved in the teaching ministry that Christ gave first to His disciples, who, in turn, gave to the first bishops, who shared it with the presbyters, who share it with the laity. You and I are not recruiting them. Christ is the one!

PMO (1/20/00)