Guide to Selecting 2018 Benefits

New Features for 2018 Employer Agreement!

- NEW When selecting employer contributions for medical coverage, you will be able to enter percentages with up to two decimal places.
- NEW If your employer offers PPO and EPO options, you will be able to enter different contribution percentages for each option.
- NEW During annual enrollment (October 30—November 17), view whether employees have *submitted* or *not submitted* their elections through Benefits Connect.
- NEW In the first week of December, view employee elections and costs for 2018 payroll purposes.
- Review or update and submit your Employer Agreement by October 13. Revise Agreements as often as needed until then; however, the last Agreement submitted through October 13 will set benefits selections available to employees for 2018.

To use this guide, click on any of the colored heading bars to go directly to the page with detailed information about that topic.

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BENEFITS
CONNECT

THE BOARD OF PENSIONS
OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (U.S.A.)
PLN-618 7/17

Getting Started

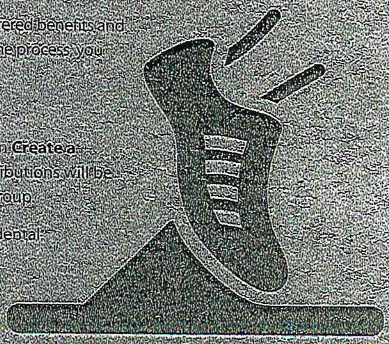
About this Guide

The Board of Pensions offers benefits for employers representing a variety of organizations. Some employers offer the full complement of Board-sponsored benefits to their employees; others choose one or a few Board-sponsored benefits to complete their benefits programs. This guide is designed so each employer can find the specific information needed quickly, conveniently, and easily.

However, we realize that some organizations may not be familiar with the range of Board-sponsored benefits, or may wish to expand or change offerings from year to year. This Guide features information about all Board-sponsored benefits to assist employers with their annual planning process.

Steps To Submit Your 2018 Employer Agreement

Benefits Connect guides employers in selecting benefits to offer employees. As an employer, you decide who will be offered benefits and when, what benefits to offer, and how much you and employees will contribute to the cost of coverage. At the end of the process, you will submit an Employer Agreement, detailing your benefits selections for the upcoming plan year.



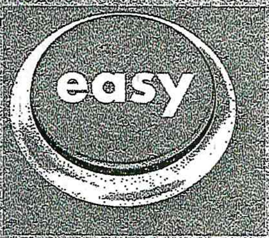
Follow these steps to review, update, and submit your Employer Agreement:

1. **Review and refine benefit groups.** When you log on to Benefits Connect, choose **Employer Agreement**, then **Create a New Model for 2018.** Current Benefits Plan members, benefit groups, benefits selections, and employer contributions will be populated based on 2017 selections but reflect 2018 costs. Review and modify the members in each benefit group.
2. **Select benefits.** Choose the benefits to offer to each group: retirement, death and disability, medical, and/or dental. Indicate your employer contribution toward the cost of coverage where applicable.
3. **Review costs and contributions.** View estimated employer costs and employee contributions.
4. **Model selections.** Each model, with benefits and cost scenarios, is named and saved automatically so you can return later. If you go through all the steps of the Employer Agreement, then choose **Saved Model**, you will be able to name the model.
5. **Submit your final Employer Agreement through October 13.** Return to Benefits Connect anytime before October 13 to make changes. The last Employer Agreement submitted through October 13 is your final Agreement with the Board, reflecting the benefits you will offer employees during annual enrollment and which will be effective January 1, 2018.

Getting Started (continued)

The Easy Path

We heard from many employers that they undertook a thoughtful benefits selection process for 2017 they intended to carry into 2018 as a two-year plan. If you do not wish to make changes to your 2017 selections for 2018, take these easy steps to submit your 2018 Employer Agreement:



- **Review benefit groups.** Make certain that all employees are accounted for and in the right group. Do the groups still reflect the criteria you want? For example, if you have set up different groups to address benefits selections based on hire date or years of service, are those groups — and the employees in them — still accurate?
- **Check each benefit type.** Step through each benefit type on the progress bar and each benefit group tab on each benefit page to confirm that each benefit will — or will not — be offered to that group and the employer contribution for each benefit.
- **Double-check your selections.** Go to **Review** to make certain that all selections are accurate. Benefits not offered are highlighted in red as an extra check at this review stage.
- **Choose Submit.** The last step to submitting your 2018 Agreement is to enter or confirm the waiting periods for each benefit group. If the employer's federal tax ID number is not displayed, enter it here.
- **You're done!** Remember to communicate any updated benefits selections or costs to employees before annual enrollment opens in October.

Questions

Check pensions.org/2018benefits or call the Board of Pensions at 800-773-7752 (800-PRESPLAN).

This Guide to Selecting 2018 Benefits is not a full description of benefits and limitations of the Benefits Plan of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). If there is any difference between this guide and the provisions of the Benefits Plan, the plan terms will govern.

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Getting Started (continued)

Navigating the Employer Agreement Step-by-Step

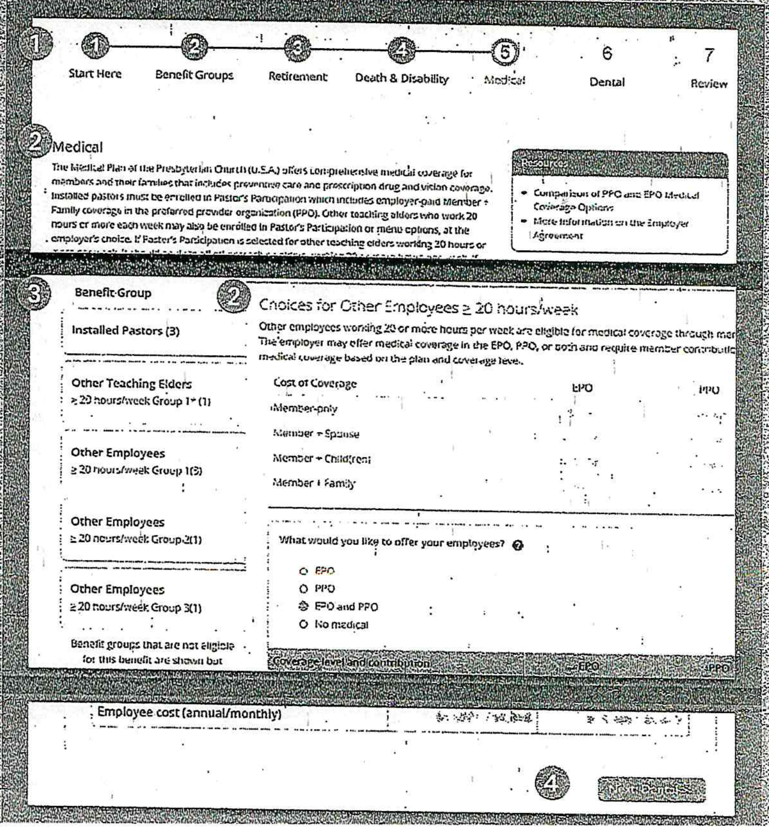
There are four important sections on each screen.

① A progress bar at the top shows where you are.

② The instructions provide important information about benefit groups, employer responsibilities, the cost of coverage, and considerations as you determine benefits selections for employees. Please read this information carefully!

③ On the page for each benefit, each benefit group has its own tab. Make certain to **click on each benefit group tab**, review the information, and make benefits selections and contribution decisions for **each** group for **each** benefit.

④ The orange button at the bottom advances to the next screen. Or, use the progress bar at the top.



Medical

The Medical Plan of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) offers comprehensive medical coverage for members and their families that includes preventive care and prescription drug and vision coverage. Installed pastors must be enrolled in Pastor's Participation which includes employer-paid Member + Family coverage in the preferred provider organization (PPO). Other teaching elders who work 20 hours or more each week may also be enrolled in Pastor's Participation or menu options, at the employer's choice. If Pastor's Participation is selected for other teaching elders working 20 hours or

- Comparison of PPO and EPO Medical Coverage Options
- More Information on the Employer Agreement

Benefit Group

- Installed Pastors (3)
- Other Teaching Elders ≥ 20 hours/week Group 1* (1)
- Other Employees ≥ 20 hours/week Group 1(3)
- Other Employees ≥ 20 hours/week Group 2(1)
- Other Employees ≥ 20 hours/week Group 3(1)

Benefit groups that are not eligible for this benefit are shown but

Choices for Other Employees ≥ 20 hours/week

Other employees working 20 or more hours per week are eligible for medical coverage through mer The employer may offer medical coverage in the EPO, PPO, or both and require member contributio medical coverage based on the plan and coverage level.

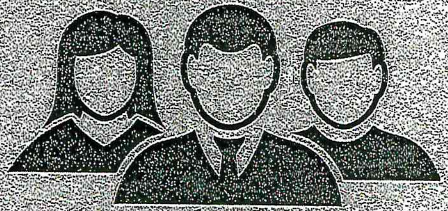
Cost of Coverage	EPO	PPO
Member-only	[illegible]	[illegible]
Member + Spouse	[illegible]	[illegible]
Member + Child(ren)	[illegible]	[illegible]
Member + Family	[illegible]	[illegible]

What would you like to offer your employees?

○ EPO
○ PPO
● EPO and PPO
○ No medical

Coverage level and contribution	EPO	PPO
Employee cost (annual/monthly)	[illegible]	[illegible]

Who, What, and How Much



The Employer Agreement features benefit groups to offer flexibility in selecting benefits to meet the needs of employers and employees. It is critical to accurately define your benefit groups to specify **who** will be offered benefits, **what** benefits they may elect, and **how much** coverage will cost you and your employees. During annual enrollment, employees will elect benefits from the selections you make in the Employer Agreement. It's important to be aware of possible implications of setting up your benefit groups incorrectly. For example, some employees may receive coverage that requires unanticipated employer contributions, or your group(s) may be unintentionally discriminatory. Keep in mind the following:

- **If you employ teaching elders who are not installed pastors and who work 20 hours a week or more, the Board urges you to provide benefits to this group through Pastor's Participation.** If you choose Pastor's Participation for these teaching elders, it should apply to all eligible teaching elders working 20 or more hours per week.
- Select benefits designed to support a position rather than a specific person currently in the position. Over time, the person in the position or the needs of that employee may change.
- Document the criteria the employer determines for each benefit group. The Employer Agreement does not capture this information, and it will serve as a guide for consistent plan administration throughout the year.

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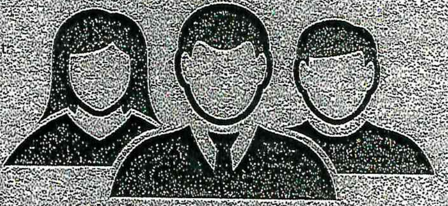
Importance of Benefit Groups (continued)

Defining Benefit Groups



The Employer Agreement categorizes employees into five primary benefit groups that may be close to but not match employment classifications you use:

- installed pastors
- other teaching elders working 20 or more hours per week
- other teaching elders working less than 20 hours per week
- other employees working 20 or more hours per week
- other employees working less than 20 hours per week

On the **Benefit Groups** page, select **View & refine group** to see the employees currently in each group. Within each of the primary benefit groups, you may create up to five separate classifications or groups. These groups are best established based on criteria like number of hours worked or length of service. However you define eligibility for certain benefits and/or employer contributions, you should be careful that they reflect sound human resources policy and avoid anything that might be viewed as discriminatory on the basis of age, sex, race, or ethnicity. Following are some examples of how you might structure eligibility for retirement plan purposes:

- Group 1: Employees, working 30 hours or more, with "X" number of years of service
- Group 2: Employees, working between 20 and 30 hours, with less than "X" number of years of service
- Group 3: Employees working more than 10 but less than 20 hours

You can move employees (assign them) to a different group within their primary benefit group. There are limitations on moving employees among primary benefit groups. For example, you will not be able to move employees into the installed pastors group. In addition, some changes to primary benefit groups may require other employment-related changes to be completed first; see Benefits Connect or call the Board for assistance.

For help with benefit groups, or with any part of the Employer Agreement process, call the Board of Pensions at 800-773-7752 (800-PRESPLAN).

Importance of Benefit Groups (continued)

Modeling and Benefit Groups

Another feature of the **Benefit Groups** page is the ability to model the addition of new employees to the Benefits Plan and/or the updating of salaries for current employees to understand how these changes may affect employer costs. **Any updates made at this step are for modeling purposes only**; these adjustments will be carried through the rest of that model for benefits selection and cost estimate purposes. However, to make actual salary changes or add employees to the Benefits Plan, the employer must use Benefits Connect and choose **Manage Employees**.

Human Resources Guidelines and Presbytery Policy

Your Employer Agreement defines benefit groups, benefits selections, and costs. It should align with sound human resources policy and your presbytery's guidelines. The Board of Pensions does not advise on human resources or employment policy. Following are general guidelines that may assist employers in developing and applying sound policy related to benefits eligibility. The policy should

- be transparent — broadly available, easily understood, and clearly communicated to all employees;
- apply to all similarly situated employees consistently (avoid any features that might suggest discrimination on the basis of age, sex, race, and ethnicity);
- be fair (including in benefits offered and employer contributions) within the context of the organization. (This does not necessarily mean that exactly the same benefits selections and contribution arrangements are offered — merely that the benefits and costs are considered to be fair across the organization as a whole.)

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Benefits Plan Snapshot: Eligibility and Costs

Employers determine the benefits available to employees based on the plan provisions and the guidelines provided by the Board of Pensions. This chart shows the benefits that are available through menu options and those required for Pastor's Participation.

The dues/costs of coverage are also described below. Percentage-based costs must be 100 percent paid by employers; the employer may require employees to contribute toward the cost of other benefits. Discuss contribution requirements with your employees before they enroll.

The benefits outlined in orange under Pastor's Participation are required for all installed pastors; employers may choose to enroll other teaching elders who work at least 20 hours per week in Pastor's Participation also.

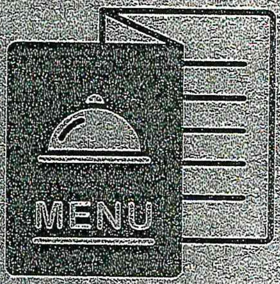
Benefit	Menu Options*	Pastor's Participation: Installed Pastors*
Retirement	Pension (11% of effective salary) Retirement Savings Plan (voluntary contributions)	Pension (11% of effective salary) Retirement Savings Plan (voluntary contributions)
Medical	Preferred Provider Organization (PPO) and/or Exclusive Provider Organization (EPO) *(For both options, there are employer-specific coverage level rates. Employers must pay at least 50% of Member-only coverage for the option offered; if PPO and EPO are offered, employers pay at least 50% of Member-only EPO coverage. Employers may, but are not required to, contribute to the cost of coverage for family members.)*	Preferred Provider Organization (PPO) (25% of effective salary)
Death & Disability	Death and Disability (1% of effective salary if provided with pension enrollment; 2.5% of effective salary as stand-alone)	Death and Disability (1% of effective salary)
Optional	Dental Supplemental Death Supplemental Disability	Dental Supplemental Death Supplemental Disability

About Pretax Payroll Deductions

Employers may offer employees the opportunity to pay, or be reimbursed, for certain eligible healthcare or dependent care expenses tax-free through pretax payroll deductions. Pretax payroll deductions result in tax savings for employees and employers, which is why the plans are called *tax-advantaged*. These plans are permitted by the Internal Revenue Code, and are called *Section 125 plans*.

If an employer requires employees to pay for benefits coverage, the employer should set up the appropriate tax-advantaged plan. The Board of Pensions offers resources on pensions.org for both employers and employees on these plans.

Through menu options, the Benefits Plan of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) offers employers the flexibility to make benefits available that meet the needs of employees and the employer.



Employers may make benefits available through menu options based on the number of hours an employee is regularly scheduled to work.

Employers may make available the following benefits to employees who **are regularly scheduled to work at least 20 hours per week**:

- pension
- Retirement Savings Plan of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (RSP)
- medical
- dental
- death and disability
- supplemental death
- supplemental disability (if eligible)

Employers may make available the following benefits to employees who **are regularly scheduled to work less than 20 hours per week**:

- dental
- RSP

Note: Teaching elders who work less than 20 hours per week may be enrolled in menu options and are eligible for medical and dental coverage and RSP participation.

Cost of Coverage in Menu Options

Dues and/or costs of coverage in menu options are as follows:

- Pension Plan: 11 percent of effective salary (must be employer-paid)
- death and disability coverage: 1 percent of effective salary if provided with Pension Plan enrollment; 2.5 percent of effective salary on a stand-alone basis (must be employer-paid)
- medical coverage: Employers must pay at least 50 percent of the cost of Member-only coverage in the lower-cost medical option they offer, and decide how much, if any, to contribute toward the additional cost of covering eligible family members. Medical costs are based on overall medical claims trends across the medical plan. Employer-specific regional and demographic factors are also applied.

The employer may choose to pay for some or all of dental, supplemental death, and/or supplemental disability (if applicable) coverage. The employer may also choose to make an RSP contribution on a member's behalf, offer a matching contribution, or both.

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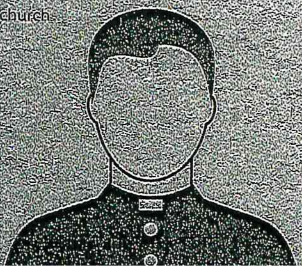
Pastor's Participation



The Benefits Plan of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) requires that teaching elders in an installed pastoral relationship with a church be covered through **Pastor's Participation** on a non-contributory basis. Pastor's Participation provides:

- defined benefit Pension Plan participation;
- death and disability coverage;
- medical coverage in the PPO (full family); and
- the opportunity to participate in the RSP, elect dental coverage and/or apply for supplemental death and supplemental disability (if eligible) coverage.

Teaching elders who are not installed pastors and who work 20 hours or more each week may also be enrolled in Pastor's Participation, or they may be enrolled in

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Do these words and phrases match your existing church vision or mission statement?

Paying attention to keeping promises, telling the truth, offering hospitality, and

should not drive decision making in communities of faith.

Promoting Hope in Churches

Not all congregations are equally focused on the possibilities tomorrow might bring. A national study of worshipers found that one in four attendees were not aware of any vision, future goals, or direction for their church, or knew of some "ideas" but not clear goals.[4] Worshipers rely on their leaders to help them catch a glimpse of their congregation's future. A clear vision that is relayed repeatedly to church members cements in worshipers' minds what their congregation's future can hold. This future portrait—one that is positive and optimistic—moves worshipers to support and invest in that future.

Here are several ways for a church to do a "Hope Checkup."

Involve the governing board. First, ask the board members to write down as many words and phrases as they can to describe what the congregation will be like five years from now. Are these positive or negative images? Do these words and phrases match your existing church vision or mission statement?

Pick three or four of the most inspiring and hope-filled words or phrases. What is the congregation currently doing that moves it in the direction of fulfilling those aspirations? Do these current activities give us a sense of agency? What one or two additional actions (achievable sub-goals) could the congregation currently undertake to more fully live out those aspirations?

Involve the worshipers. Consider using this or a similar short survey during a worship service to get a sense of the hopefulness of current attendees about the congregation's future. Ask them to strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree to the following statements:[5]

1. I think our church is doing pretty well.
2. We can think of many ways to get things done that are most important for our church.
3. We're doing just as well as most other churches.
4. When we encounter an obstacle or problem, we can come up with lots of ways to solve it.
5. The things we have done in the past will help us in the future.
6. Even when others want to give up, most members believe we can find ways to meet our challenges.

Involve the youth group or other small group. Ask participants to take pictures of people, places, or things that represent "hope" to them over the course of a week (or several weeks). When the group meets again, invite each participant to show one to three images that they found most powerful. What about the image denotes hope for them? What impact did the exercise have on them personally? What lesson does the image convey for a more hope-filled church? Are specific pathways suggested? The group could consider making a presentation based on their experience to the board or a whole church gathering.

Friends of Hope

Certain actions and attitudes diminish hope and foster despair. Deception and habitual grumbling undermine the church's sense of community. Sorting out what is going on is difficult work. However, spiritual practices—those actions people do together to address human needs—are central to the big picture of promoting hope.

Paying attention to keeping promises, telling the truth, offering hospitality, and expressing gratitude are key to Christian faith and they are the friends of hope.[6] As expressed by Martin Luther King Jr., "We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope."[7]

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1. C. R. Snyder, ed., *Handbook of Hope: Theory, Measures, and Applications* (San Diego, CA: Academic Press, 2000).
2. J. T. Pedrotti, L. Edwards, and S. J. Lopez, "Promoting Hope: Suggestions for School Counselors," *Professional School Counseling*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (December 2008).
3. Nato Thompson, *Culture As Weapon* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2017), xi.
4. Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce, *Beyond the Ordinary: 10 Strengths of U.S. Congregations* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 101–7.
5. This survey was modified from a Goals instrument used to assess school students; see Pedrotti, Edwards, and Lopez.
6. Christine D. Pohl, *Living Into Community: Cultivating Practices That Sustain Us* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans: 2012).
7. Martin Luther King Jr., *Strength to Love* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010).

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EQUIPPING VOLUNTEERS BUILDS A STRONG CHURCH COMUNITY

Sociologist Joshua Packard describes an emerging population he calls the "dones." They are "spiritual refugees" from organized religion who were once long-time members, but who pass through the exit door of the church and never look back. Though many reasons exist for their departure, a significant theme is the feeling of being of ignored or underutilized. "It's hard for me to be just a passive worshiper," one of Packard's interview subjects said. "I've got to do things. That's how I understand my faith and how I understand God."[1]

Signs of Trouble

Marlene Wilson, a recognized specialist in volunteer training, explains that in many churches the Pillars do much of the work, fostering close and satisfying relationships within their clique and making a majority of the decisions. This can leave the Pewsitters with a lack of enthusiasm about getting involved. Additionally, while one can be part of an active core of volunteers and still experience a vague sense of dissatisfaction, Wilson describes signs of trouble within a volunteer system.

The team leader or committee chair does all the work for the team. Though it is tempting to blame laziness, the culprit might be an overactive team leader. Imagine gathering for a team meeting where the leader lays out her vision for the team's work, hands out printed material, and adjourns. Later, team members realize that the leader did all the talking. Unless team members are asked to contribute, it seems pointless to participate.

Leaders are asked to do several jobs at once—and retained for too long. When leaders juggle multiple tasks, they are unable to give their best effort to any one thing. Without an influx of new volunteers, the regulars may feel burdened and unmotivated. Some churches address this issue by refusing to allow anyone to be in charge of more than one ministry team.

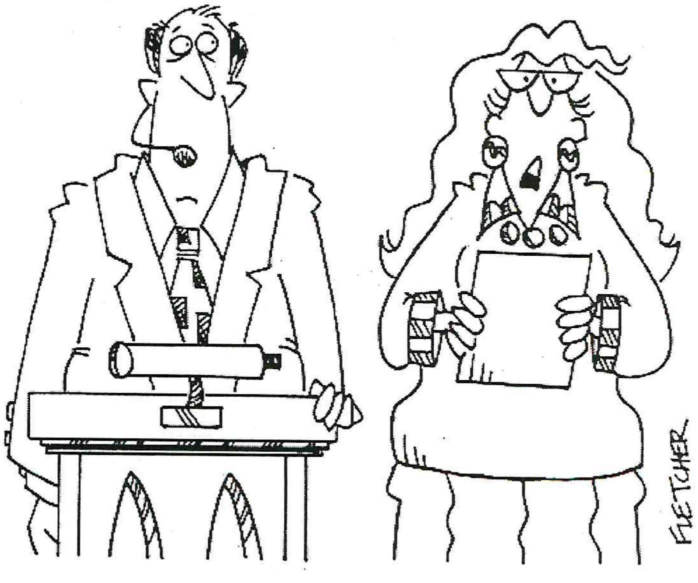
Unrealistic time commitments scare volunteers away. The era when volunteers inhabited their jobs for a lifetime is over. "A major trend in volunteerism," writes Wilson, "is that volunteers prefer three-, six-, or one-month assignments rather than longer commitments. The shorter time commitments fit better into volunteers' busy lives."

There is no system for coaching volunteers. Imagine being assigned a volunteer job with no one to be accountable to and no one to contact in case problems arise. Supervising is just as important for volunteers as it is for paid employees. The best approach is to create a documented process. Develop a coaching system and write it down.

Volunteers are more committed to the director than to the program. Inspirational leaders are never a problem—unless the leader leaves! Every team or committee needs a mission statement that answers the question, "What is our purpose?" and a written vision statement of where the team is heading.[2]

Discovery First, Equipping Second

Sue Mallory and Brad Smith lay out an equipping system for congregations structured around the journey a new member makes from entry to worship involvement



"THE 20 PERCENT OF OUR CONGREGATION THAT DOES 80 PERCENT OF THE WORK WILL BE HONORED AT A SPECIAL LUNCHEON...AS SOON AS THE REST OF US FIGURE OUT HOW THAT'S DONE."

to volunteer ministry.[3] At the heart of this equipping system is the discovery interview, which seeks to discover the abilities and interests of potential volunteers. It is best to recruit a team to conduct these interviews. Anyone who is able to ask open-ended questions and practice reflective listening would qualify. The interviewer should take prolific notes or use a pre-fabricated form. Some congregations use volunteer database software for its members, which is fine as long as confidentiality is respected regarding personal issues that might arise in the interview (see "Top 20 Volunteer Management Software Products," http://www.capterra.com/volunteer-management-software for examples).

Here are some sample questions for a discovery interview[4]:

- I would be interested in learning about your family. Tell me about. . .
- What do you do (or have you done) to earn your livelihood?
- What do you love doing?
- What do you dislike doing and hope never to have to do again?
- We seldom have the opportunity to share with others those things that we most enjoyed and felt we did well. Are there things you have accomplished that you are really proud of?

Matching and discovery are different tasks, and discovery must come first. Matching then requires a thorough review of the abilities, interests, and motivations of the potential volunteer before seeking to fill available slots. When matching, one should pay attention to not only positive factors, but also reasons why this might not be the best time to volunteer, such as exhaustion from previous service, personal crisis, or a significant life transition.

The Basics of Equipping Volunteers

Success in volunteer service requires encouragement and support. This is often called equipping, a reference to Paul's call to leaders "to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for the building up of the body of Christ" (Ephesians 4:12, NRSV). Here are four keys to effective equipping.[5]

Apprentice your volunteers. In the Middle Ages, the apprentice served alongside the master, who provided instruction and guidance. The apprentice learned by doing. The effect here is that of the slow cooker or crock-pot, not the microwave oven. Demonstrate how it is done, and let it simmer.

Use a team structure. The problem with the solo approach is that we end up doing too much of the work ourselves. If you are launching a new project without a team in place, it risks collapse. If the size of your long-standing committee or team has dwindled over time, you risk burnout. Pay close attention to forming and sustaining the team.

Train for the work. Once you have a team in place, think about attending a training conference together, watching an instructional video, or visiting another congregation that does what you do. Observe and ask questions: What worked? What didn't?

Develop leaders. While training prepares a person to complete a task, leadership development aims at developing the whole person. For instance, a church-operated food pantry may recruit new volunteers from its customers and train them to stock shelves or clean the floor. Then, invite volunteers who show interest and leadership potential to serve on the board or hold other leadership roles. With proper guidance, this customer-turned-volunteer might develop into a trusted leader. Leaders may come from anywhere.

How Volunteer Ministry Feeds Us

Equipping others for the work of ministry, Paul writes, serves to build a strong, diverse community called the body of Christ. Where do you fit into that community? Are you a Pillar, a Pewsitter, or something in between? What would a discovery process look like with the newest members, your circle of friends beyond the church, the "dones," and the "not-yet-dones"?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: The Rev. Dr. Dana Horrell, executive director of Faithful Citizen (www.faithfulcitizen.net) and United Methodist pastor, works to engage congregations in social ministry.

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[1] Joshua Packard, "Meet the 'Dones,'" *Christianity Today*, Summer 2015, http://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2015/summer-2015/meet-dones.html.

[2] Marlene Wilson, *Creating a Volunteer-Friendly Church Culture* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2004), 47-53.

[3] Sue Mallory and Brad Smith, *The Equipping Church Handbook* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 244-346. Also see Sue Mallory, *The Equipping Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016).

[4] Ibid., 287-88.

[5] Dan Entwistle, *Recruiting Volunteers* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), 39-50.

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SHORT-TERM MISSION TRIPS THAT YIELD LONG-TERM SUCCESS

Reporting on the popularity of short-term mission trips, sociologist Robert Wuthnow estimates that in the US, 32 percent of congregations sponsor short-term overseas volunteer trips every year. About a quarter of the US population has taken part in a short-term mission experience at some point in their lifetime.[1] In fact, the prospect of embarking on a short-term mission trip, fueled by well-resourced, energetic people of faith, can be exhilarating for both participants and the community being served. Still, despite the best intentions, such trips often fall short of expectations for all involved.

Worst Mission Trip Ever: A Case Study

Moments after the ten-passenger van arrived in the Central American village of San Valente, Jenna pulled out her camera to photograph the dozens of patchwork buildings made of corrugated metal, plastic, and wood. Matt said, "Wow! This reminds me of last year, when we were in Mexico." Scott, the trip's coordinator, asked the group to help hand out the goods to community residents that would arrive via truck that afternoon.

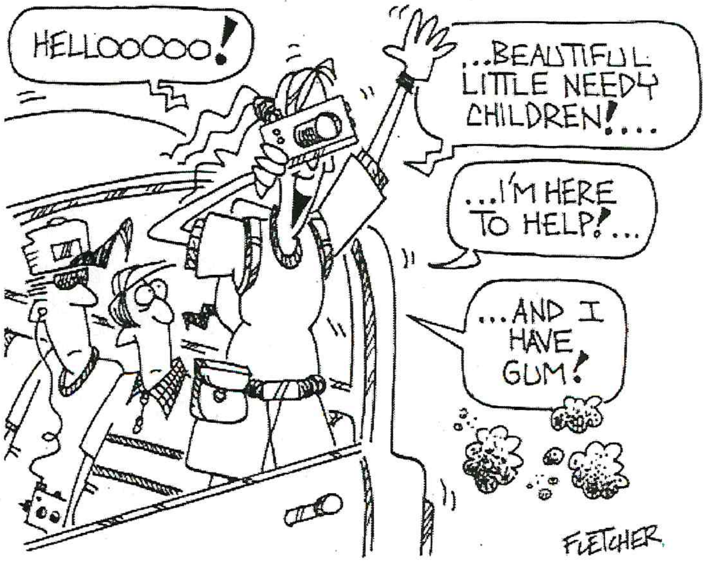
This mission trip's purpose was to lay the foundation for a new community church. The mission trip leader sent money in advance to hire someone to dig the foundation trenches. However, when the group arrived at the work site, they were shocked because the trenches were only half-finished. Miguel, their host, explained the reason: They preferred to hire local workers with hand tools, not a single person with heavy machinery, so that more people would be employed. "Looks like it's going to be a long week!" Jenna exclaimed.

While this story is fictional, it contains instructive examples of misguided actions.[2]

- Before Jenna reaches for her camera, she and the other missioners should be advised to get to know their hosts, and gain an understanding of what it is like to live there. Otherwise, the trip—whether to El Salvador or inner city Detroit—becomes voyeuristic or like a tourist destination.
- Matt's memory of last year's Mexican mission trip highlights that, while changing destinations every year can be enjoyable, the best way to develop a lasting relationship is to make a long-term commitment to one community and return each year.
- The coordinator's plan to hand out supplies from the back of a pickup truck can be an offensive practice, as it reinforces a pattern of top-down paternalism. Instead, give the items to a local service agency or congregation to distribute.
- The expressions of shock over a half-finished trench remind us that missioners need to respect that they have now entered their hosts' world. Logistics and timelines need to proceed under local direction.

Best Practices for Effective Mission Trips

Laurie Occhipinti, an anthropologist who researches economic development, has spoken with missioners, read scholarly articles and religious leaders' accounts, and participated in trips herself. With this background,


HELLOOOOO!
...BEAUTIFUL LITTLE NEEDY CHILDREN!...
...I'M HERE TO HELP!...
...AND I HAVE GUM!
FLETCHER

she offers best practices to ensure that short-term mission efforts are effective.[3]

Establish Long-Term Relationships. The here today, gone tomorrow quality of many short-term mission trips begs the question: How are we not simply religious tourists? Long-term connection through repeated visits can change the relationship quality between sender and host, assisting team members in deepening their local cultural understanding and allowing those who have made multiple trips to help newcomers learn what to expect and how to behave. Repeated visits also increase the likelihood that local community members will have input into the projects undertaken.

Reflect on the Experience. Orientation and debriefing sessions should be mandatory for groups undertaking short-term projects. These sessions work if everyone provides input. Newcomers should be encouraged to talk aloud about their preconceptions about the trip and the culture. At the final debriefing, group discussions provide an important opportunity to frame the social, cultural, and political contextualization of the encounter.

Work to Ensure the Project Benefits the Community. Good mission trips often resemble successful community development projects undertaken closer to home. This involves practicing good listening skills with local leaders; focusing on resources, not deficits; and considering how the project could enhance community sustainability five or more years down the road. Such steps ensure that the host community, and not just the mission team, receives lasting benefits.

Understand the Role of Culture. Occhipinti notes that mission participants often "collapse cultural differences" by lumping the poor in other countries with the poor everywhere else, disregarding cultural variances. Time invested in learning about the local culture, perhaps even learning language basics, is time well spent.

Work in Partnership. "The question is not *whether* we travel and work with others; the question is *how*." In other words, the *process* of working with others matters as much as the project's material output. Unfortunately, Christian mission history is tainted by missionaries' collusion with colonial governments and institutions seeking to extract resource wealth from colonial territories. Only by continually stressing *partnership* in the project's planning and execution can both sides of the mission equation—missioners and hosts—learn from each other.

Where Should We Go?

When initiating a short-term mission trip, the most important decision may be the first: where should we go? Here are two possibilities for finding that answer.[4]

Personal Connection. This occurs because a church leader learns about the host community through a friend or business colleague. In one case, a professional woman started a nonprofit agency after learning about the poor living near a Nicaraguan landfill while on vacation. Her home church stepped up to support her with funds and additional support through mission trips. If you choose to rely on a personal contact, do your homework. Contact a nonprofit development organization with contacts in the region you plan to visit, or talk with someone in your denominational mission office.

Institutional Connection. If your congregation is part of a larger denomination with global reach, denominational staff may have institutional ties with nongovernmental agencies in the host region or country. One advantage: the denominational office may be able to help with logistical arrangements as well.

So which is better? Personal connections may appear more direct and less bureaucratic, yet a potential downside is the "side-of-the-road syndrome." Occihipinti describes it this way: Everybody loves the mission site that lies on the beaten path, while the greater need may lie just inland from there. For example, Juarez, Mexico, located just across the border from El Paso, Texas, receives many American mission teams, while more remote locations receive hardly any at all.

Reflecting on Meaningful Mission

Do mission trips do any good, or are they simply faith-based tourism masquerading as meaningful engagement? When handled effectively, such trips can help missioners from a dominant culture challenge long-held assumptions. Immersion in another culture, especially in a less developed country, cracks open cultural assumptions, as if a fish, always accustomed to immersion in water, suddenly became aware of its surroundings. Such experiences can be transformative.[5]

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1. Laurie Occhipinti, *Making a Difference in A Globalized World: Short-term Missions that Work* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014), 13-14.

2. Mark Radecke, "Misguided Missions: Ten Worst Practices," *Christian Century*, May 18, 2010, 22-23, 25.

3. Occhipinti, 117-21.

4. Ibid., 95-96.

5. Ibid., 34-38.

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