

Building up the Body

Bible study notes

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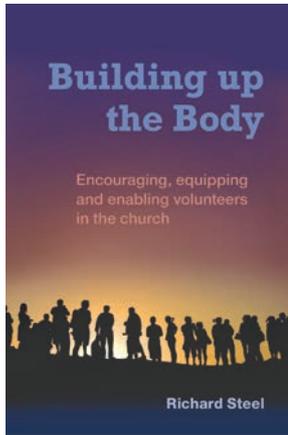
These notes are for group leaders who want to explore some of the principles of volunteering as a Christian. The notes could be used as a short series on their own, or perhaps as part of a longer series linking in to topics such as the gifts of the Spirit, community mission and involvement, or simply church life in all its amazing, and sometimes painful, complexity.

They give you a biblical way in to the material of the book and I hope they will help participants explore the issues around volunteering in such a way that they can see just how important they as volunteers are in the bigger picture of the church—well beyond the specific thing they are doing, however small and seemingly insignificant. Leading volunteers well is about building up the Body of Christ to carry out the greatest vision possible, that of the ‘Great Commission’ to ‘go and make disciples of all nations’ (Matthew 28:19, NIV).

Each of the four studies has an Introduction to the theme, an Opening question to get people talking, then the main Study section with a key text and questions for discussion, some of which lead to the study of further Bible passages. Following this is a time to encourage people to Share something of their own experience with some suggestions for Prayer to end.

In many sections there are some suggestions to help get discussion going or hints as to how to approach things. These are **in bold script**.





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Loving to volunteer

Introduction

1 Corinthians 9:17 is the only mention of volunteering in the Bible. This is not strictly about volunteering as we understand it, as Paul is saying he feels compelled to preach the gospel. Yet that is what Paul was—a volunteer. He worked as a tentmaker; he did not expect money for preaching or ministry.

Right at the beginning of this study it might be worth pointing out that nothing which follows denigrates in any way those who are paid to work for the church. Many churches could not develop as they are without paid ministry of various kinds, and Paul also clearly states that there is a role for payment, as well as honour—see, for example, 1 Timothy 5:17–18. That said, most churches still rely on volunteers for the bulk of their ministry, especially the part of the ministry that goes beyond church walls and is so vital for God’s mission. It is important to be aware of this complementarity and to work hard to get the relationships right.

Both paid church workers and volunteers are, one hopes, doing what they do for the love of God, the love of those they serve or those who will benefit from the work they do, for the love of the cause or the activity. Love is a key driver for volunteering, even if not every volunteer might describe it in that way. For volunteers the only reward is the response to that love. There is a strong link between the word ‘volunteer’ and the word ‘amateur’. Both refer to activities done without payment, with the latter (coming as it does from the Latin meaning ‘to love’) being about the ‘why’ rather than the ‘what’.

As a Christian we are called to love God and to love other people (our ‘neighbour’). It is those two loves that should drive us to give of ourselves, our time and resources for God’s purposes and for the sake of others.

Opening question

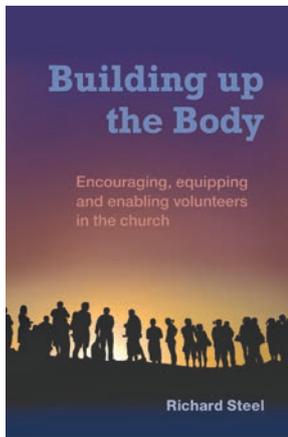
Why do volunteers give so much in terms of time and money to the church and others?

Use a flip chart, white board or on a computer with projector.

NB It can be very instructive to find out in what other areas of volunteer work members are involved outside the church.

Here are some of the things that came up in research:

- an identified need, and a feeling they can help meet it
- strong personal drivers
- family example
- desire to serve
- a need to be needed
- personal commitment to the cause
- friendship



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- personal motives: 'to get out of the house', 'to meet others'
- filling a gap in their life
- guilt: 'I feel I should. I have children, so I volunteer to help in Sunday school.'
- gaining fulfilment
- spiritual drive
- desire to be part of a team
- because they share the vision of the project
- or simply for no other reason than because they have been asked

Once people have produced a list, ask:

Do you identify with any of these? What others might you add?

Do any of them seem 'unworthy' for a Christian?

Try to 'unpack' this a little. There may not be a problem but some Christians might find their 'ordinary' motives too 'unspiritual' and feel they should be prompted by higher reasons.

Study

Key text: Luke 10:25–37 ('the Good Samaritan')

Explore what this story has to tell us about the way we might volunteer, or the reasons we might not.

Begin by looking at that priest and Levite—why did they not stop?

Answers might include:

- because of fear of ritual uncleanness, which would have stopped their religious duties
- because stopping would have made them late
- because their religious duties were more important to them
- because they might have put themselves in danger

How much do these things stop us volunteering?

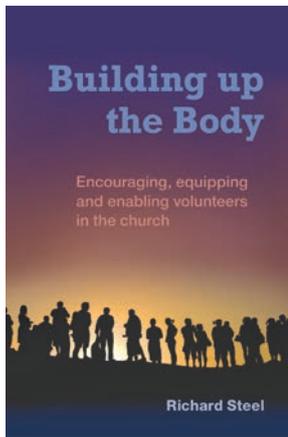
Then move to the Samaritan.

Interestingly, we are not told why he stopped to help, simply that he did, and the way he went 'above and beyond the call of duty'.

What does his story tell us?

Answers might include:

- to be prepared to put ourselves out for others. How far are we prepared to go? How much time do we give to voluntary work as a proportion of all our time? And in comparison to the time we spend on leisure activities? Perhaps someone whose main leisure activity is volunteering might be prepared to say a bit more about why this is.
- to take risks. How much risk are we prepared to take?
- to be prepared to invest our time and our money



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- to be in it for the long term (the Samaritan planned to return and see how things were going)
- to cross racial and religious barriers. Who are those locally who fall into this group? How does your church reach out to them? How could it do so in future?
- to show practically what it means to love those who aren't like us (Matthew 5:43–48). Expand on this point. You might also look at Luke 6:33 and Romans 12:20.

Spend a few moments reflecting on the impact that parable had on the expert in the law and the crowd listening. How easy is it to assume that doing our duty to God in a formal way, within certain limits, fulfils our obligations? Is your church active and working for God throughout the week, or is worship your main activity? Spend some time thinking about whether this is right.

Make the point that the church is active when its individual members are. This question is not supposed to imply that we should spend all our time in church-organised activities, but rather that unless each member is actually living out God's call to service in all sorts of activities we are not in fact obeying God's call at all.

Share

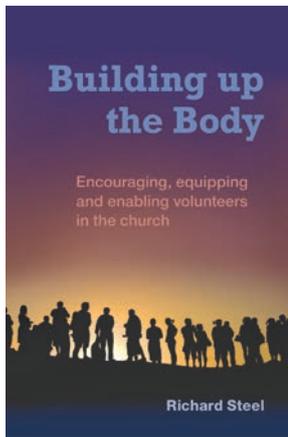
Read Matthew 5:13–14. Volunteering is a great way to be visible in your community. In what ways does your church do this?

Ask people to give examples from their own experience.

People might be reluctant to share because of reticence or not wanting to brag. You may have to draw them out or start with your own examples.

Pray

- Around the challenge to the 'expert in the law'
- For groups and individuals you may not find easy to help
- For God to keep your eyes open to ways that you need to be salt and light in the local community



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Our calling as volunteers for a 'servant king'

Introduction

Being a Christian is not simply one element among many leisure pursuits nor is it just about keeping a club going. It is about being an agent of God's kingdom. A theology of volunteering begins with the call of Jesus to the disciples (Matthew 4:19; Mark 1:17) and to the rich young man (Luke 18:22): 'Come, follow me.' All that God calls us to is voluntary. He *invites* us to become his disciples, he *asks* us to live for him, to serve others as he served others.

Opening question

Is being a servant leader all about the menial, basic tasks? Does it mean you do not let others do things for you?

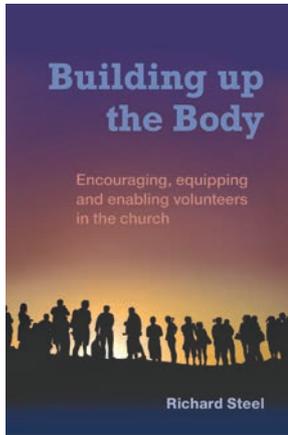
In many organisations, especially perhaps churches, the simple but time-consuming tasks are exactly what volunteers can do, to great effect.

Study

Key text: Matthew 20:20–27 (compare also Mark 10:42–45)

Explore these questions:

- How did Jesus live out this teaching? What examples can you think of?
The key one is clearly the foot-washing—see John 13:2–17. Encourage people to think more widely, though.
- What are some of the most compelling reasons for volunteering?
For example, Matthew 25:40, where we are reminded that in serving others we are serving Jesus himself. Make this point but do not labour the passage as we return to it in a later study. Also look at Colossians 3:23, where Paul says much the same thing. See also Luke 12:48b, Romans 12:6, 2 Corinthians 12:15 and 1 Peter 4:10.
- Where do we gain our strength to serve as Jesus did?
For example, look at John 15:4.
- Does being a servant mean not expecting to be thanked?
See 1 Thessalonians 5:11. We all know how we feel when someone says 'thank you' or 'well done' or 'that was great'. How much do we do this for others?



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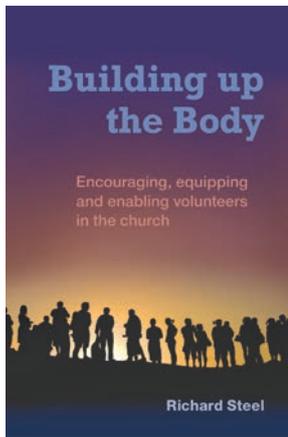
- Does being a loving servant leader mean that you should never criticise or correct?
See, for example, Paul's contrasting comments in 1 Corinthians 11:2 and 17. Paul was not afraid to praise, nor was he afraid to criticise. Sometimes we are afraid to do either.
- What might this passage say about people of different ages relating together? You might want to look at **1 Timothy 4:12 and 5:1–2**. You could also use **Paul's own example of working with a younger man, Mark, who had let him down in some way. After being critical of him in Acts 15:36–41, he later was clearly reconciled and saw him as a valued colleague (Colossians 4:10; 2 Timothy 4:11).**
- On the other hand, how much emphasis do we give to the need for rest? How do we encourage people not to do too much?
See Mark 6:31; Luke 5:15–16.

Share

Ask people to give examples of when they have been encouraged as they have used their gifts for God, and why. Also, when they have been discouraged, and why.

Pray

- For a spirit of true servanthood
- That we might remain part of the vine
- For right relationships within the church
- That we might encourage others when we have the opportunity



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More about love

Introduction

The kind of love we are talking of when we think of volunteering is that expressed by the Greek word *agape* (as used in 1 Corinthians 13), which I define as ‘promise love’. It is an act of the will, spiritual and selfless, self-giving, all very appropriate when one thinks about what a volunteer does. Interestingly, *agape* means ‘unconditional love’ in modern-day Greek.

Although this passage is most often referred to today within wedding services (where it certainly fits well), we should remember its original context. Paul includes this wonderfully poetic chapter within a discussion on relationships within the church, indeed relationships that were not of the best. It comes in the midst of some stern words about what happens when things go wrong in a church’s life (have a look at 1 Corinthians from 11:17). Without love we have no life within the church. Without loving actions we have no mission.

The church was founded by volunteers, those who gave everything freely, who met and cared for one another (see Acts 2:44–46; 6:1–5). Paul was himself a volunteer, for at least some of his ministry (Acts 18:3; 1 Corinthians 9:12–17) and encouraged others to give both money (Romans 12:8; 1 Corinthians 16:1–2) and service for others (Acts 20:35).

Opening question

Who can you think of, who has given up much for the sake of the gospel and worked tirelessly without receiving payment?

You may well get the famous names like St Francis and William Wilberforce. Encourage people to think too of ‘ordinary’ people they have known, especially from your own church, past or present.

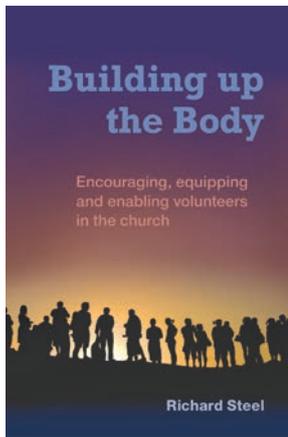
Study

Key text: 1 Corinthians 13

Explore these questions:

- What connection might there be between the relationships within the church and our ministry, both within and outside of it (see 1 Corinthians 12:26)?
If we are out of sorts with each other, we are unlikely to be inspired to give of our best.
- How does this passage influence the way we act as volunteers?
- How, for example, might we show the qualities in verses 4 and 5?
- Which of the aspects of this kind of love are we likely to need most? How easy is it not to be ‘easily angered’ and keep ‘no record of wrongs?’

Encourage people to give specific examples.



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- How does this passage connect with Jesus' parable of the sheep and goats (Matthew 25:31–46)?
Look, for example, at the 'three things' that remain, and how they relate to both the actions and reward and judgment talked about in the parable.
- Looking back to the examples in chapters 10 to 12 and on to chapter 14, what sort of dangers do we face if we do not show this sort of love?
There are many areas this discussion could lead to. You will need to ensure it stays in the area of service and ministry. You will need to decide at which sections you wish to look.
- How might we encourage in our worship the love we are asked to aspire to?

Share

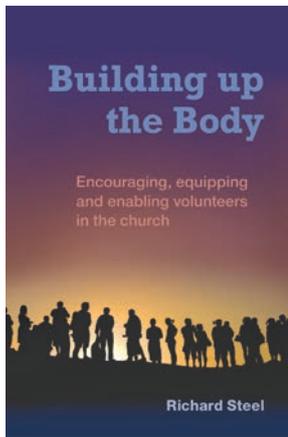
Can you give any examples of when you have seen such levels of love achieved in church ministry, and when you have seen the results of a failure to love in this way?

I have deliberately suggested starting at one remove to the individuals in the group. If people do not move on to more personal examples, encourage them to do so. Indeed encourage them to be as honest as they can. The depths you get to in this section will depend very much on the group make-up and dynamics.

Pray

- For God to give us the grace and strength we need to love in this way
- For any particularly difficult situations in the church's life
- For each group member to love others in the coming week—at home, at work, in their various networks

The Body we are building



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Introduction

One of the key pictures of the church is that of the Body (Romans 12:4, 5; 1 Corinthians 10:17; 12:12–31; Ephesians 4:4–6). The church is a Body in which each and every person plays their part; a Body in which everyone has gifts and no one is useless; a Body called to work for the sake of God and his kingdom. And a Body where, in most churches, so many do so much, and only very few get paid for the privilege.

Opening question

How much is done by volunteers in your church?

Spend time making a list on a flip chart, white board or on a computer with projector.

Study

Key text: 1 Corinthians 12:12–31

Explore these questions:

- What do these verses say about the various ministries within the church? A body first of all needs good health to function, simply to live; only then can it actually do the things it needs to. What does this passage say about wider ministry?

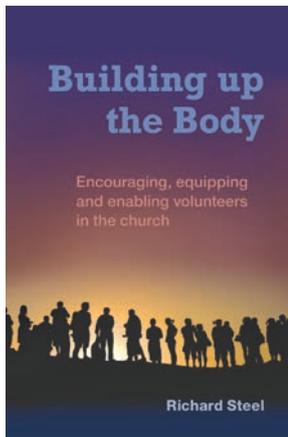
See also Ephesians 4:15–32 which adds the crucial element to the body—its head.

- Look also at James 1:22–25 and 2:14–22. Taking these verses into account as well as 1 Corinthians, how strong an imperative does the New Testament give to being an active Body? Can you think of any of Jesus' teaching that might be relevant here?

For example, Matthew 5:16; Acts 20:35. For other New Testament encouragements, see Galatians 2:10; Philippians 2:3–4; 2 Thessalonians 3:13; 1 Timothy 6:18; Titus 3:8; Hebrews 10:24; 1 Peter 4:10.

- Do the verses in 1 Corinthians 12 suggest any hierarchy of gifts? Why do we so easily regard those gifts that have been often 'professionalised' as somehow the most important?
- How does the attitude encouraged by the verses 22–25 work itself out in your church?
- How might we, with our much greater knowledge of how the body works, expand this passage with other examples?

You might think about nerves, blood and even DNA! This could be a light-hearted interlude but need not to be flippant. You might find some examples that would be especially relevant to your church by going beyond the limitations



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of asking whether your group members see themselves as an eye, ear, nose, hand or foot (or a less presentable part!) As long as the examples raised are consistent with the biblical message and not just speculative, they can be useful.

- It is vital to get people with the right gifts in the right roles. What are the consequences for a church when an ‘eye’ thinks that they are a ‘hand’ or vice versa? **For example, it is no use appointing a church treasurer who is no good with figures and has a phobia of spreadsheets! It is important to ‘speak the truth in love’, becoming more like Christ. Only then will the Body be built up (Ephesians 4:15–16).**
- What do the verses 29–31 say to those who think that their gifts, their ministries, are the most important ones? **We need to be careful of using the Mary/Martha example to say that Jesus wants us to be ‘spiritual’, not practical people. How many church events could function without those in the kitchen? Yet if we don’t also have our ‘God-time’, we will soon be drifting from him and become ineffective. Spiritual strength and effective ministry go together.**

Share

Remind people of the well-known story of Christopher Wren visiting the site of the new St Paul’s Cathedral. He was watching his design take shape, when he noticed two workers laying bricks in one of the outer walls. One of the workers seemed bored and slow, clearly not engaged in his work. The other was working hard and with great enthusiasm. Wren went up to the first bricklayer and asked him what he was doing. ‘What does it look like?’ he replied. ‘I’m laying bricks!’ Wren then went to the second and asked the same question, ‘What are you doing?’ The second bricklayer looked up and greeted Wren with a smile and a nod, ‘I’m building a magnificent cathedral, sir.’

Ask the group whether they, especially those who help with the (so-called) ordinary things—making the coffee, moving chairs, tidying up, sticking the cotton wool on to yet another cardboard sheep, and so on—feel that they are a valuable part of the Body. If not, what could you do to change this?

Pray

- For the people you have thought of during this session
- For any decisions you have made
- That God will take and use all the small building blocks you have talked about to be part of his kingdom

A final thought

As you finish the course, you might want to give your group members this challenge: for what proportion of your time are you using the gifts God has given you as a volunteer inside and outside the church?

Do you have any gifts that you are not using?