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The ambivalence regarding volunteering and reward systems in church settings

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Traditionally, churches exist to fulfil the 'great commission', which is to preach the 'good news' to all believers. As the 'great commission' finds expression within the Church, numerical growth becomes inevitable. The latter puts pressure on the Church to function in a professional manner. People with requisite knowledge, skills and experience are often needed to manage the church activities. Whilst the Bible alludes to spiritual and heavenly rewards, during and post-earthly services, some of these church managers and other volunteers may sometimes require rewards for their efforts and time. Qualitative research methods in the form of semistructured interviews and content analysis were employed. The research was conducted amongst churches within the Gauteng province, South Africa. A total of 26 church managers were interviewed from participating churches. Responses were received and subsequently analysed. Data were analysed using the Atlas.ti software. The findings indicated that the spirit of volunteerism is fast eroding within churches.

Contribution: This research highlighted the plight of church managers as volunteers and stewards in the context of not-for-profit organisations and adds towards the agency theory. Consequently, churches as principals ought to find creative ways to generate sufficient revenue for their volunteers.

Keywords: Christianity; churches; church managers; not-for-profit organisations; reward systems; South Africa; voluntary work.

Introduction

In every task undertaken, it is common for those who made efforts to expect some form of reward or recognition. This becomes complex whenever tasks are undertaken on a voluntary basis. That considered, the Bible advocates for selfless Christian service (Rm:12:1–2 NLT 2005 Bible Gateway). It is also same Bible that encourages good health and prosperity (3 Jn 1:2 NLT 2005 Bible Gateway). Whilst the latter text does not necessarily refer to prosperity in economic terms, the current reality suggests that it costs some money for church volunteers to lead a healthy lifestyle (Diener & Tay 2017). Not-for-profit organisations (NPOs), such as churches, often face difficult situations of having to compensate or reward their workers, especially those who do voluntary work. As instruments, reward systems play a vital role in incentivising high performers within the organisations, and this is useful for strategy implementation.

The main questions of this research read as follows:

1. In terms of leading and managing the church, what is the role of managers as volunteers of the church?
2. Are the managers as volunteers involved in the day-to-day running of the church and/or denomination?
3. Are the managers as volunteers rewarded for their services, and for what services?
4. What is the church's position in terms of volunteering and payment made for services rendered to the church?

Literature

This section discussed three main concepts, namely church history, common church expenses, and volunteering and stipends. Church history is discussed below.

Church history

Gathogo (2011:133) asks whether Christianity, which began as a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, has shifted to being materially minded. Over time, churches assumed the responsibility of

taking care of the welfare of their congregants and workers. This model has since proven to be unsustainable for volunteers, especially those who do so on a full-time basis. Stock (1995) notes that churches as NPOs operate under fund accounting. This makes issues of good governance and accountability imperative. Nieuwhof (2015) highlights the essence of accounting and the use of money for and by volunteers in church settings. Even churches that existed during the 18th century were confronted with challenges regarding revenue collection (Ashmarov et al. 2018).

Common church expenses

All organisations have bills to pay and workers to take care of. Afriyie (2021) suggests that churches, like any other organisations, ought to appreciate the value of money and its governance towards the fulfilment of its missions. Pogson (1974) cautions that such a responsibility requires prudence from managers who are entrusted to run such organisations. It is emphasised by Nash (1880) when observing, amongst others, the Michigan Street Baptist Church utility bill. Harding (2018:5) cautions about the costs associated with the maintenance of church infrastructure that needs to be considered by churches seeking to preserve their assets for future generations.

Meanwhile, Marchuk (2021) views Harding's position as noble and principles of good governance and church management. Afriyie (2021:11) infers that church bills and finances are a product of financial behaviour of congregants. Moreover, Carpentieri et al. (2020) allude to the alarming financial reality that modern churches are confronted with in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic. This further deepens the churches' financial challenges and their marginal propensity to meet their periodic obligations. The aforesaid certainly has a bearing on the churches' reward systems, especially towards their volunteers.

Volunteering and stipends

Whilst there is a challenge regarding reward systems in church settings, Shumway (2015) credits mass (large) money offering as a means to contribute towards attending to the needs of church workers who are, more often than not, volunteers. Meanwhile, Malaya (2021) encourages the use of reward systems towards fostering sustainable stewardship of the church as agency theory infers. Frost (2020) warns that churches should not weaponise reward systems, in that only those managers who perform best are rewarded and those who are not doing well are not. That said, the Bible refers to the rewards of only those who are obedient (Ps 1 NLT 2005 Bible Gateway Malachi 3 NLT 2005 Bible Gateway). Asadu (2022) infers that it is imperative for churches to reward their volunteers in stabilising and sustaining their mission. This further supposes that there can never be any sustenance of the church without happy stewards as advocated by the agency theory (Siems & Seuring 2021). In his seminal research work, Putnam (2000) in Oberle (2016) warns of an eroding social capital that in turn causes dysfunctionality society.

This in turn affects the volunteering spirit in society, including the churches. Thus, total recovery towards having selfless social agents has since become imperative. Whilst the primary goal of volunteers is to serve without expectations, the lack of proper church reward system may be detrimental towards the future of the modern church (Carpentieri et al. 2020).

Research methodology

A total of 26 church managers participated in this research. This total number of participants was realised with due regard to theoretical saturation (Guest, Bunce & Johnson 2006). Qualitative research in the form of semistructured interviews was chosen to find the deep-seated thoughts of the participants regarding church management in general and church volunteering and reward systems in particular (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit 2018). These were done in five Gauteng province regions, namely the City of Ekurhuleni, the City of Johannesburg, the City of Tshwane, Sedibeng and West Rand. Most of the churches that participated were affiliated with the South African Council of Churches and Baptist church bodies (SACC 2007). Both the Adherent and Protestant denominations participated in the interviews (Guest et al. 2006). The interview questions were derived from an interview guide and were in line with the literature of this research (Azzara 2010).

Selection of participants

In line with qualitative research, the participants in this research were rather selected than sampled (Creswell & Clark 2018). The following constituted the criteria:

- The participant needed to be 18 years and above.
- The participant needed to be managing a church.
- The participant needed to be involved in planning and implementation of a church strategic agenda.
- The participant's church needed to be within the province of Gauteng in South Africa.

Anything and anybody outside these criteria were not considered for participation. The criteria allowed for logistical and economic realities associated with qualitative fieldwork research.

Ethical issues

The author had to obtain ethical clearance from his academic institution and permission to conduct research from the affected church bodies. The participants had to complete consent forms that they were participating in the research voluntarily. There was also a clear undertaking that they could withdraw at any time without having to explain themselves. The data collected were stored in a password-protected device that would later be disposed of in line with the *Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA)* of South Africa 2021. This research was also consistent with Tracy's (2010) criteria of conducting research that considers procedural, situational, relational and existing ethics.

Findings

This section departs with a table that describes the type of participants in this research (Table 1). The details thereof are meant to alert the reader to the current realities of participants and the credentials they possess in managing their respective churches and leading society.

From Table 1, it is apparent that a total of 26 church managers participated in the research. Of the 26 participants, only 4 were female. There was an even spread of African and white participants, with only one participant being of Asian origin.

From a total of five Gauteng regions that participated in the study, the City of Tshwane, Sedibeng and West Rand were the most active regions with eight, seven and six participants, respectively. The City of Johannesburg had the least number of participants, with only two. The City of Ekurhuleni had three participants. Participants' years in service as church managers ranged from 1 to 38 years, which made the responses more credible. Many of the participants held post-matric qualifications up to master's degrees. Of the 26 participants, a total of 19 were from the Protestant denominations whilst the rest were Adherents. This is the summary of the type of persons that participated in this research. It is estimated that the participating churches had a combined average of 127 members, a minimum of 50 members and a maximum of 300 members. It is not clear what the number of the economically active member was. Also unclear was the average monthly contribution to the church purse. These would have provided the churches' marginal propensity to remunerate the volunteers.

Findings for research question 1: In terms of leading and managing the church, what is the role of managers as volunteers of the church?

In dissecting this question, this is what some of the participants had to say:

> 'Yes, eh, in fact everybody in the church is a volunteer. Starting with the priest, myself, who is a fulltime priest who to leave the corporate because of the calling and willingly accepting that and surviving on what we call a stipend, yes, you know. So, that makes me a volunteer in the church but there are other volunteers in the church which are church council members, your lay ministers, everybody in the church is a volunteer.' (Participant 4)

TABLE 1: Details of participants.

Participant	Gender	Race	Region	Years of experience	Qualification(s)	Major denomination	Estimated membership
1	Male	White	Tshwane	2	Master of Science Bachelor of Theology	Yes, Protestant	50
2	Female	African	Tshwane	10	Master of Arts	Yes, Protestant	80
3	Male	African	Johannesburg	13	Doctor of Philosophy (Theological)	Yes, Protestant	50
4	Male	African	Sedibeng	10	Diploma in Theology Diploma in Project Management	Yes, Adherent	300
5	Male	White	Sedibeng	8	B Tech in Marketing	Yes, Adherent	100
6	Male	White	Sedibeng	20	Doctor of Philosophy (Theological) BA in Psychology	Yes, Protestant	110
7	Female	African	Sedibeng	30	Master of Education	Yes, Protestant	300
8	Male	African	Sedibeng	3	Bachelor of Theology	Yes, Adherent	70
9	Male	African	Sedibeng	5	Bachelor of Theology	Yes, Adherent	80
10	Male	Asian	Johannesburg	4	Master of Theology MBA	Yes, Adherent	50
11	Female	White	Sedibeng	Not disclosed	Bachelor of Theology	Yes, Adherent	50
12	Male	White	Ekurhuleni	20	Diploma in Business Studies BA in Biblical Studies (Current)	Yes, Protestant	150
13	Male	African	Ekurhuleni	8	Honours BTh × 2	Yes, Adherent	200
14†	Male	African	Ekurhuleni	33	Master of Theology	Yes, Protestant	150
15†	Male	African	Tshwane	27	Sales and Marketing Certification	Yes, Protestant	200
16	Male	African	Tshwane	2 ½	Bachelor of Theology (Honours) BA Honours in Ancient History Diploma in Organisational Development	Yes, Protestant	100
17	Male	African	Tshwane	17	Doctor of Philosophy (Religious Studies) Church Development and Leadership Short Business Programme	Yes, Protestant	130
18†	Male	White	West Rand	38	Doctor of Philosophy (Theological) × 2	Yes, Protestant	70
19†	Male	White	West Rand	10	Studied Music Unconfirmed	Yes, Protestant	70
20	Male	White	Tshwane	21	Bachelor of Practical Theology Diploma in Building a Local Church	Yes, Protestant	80
21†	Male	White	West Rand	10	Undisclosed	Yes, Protestant	90
22†	Male	African	West Rand	1 year 2 months	Matric, second year student from Bachelor of Theology	Yes, Protestant	90
23	Male	African	West Rand	7	Degree in Public Management	Yes, Protestant	300
24	Male	White	West Rand	38	BA in Church History Bachelor of Theology	Yes, Protestant	50
25†	Male	African	Tshwane	5	Matric	Yes, Protestant	150
26†	Female	African	Tshwane	1	Administration Diploma	Yes, Protestant	150

Source(s): Fieldwork notes
P, Participant.
†, Participated in the interview along with a colleague.

The participant said everyone in the church, including himself, was a volunteer. He was a priest and church manager who had experience of working in the corporate sector before assuming a full-time role within the church. From a theoretical perspective, this denotes a servant leadership style and a culture of selflessness and giving. Other volunteers assumed the roles of lay ministers and members of the church council. This church council would have assumed the roles of the board if they were at corporate level. Not included in this quotation, the participant alluded that the church council was responsible for planning and regularly reviewing the affairs of the church. This is a very critical role to play. Participant 8 added the following:

> 'The role of the management of the church, they do get views from the people or from their own observation, they center them to the parish priest. Basically, it is to decide on the way forward. So, they make executive decisions and also, they participate in the implementation of these decisions. So, each person plays his own role but in unison with the parish priest and with the other members. So, after strategizing everything we give roles, and these roles are played by more or less the individual members within the management system.'

Participant 8 alluded to instances of strategic planning and strategy implementation that are undertaken by the church volunteers, from evangelisation worship to finance. An environmental analysis was done through the gathering of various views and observations of other managers. This approach suggests that the church is inclusive and consultative towards its role-players, who happen to perform their tasks on a voluntary basis. Meanwhile, participant 10 suggested the following:

> 'So, administrative volunteers will only be people who are entrusted for a particular role by the management committee or by the general body, so their role are pretty much precise to what they are advised We have the management committee who does the all the administrative duties.'

The participant suggested that volunteering was confined to administrative and management roles only. This meant that other persons would not volunteer their services to the church except those appointed to manage the church. This issue highlights the church culture, and it is also a product of the type of church government. Even when the church has a particular project to do, such as a conference, the manager(s) of such an event ought to come from the church managerial ranks. This simply means that only church managers could assume the volunteering roles in that regard.

Findings for research question 2: Are the managers as volunteers involved in the day-to-day running of the church and/or denomination?

In addressing this question, this is what the participants had to say:

> 'Unfortunately, because I'm working, I do take part in church, in fact a week does not end with me not taking part, like I'm a secretary in my church so you know sometimes there are meetings, I'm busy with the letters, writing, and sometimes communicating the decisions and its part of my routine. Even though I'm not present physically I have to do something regarding church affairs.' (Participant 7)

As a departure from other responses, this participant addressed part-time work because of other career-related commitments. Some of her church responsibilities were executed remotely form the church premises. She had to strike a balance between paid day time work and that of a volunteer in her capacity as a church secretary. This is the same church manager who has been volunteering her services for over 30 years. This is another evidence that one does not always need payment to serve the Lord (Putnam 2000).

Participant 13 said the following:

> 'Yeah, I'm full time here and I am very much hands on, but I have other responsibilities. Fortunately, the church can afford to have a secretary. Well, during lockdown she hasn't been coming full time, she hasn't been coming everyday. And so momently I am here, it's easy for people to contact me. Some pop in because they know I will be here and so forth.'

The participant regarded his role as a church manager as a full-time role. Given the scope of work, the church was able to hire a secretary to complement his role. As an additional role, the participant also performed diocesan duties. This role would have been regarded as a regional manager in the corporate sector. This arrangement appeared to have increased the workload of the participant, unless the secretary was also working from home. Participant 16 had the following to say.

> 'Remember I'm a full-time member the problem is that I come back home late because sometimes we have to sit in meetings. But yes, I'm involved in the church finances. I'm there with many things, hospital cases, old age homes, sometimes I'm on radio, so there is one thing sometimes we run like crazy doing the little that we can but I'm fully managing this congregation.'

The participant went into the details of the full-time role he played as a church manager. Although dedicated and passionate, the participant seemed to be overwhelmed with many responsibilities. Being a church manager seemed to entail many layers of responsibilities as he was also involved in almost all church responsibilities and beyond. This seemed to be a classic example of servant leadership style. On the flip side, this appeared to allow him very little family time and demonstrated a poor work–life balance.

Findings for research question 3: Are the managers as volunteers rewarded for their services, and for what services?

In attempting to answer this question, this is what participant 12 had to say:

> 'Everybody else who does any work in the church is all volunteer based. There are pros and cons so one of the cons is that everybody who is a volunteer at the church is not paid by the church and has to support themselves in their own jobs and as a

result their time may be restricted so all of us are limited on how much time we can give to the church.'

'However, in a paid position one of the disadvantage is that you feel that because this is where your income comes from you have to please the congregation in some way, you almost feel obligated to make everyone happy. Whereas, those who are volunteering don't necessarily feel obligated.'

This participant clearly explained that only the pastoral teams are rewarded. The rest of the management team, including himself, are not rewarded.

This makes the roles of remunerated managers and volunteering managers interesting in terms of their levels of commitment and indebtedness towards the congregation. Those managers who receive no remuneration often display half-hearted service, given that they ought to make a living elsewhere. This phenomenon is consistent with the agency theory (Siems & Seuring 2021). Remunerated managers may feel duty-bound to act in ways worthy of their performance agreements. The dichotomy of knowing whom to please – God or man – becomes a lived reality. Participant 17 had the following to say:

'They just do it for free. So, volunteers play a major role in the church and that's what I think also makes it difficult for us to leave because when you need volunteers you depend on encouragement. Not doing so like in a business where you have to give money and other incentives.'

This participant confirmed that there are no monetary incentives for volunteers at his church. He further saw this as one of the major challenges that NPOs are confronted with. Thus, this participant further inferred that creative and alternative ways are needed to serve as incentives. He alluded to recognition as a form to encourage volunteers within the church. Whilst this approach could be commendable, the sustainability thereof may not be sustainable.

Meanwhile, participant 23 alluded to the following:

'Only the chairperson of the church is paid who is the minister or the pastor, the rest of the people are volunteers. Many people are volunteers, they volunteer their skills at the church. Members of management ensure that payment is made by congregants so that they are able to pay the sitting pastor.'

The participant confirmed that none of the management team members are rewarded, except the sitting minister. This is an example of selfless and servant leadership practically demonstrated. The sitting minister is thus dependent on the volunteering managers to ensure that he gets rewarded.

Findings of research question 4: What is the church's position terms of volunteering and payment made for services rendered to the church?

In answering the question, this is what participant 8 had to say:

'It is a duty that they church has that whoever comes to work is also looking for a source of livelihood, that we pay them because we appreciate them. So, both of them are okay because one volunteers and supports the other, so I do appreciate and promote both.'

The participant encouraged the church to find ways to protect the livelihoods of participants. That said, he still encouraged managers to volunteer irrespective of compensation being provided or not. This is an ambivalent answer regarding whether or not volunteer church managers should be rewarded. Participant 13 was more explicit.

'It's not just the problem of the church but the community at large. Once people volunteer, we need to be able to establish a way of making them feel good, where necessary see how we can remunerate them so that we can encourage that sense of volunteering. We are not doing a lot of that in South Africa.'

The participant alluded to the lack of volunteering spirit. He held that volunteers ought to be encouraged by using incentives. Whilst this could be a noble act by churches, it is often difficult to realise, given the ever-limited financial resources. As such, some of the volunteers may be discouraged:

'You know what, it depends on the services given, for an example if you want to fix the roof for the church then you must get a company that we will pay, because they give you a specialised service. Some people say it's their way of serving the church. I know the church is not a business, but the church must be able to pay for the services they use.' (Participant 16)

The participant cautioned that payment of voluntary work ought to depend largely on the type of services provided. In other words, only certain services merit compensation. He further appreciated professionals who were prepared to volunteer their services to the church and regarded this as noble charity work. Nevertheless, he encouraged churches to pay volunteers whenever possible.

Discussion

In this research, four major questions were answered by participants. This gist of the discussion was to explore the role of church managers as volunteers, their level of involvement within the church, denomination, fraternity and society at large, the issue of reward system for a church manager's services and their opinions regarding volunteering and reward systems for volunteers. Almost all participants (except for participants 5 and 16) were of the view that volunteers within the church, especially managers, may be compensated if the church had the means to do so. Participant 4 was totally against the idea of the compensation of managers whilst participant 16 alluded to certain conditions such as the type of services rendered. The major themes emerging from the research are summarised in Figure 1.

In explaining the diagram and as a part of the summary of this research, the participants as church managers generally
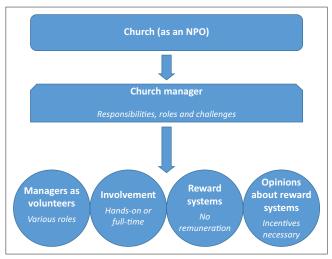
FIGURE 1: Church managers as volunteers.

performed various roles for their church, denomination, fraternity and society, with little expectation from their principals. The roles ranged from teaching, preaching, counselling and leading charities to property management, fundraising, secretarial and administrative services. Thus, their involvement was mostly hands-on and full-time. The roles were mostly of a voluntary nature, with little or no reward. This seemed to threaten their livelihood and, subsequently, the sustainability of the church (also see Asadu 2022). In unison, whilst applauding voluntary work, church managers advocated for rewards for services rendered, whenever possible (also see Nieuwhof 2015). There appeared to be a need for a proper and well-structured reward system for church managers and other church volunteers. Failure to do so may threaten the sustainability of the church.

Contribution and implications

The church not only as an NPO but also as a 'faith-based community' called to service by the Lord needs to be considered. The role of church managers as volunteers and agents is a very common feature and set to continue in future. As societal challenges change, its needs increase. This puts unprecedented pressure on church managers to increase their efforts and the time they devote to the church and its surroundings. It would require churches to collect sufficient revenue to remunerate their managers.

The Bible clearly states regarding the spiritual and heavenly rewards. That said, churches cannot afford to look away when some of their volunteers, especially full-time volunteers, are in dire need of livelihoods. Creative fundraising initiatives and social entrepreneurship are required (Antonites, Schoeman & Van Deventer 2019). This research advocates for a comprehensive model by churches and NPOs, which makes use of volunteers. Guidelines and funding models would clarify the expectations churches as principals and their managers as agents may have of each other. Good volunteers should not be lost because of poor reward systems.

Competing interests

The author declares that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Author's contributions

K.S.B. is the sole author of this article.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of South Africa College of Economic and Management Science Research Ethics Review Committee (No. 2018_CRERC_016(FA)).

Data availability

The data available were received through interviews of participants. Data are currently in possession of the author in a password-protected device. These data will be deleted after five years to its shelf life to protect the participants' identities. The names of participants are assigned a number to further anonymise them. Data that support the findings of this study can be made by the author upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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