We need help! This typical plea is lifted in some form in every church that starts new groups or classes, for any purpose. Things get done in the church if and when our members and friends step up and take charge. Our plans bear fruit when these leaders have the direction, gifts, and skills needed. It stands to reason then, that thoughtful recruiting for the right leader, not just any volunteer, is an essential function in the advancement of our teaching/ learning ministries.

Much has been written about good recruiting: have a clear description of required responsibilities, be honest about the time commitment and skills needed, fine Christian character, participation in training as well as worship, and so on. (See the links at the end for more.) One element of recruiting probably includes the promise, “I’ll help you; just let me know what you need.” (I, at least, have said that more than once!)

So, after we get a Yes, hand the job description to the new teacher or group leader, and commit to be on hand to help, how do we ensure that we have not just delivered empty promises?

Look at the Job Description

The job description (which ideally would be in writing) asks for the skills and names the responsibilities needed in the teacher or group leader. That’s the easy part. We usually know how to ask for what we want. When the teacher or group leader steps up, he or she then needs the commitment from the church to make possible the fulfillment of those requirements.

The article “Creating Job Descriptions” outlines the elements of a clear, useful description that makes it a good recruiting tool.

- Have a vision of the role
- Identify spiritual gifts
- Indicate desired character traits
- Outline clear expectations
- Offers a yardstick for development
- Allow for changing circumstances

These elements imply that there is an intentional infrastructure that supports what you ask. What might that look like? Who or what should be in place?

Have a Vision of the Role

The pastor and church council set a vision for the overall ministry of the church. They, with perhaps the cooperation of the committee on nominations, will take a closer look at the vision of both the role to be filled and the person who fulfills it. This may also be the responsibility of the Christian education and formation committee, or, in a church with several paid staff, of minister/director of Christian education and formation (or discipleship).

What should the vision be? A vision for the role would include a portrait of success. “If the Christian education committee is
doing what we hope, it provides for groups and classes for all ages in which people come to know and know about God, the Christian faith, the tradition of our church, the means of developing a life of faith through spiritual practices, and commitment to service.” Your vision is a results-oriented word picture of what your successful efforts would accomplish.

"It takes a village to raise a child,” and it takes a village to equip those people who will raise the child.

Knowing what you want to accomplish, in general, is not enough though, when it comes to recruiting and equipping your leaders. Your vision of the ministry and therefore, the people who lead this ministry, is what identifies the spiritual gifts and character traits needed. But to find the best gifts and traits, you also need to have some idea of how those goals are achieved.

**Identify Gifts and Traits**

Some of us are a bit timid about identifying or claiming our own gifts and strengths. To do so is positive and honest, not an exercise in hubris (take care, though). As a community of faith, we also have the privilege of both calling out and confirming the gifts we see in others. If we want and expect ministries of excellence, we will be bold in naming the gifts and traits we need in excellent leaders.

The last thing we want to offer God is a “settle for” practice in leader selection—as in, “We had to beg for a 5th grade teacher, so we settled for the one, poorly-equipped volunteer who raised his hand.” Clearly, the act of naming the personal expectations may point out weaknesses in the existing group of leaders.

Of course, in order to recognize gifts, we must have the opportunity for observation and interaction. Just as it takes a “village to raise a child,” it takes a village to equip those people who will raise the child.

What needs to happen in a group or class so that participants come to know God? First, the leader must have a demonstrable relationship with God. How will group members learn and develop spiritual practices? The group leader should be able to demonstrate and speak from experience. Regular attendees do not necessarily have well-cultivated personal spiritual disciplines. Seeing someone in worship does not necessarily tell us about how he works with others or what her values are. If we want leaders to model good Christian habits, we need not be shy about ensuring that they have them. We could at least employ the same degree of observation and investigation we would use to purchase an expensive “toy.”

**New Members and Leadership**

A further word is in order about engaging new members as leaders. Some persons will transfer into your congregation as long-time leaders and members from another church. We may be tempted to put them right to work in another leadership role, but that may not be wise.

Any new member needs the opportunity to meet people and get acculturated in the new environment. Be sure they have a sense of belonging and identity with your congregation. One way to do that is as a participant and/or helper in a group, team, or project, as well as attendance at worship. If the new member comes from a tradition other than United Methodist, you will want to take the time to get them oriented with the United Methodist Church, how it works, its theological “flavor,” the unique practices, what that looks like in your congregation, and so on.
**Share Expectations**

You want to see gifts and Christian character traits your leaders possess; they want to understand what you expect of them. Those expectations must be possible and manageable. If, for example, you expect your teachers to worship, the morning schedule has to allow for teachers to either prepare or clean up, as well as to get to and from the sanctuary (and perhaps pick up their own children on the way). If teachers or leaders are expected to attend training sessions or groups for their own development, training opportunities should be relevant; in the church’s training plan; on the calendar; and as necessary, in the budget.

The teacher/leaders faith development is an important gift. If you expect them to be a group of their own, you need to have appropriate groups in place at a time and place that is accessible.

If you have said, “I’ll help you; just ask,” the teacher and leader will want to know what you mean by that. Can she call Saturday night? Can he get his knotty theological questions answered? Are you willing to intervene between the leader and a parent or other person? Will you listen to personal issues unrelated to the area of ministry? Will you substitute for them? Are you willing to help them prepare week after week? Share expectations and be clear about the boundaries.

Boundaries are crucial for the protection of children, youth, and vulnerable adults. It goes without saying that you expect your leaders to live out of strong Christian ethics and morals. In a day when emails, tweets, Facebook postings, and anything else digital or scan-able can go around the world in a heartbeat, the gray area between acceptable and criminal can be quite murky. Teachers and leaders must know your policies and commit to them, for their own sake as well as for others.

**Train and Resource**

We expect teachers and leaders to be able to control their group appropriately, though that may never be stated in so many words. This means you have in place some way of knowing how they will do before getting to a class or group. It may also entail providing training in helping them understand how to maintain control in ways appropriate to the age group.

Continuing education and equipping does not have to be offered directly by the church, but the church should be in conversation with leaders about the sort of tooling they need and with what is out there across the district, conference, denomination, or web. Not all courses, webinars, websites, books, and so on are created equal, so whoever is responsible for monitoring the continuing education of leaders should also monitor the options.

This is not to say that you are the course police or that teachers and leaders have to get permission for whatever they take, read, or do. At the same time, United Methodist congregations have an obligation to teach, preach, and nurture within the bounds of the theology of The United Methodist Church. You need to know what that is and how to assess non-UM training and resources.

Just as teachers and leaders should expect to receive the training and orientation they need, they should also have ready access to the resources, supplies, books, and so on that they need. This means budgeting realistically and honestly for groups and classes of all ages, including adults.
You may want to do an orientation to the curriculum resources at the beginning of a quarter or term, so that teachers get an advance look at the supplies they will need and the preparation required.

If you purchase curriculum that requires DVD, video, or other equipment, the teachers and leaders will need to know how to sign up for it (if such things are shared), how to get it in their class, how to use it, who to talk to about problems with it, and how to put it back. On the other hand, if the curriculum relies on materials and equipment you don’t have, what is in place to help them adapt, borrow, or create?

**Allow for Changing Circumstances**

Things happen. Given that certainty, your infrastructure should be nimble enough to accommodate changes, surprises, and crises. You know that sooner or later, even the most dedication leader will not be able to come, and may not be able to tell you in advance. Some crisis may strike, like sudden illness or accident, during a class or group gathering. Some personal situation may become too burdensome for a leader to continue.

**Things happen. Given that certainty, your infrastructure should be nimble enough to accommodate changes, surprises, and crises.**

All of this means that from the beginning, your structure, whenever possible, should have shared leadership and clear lines of communication, especially when dealing with exceptional circumstances. You don’t want to wait until the class has started to figure out your system of substitutes, and you can’t wait until a child is hurt to work out how to help him without leaving the rest of the children unattended. Such proactivity will, at the least, ensure that you to operate in ways that do not nullify or compromise your insurance provisions and Safe Sanctuary policies.

Your leadership team might want to do some scenario planning; that is, “If circumstance xxx occurred, what would be our back-up plan or response?” That process can be as simple or as elaborate as you wish, but you may be very glad of it someday. Just requiring yourselves to think about all the possible little and big things that could go wrong or change will help in your overall preparedness.

Most changing circumstances are far less critical, but still have to be dealt with. Faithful leaders will have feelings about having to “let down” their class, church leaders, or friends. When the structure is in place to pick up the responsibilities of these leaders, there will be far less angst, and much more grace. One of the important ways we support our volunteers is by knowing when and how to let them step down in a way that is respectful, graceful, and leaves the way open to future opportunities for leadership and participation.

**But We’ve Never Done This**

All this may sound well and good, but if you haven’t employed some of these key strategies, how do you get started? Being intentional about job descriptions and some form of teacher/leader interviewing may meet with resistance. How do you justify setting out standards and written responsibilities for new group leaders when the current ones have not had the same requirements? Creating an infrastructure of support while doing the recruiting that should be able to count on that support adds a layer of complexity to what is often a difficult enough process.

Well, you have to start somewhere, so begin by making friends. Any change is made easier by having advance support.
**Rally the Troops**
The place to start is with your leadership team. Do with them what this article is suggesting: cast the vision, talk about the importance of employing the right spiritual gifts and abilities, discuss the expectations you have for this ministry and for its leaders. Receive their ideas and input. Identify your common values. Pray together for the plan God wants for you. When you agree together on your ultimate hopes, dreams, and goals—and how to achieve them with excellence—you will lay a foundation for the “congregational DNA” that supports the changes you need to make over time.

When the leadership team is on board, do the same thing with the church council and begin to talk up those dreams in the congregation. Anything mysterious is treated with suspicion. De-mystify!

**Be Patient and Consistent**
If you need to do a complete turn-around from the way you currently work, recognize that it could take two or three years to shift into a new process. There will always be resisters who won’t agree or step out of the way. You may never convert them, but you can model the change you want. As more people accept and live out of the new paradigm, even your resisters will have to shift a bit because what is all around them will shift. But when you start, maintain the standard you want, keep interpreting what it is and what it means, lift up the results you expect to achieve, and celebrate the achievements you have.

**Be Invitational and Gracious**
You may choose to institute changes starting with whoever is coming into a leadership or teaching position, recognizing that there will be a transitional time when more than one set of practices is in place. Since people come and go, eventually everyone will enter into the new plan. In the meantime, everyone currently on board needs to know what the new set of expectations is and be invited to participate in it. If they helped to shape the new plan and share those values, they are more likely to work with the changes.

Expect some losses, though, and be gracious about it. Current leaders are following whatever plan was in place when they started. If they say in some fashion that the new plan is not what they signed up for, they’re probably right. Encourage the new plan and share it as winningly as you can. Give people time to shift gears. Lift up the expectation that those who can’t or won’t accept the new plan must at least not work against it. (It’s one thing to resist and another to obstruct. You may need to replace obstructers, though do so in a way that honors their contribution. If possible, help them find new ways to share their gifts and energy.)

**Keep Your Eye on the Main Thing**
Change is chaotic. (Regular church life, whatever that is, tends to have its own chaos anyway!) It is easy to be distracted by the day to day minutia, problems, puzzles, and people issues that inevitably crop up. At least one leader has to remain attentive to the real reason you are doing whatever you’re doing—making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

You will need to make this vision plain and appealing. You will probably explain and interpret over and over again. Be patient and consistent. Be invitational and gracious. Keep your eye on the main thing.
**Discussion Questions and Practical Helps**

*Use these questions to engage your church leaders in reflection and action toward congregational vitality.*

- Do any of the ministry areas have descriptions of what you expect from the ministry and those who lead those ministries? (See Guidelines for Leading Your Congregation.)
- What structures do you have in place to help your members identify their gifts and skills for ministry (whether in the church or in the community)? How nimble is that structure?
- What would your congregation look like if you established and insisted on a more rigorous set of standards and expectations for all your leaders?
- If you wanted to institute some changes, who are the leaders and stakeholders whose help and guidance you should seek out first?
- To make those changes, what first three things would you do? When will you do them? Who will help to hold you accountable and offer support as you do?

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**Resources**

Look for other resources at [www.gbod.org](http://www.gbod.org) and [www.cokesbury.com](http://www.cokesbury.com)

*Creating Job Descriptions.* For more samples for professional positions, go to [www.cef.org](http://www.cef.org) and check under Resources.

*Evaluating Your Ministry.* A guide to help establish measures and evaluate what you do.

*Keep the End in Mind.* Useful for beginning teachers or teams to keep your eye on the main thing.

*Recruiting, Nurturing, and Supporting Effective Teachers.* More on working with teachers and leaders.

Look for other occasional papers in the Pathways to Congregational Vitality series.

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This pamphlet is prepared by the Discipleship Group at the General Board of Discipleship of The United Methodist Church and may be reprinted for use in the local church © 2011 GBOD.

For more information about the needs and requirements in specific ministry areas, see the leadership series Guidelines for Leading Your Congregation, which includes

- Christian Education
- Evangelism
- Finance
- Small Group Ministry
- Stewardship
- Worship

Go to [www.cokesbury.com](http://www.cokesbury.com) or call 1-800-672-1789.