

Volunteer Appreciation

What comes after Easter? After the excitement of Christmas and New Year's Day? Life comes next. Every day is followed by a new day if our path is still unfolding. And each new day comes with a fresh set of choices and by those choices we create our life—day by day.

Unity of Lehigh Valley is a spiritual community—a church is more than a building—and we create it day by day with our choices. Volunteers are those people who choose to embark upon a path of spiritual development. What?! You thought they just agreed to make coffee or babysit the kids downstairs or sing on Sunday? Oh no! Volunteering is a commitment to spiritual growth, whether you make the choice consciously or unconsciously. Of course, your consciousness does impact your outcomes.

On the website Energize, devoted to volunteer leaders, I found this definition of volunteering: “To choose to act in recognition of a need, with an attitude of social responsibility and without concern for monetary profit, going beyond one's basic obligations.” To act in recognition of a need: church has many needs from tending the flower beds to supporting the spiritual growth of our youth to cleaning up after a meal we've shared to governing and leading this organization to its highest good. Volunteers respond to a need without concern for monetary profit and go beyond the basic obligation of church attendance. Well that is easy. Unity has really no obligations for attendance and few for membership. So in a conscious or unconscious awareness, the choice to volunteer and go beyond the basic obligations enrolls us in spiritual growth. Spiritual growth is one of our core values and it's the one we celebrate this month. Let's look again at how we define spiritual growth:

You can take any set of spiritual principles and apply it to volunteering and generate a laboratory for spiritual growth and deepening understanding. We could apply the Eightfold Path of Enlightenment, the Four Agreements or Unity's Five Basic Principles and they would all apply to volunteering and produce lessons. Of course, we also have to recognize that we are not always ready for the lessons life presents. So we don't always choose the path of

growth; sometimes we get stuck in our present thinking and it produces some interesting outcomes. We can rest assured, however, that life will present the lesson again and again until we are ready to progress.

I have two very different hopes for today's sermon. The first is to honor the contributions our volunteers make and the very real difference they make in the community of ULV. The second is to inspire our volunteers in new ways and to inspire those who have never volunteered to step into the next phase of their spiritual growth. So we'll see how it comes out.

Unity's Five Basic Principles are printed on the bulletin so we can see how they might result in spiritual growth in the volunteer experience.

The first principle is: There is only One Presence and One Power, God the Good. Everyone knows that and since we're volunteering in church, we're all certainly clear on that. Right? What about when our experience doesn't feel like "good" to us? Does that mean that God is not in the experience or that God is not good? Or is the good some potential we just have not uncovered, a lesson still unfolding? Or is there another power at work? Sometimes we have to examine who we are serving when we volunteer. Occasionally we volunteer to serve ego. When receiving constructive criticism, the volunteer who serves Spirit says, "Thanks for the input. Let's see how we can make this work better." The volunteer who serves ego says, "Well if you don't like the way I do it, you can just do it yourself." This is usually followed by stomping off. Ego feels victorious and the volunteering lesson is over. Or ego is hurt and shamed and the volunteer simply stops showing up. Ego slinks away to lick its wounds and the volunteering lesson is over—at least until some says, "Are you still volunteering?"

The second principle is: There is divinity in each one of us, the I AM or the Christ of our being. We often speak about seeing the Christ in each other. In volunteering we get the opportunity to see the Christ of our own being and the Christ of our teammates, our leader, even our minister. This may not always be a clear vision. The I AM may be the light under the basket of some less attractive, very human behaviors.

Volunteering first gives us the opportunity to discern the gifts that are ours to give. We may discover new gifts we were unaware of or we may discover that our divinity does not manifest as a particular gift and a volunteer position we

long for is simply not our place of service. Either scenario can be a challenging opportunity for spiritual growth. We get uncomfortable being called higher than we believe we are capable. It can feel like a burden or a stretch beyond our abilities. Also, we may move to a place of lack or unworthiness if we discern a particular gift is not one of ours. There is no lack in us, just a different expression of spirit. There is courage in saying, “I need to find a different way to serve.” There is courage in saying, “I am not sure how I’ll do it but I am willing to try.” There are courageous volunteers among us now.

Volunteering also gives us the opportunity to discern the Christ Light under the basket of our team’s behaviors. Everyone has their own experiences, filters and behaviors. Spiritual growth is remaining centered in the Christ Light and finding a new way of responding to the behaviors. We offer classes like Compassionate Communication and “I of the Storm”. We have adopted the covenants of *Agreeing to Disagree in Love* as a way of dialoging in exploration of what is coming up for healing in conflict. And, if we are not ready for the lessons, we may simply walk away from volunteering. We may let conflict destroy the work of a team, the progress of the church, the growth of our community consciousness. The important thing to remember is that everything is a choice. There is never just one outcome, one way to approach a situation. Volunteering gives us all an opportunity to learn and grow together.

A third principle is the law of mind action: the idea that we create our experiences, our material world and our church with our thoughts. We have touched on that a bit already. We have a mission and vision statement to try to keep our thoughts centered. We have affirmations to guide the conditioning of our mind in positive directions. Yet we are all still human, still not ascended and in challenging situations, we revert to “stinking thinking”. We fall into old patterns. We affirm lack in our thoughts and words. We believe in failure. We set ourselves and our community up for what manifests from those thoughts. One of the challenging thoughts for volunteers that may almost be unconscious is, “It doesn’t really matter if I show up.” Or my favorite metaphysical malpractice, “It will be divine order and if I’m not there I trust whatever happens.” Do you understand that divine order is simply the outworking of principle based on the seeds planted? So when you plant lack,

“it doesn’t matter”, it manifests lack one way or another. When we commit to supporting some aspect of ULV with our time and talent, we create a fertile place for the seeds to flourish in that aspect of the ministry. When we say, “It doesn’t matter”, we create the soil of shifting sand and seeds have no place to root and grow.

Volunteering is the “work” of our faith. It is the hands and feet we give to the affirmations we speak. James 2: 26 says, “For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.” Our mission statement says, “United in love, we provide a positive environment”. No matter how loudly we say it or how often we affirm it, this cannot happen without the intentional acts of volunteers acting from their faith.

The fourth principle is the power of affirmative prayer. Every challenge we encounter in volunteering is an opportunity to practice accessing the power of affirmative prayer OR relying on past patterns of thought and experience. It honestly is a choice and we gain the opportunity to respond rather than react by taking a breath. In that very breath is our prayer for guidance, our affirmation of wholeness to be brought forth. Volunteers gain the experience of staying “prayed up” so that unexpected developments are part of the flow, not a disruption.

Finally, walking the talk and living the truth we know is the very basis of volunteering. Practicing the fifth principle by volunteering is choosing spiritual growth and living out the works of our faith.

The theme of this Volunteer Appreciation is the Starfish. I chose this based on this simple story by Loren Easley.

One day a man was walking along the beach when he noticed a boy picking something up and gently throwing it into the ocean. Approaching the boy, he asked, “What are you doing?”

The youth replied, “Throwing starfish back into the ocean. The surf is up and the tide is going out. If I don’t throw them back, they’ll die.”

“Son,” the man said, “don’t you realize there are miles and miles of beach and hundreds of starfish? You can’t make a difference”

After listening politely, the boy bent down, picked up another starfish, and threw it back into the surf. Then, smiling at the man, he said “I made a difference for that one.”

It is easy to say there is just too much to be done. It is easy to say I just don't have the gifts needed to do the work that needs to be done or I don't have time or someone else will be available. However, ULV is the spiritual community we enjoy today because every day volunteers choose to make a difference and pick up what is before them to do, staying in integrity with their words of commitment. Sometimes the difference is obvious and immediate, such as when a prayer chaplain prays with someone or when the AV team gets us through another Sunday service with sound and slides. Sometimes we may never know the difference we made in the life of a visitor we welcomed as a usher or offered a cup of tea after service. Years from now some young adult may make a healthy choice because of what she learned in youth ministry because someone cared enough to sit with her and believe in her. Someone no one really remembers gave us half of his estate because we made a difference in his life. Somehow, someone threw Bart Steinman back into the ocean and he acknowledged that. But volunteering is not done for just for the rewards we see; it is stepping into the field of spiritual growth confident that it makes a difference for us all.

Today I have little gifts of starfish as reminders that ULV deeply appreciates the spiritual growth and works of faith of all of our volunteers. Whether you serve on the board, bring food for fellowship or serve in some way you are never sure matters, please take a gift with you today as a token of our gratitude. Together, through staff and volunteers, we create Unity of Lehigh Valley as the instrument through which Spirit awakens the world to peace, harmony and abundance.

Let us affirm together: The work of my faith makes a difference!