Executive Summary

A Grounded Theory Emerging from a Case Study of Contributing Factors that Lead to
Significant Growth in Volunteerism in Youth For Christ USA Ministry Sites

Background Material

While Youth For Christ (YFC) is encouraged by the increasing number of lost kids in relationships with leaders, there is cause for concern about a national flatline in the number of Christian leaders engaged in ministry. For relational methodologies like YFC deploys, a stretching ratio threatens the strength and integrity of the most critical ministry relationships. Higher numbers of kids per leaders places taxing loads on the volunteers attempting to build meaningful relationships. A lack of growth in volunteerism limits the capacity of the otherwise growing movement, since the number of kids who come to Christ through Youth For Christ has often been correlated to the number of volunteers that can be mobilized to spend time in relationships with lost teens. The challenge of growing and retaining volunteer ranks is not unique to YFC. In fact, a 2004 national study of rural youth workers found that four out of the top five challenges reported by youth leaders had to do with volunteer management. They were (in weighted order):
1. Competing schedules [of children’ activities]

2. Time constraints of adult leaders

3. Cannot find enough leaders

4. Volunteer leaders get burned out

5. Lack of continuity, stability in youth group leadership (Goreham 344; emphasis mine)

I began the present inquiry with the following question in mind: If the entire Youth For Christ USA movement remains largely stagnant in the number of leaders, to whom could the organization look as exemplars? I conducted a case study of the top ten percent of ministry sites that have reported the most significant growth in volunteerism. Among these top growing ministry sites, I wanted to know what factors had led to the growing volunteer base in a YFC ministry site and then develop a theory that answered this question.

I chose grounded theory as the theoretical framework for this project. Through the data collection and comparison analysis, a theory emerged that I believe explains the factors that have contributed to the growth of these volunteer teams. This project utilized a mixed-method approach, including two layers of online surveys with sixty-three nationally-distributed volunteers and one round of recorded, semi-structured phone interviews with eight YFC staff directors who lead those same volunteers (herein “site directors”) at top-growth ministry sites. The interviews and surveys were primarily qualitative in nature, but they included some quantitative questions that helped to cross-correlate with influential demographics. Consistent with the grounded theory approach, the literature review was conducted concurrently with the surveys and interviews.
Research Questions

The primary question of this study is: *What contributing factors are causing the volunteer teams at high-growth ministry sites to increase in size?* The project is also designed to consider supporting questions such as:

1. Where did these volunteer leaders come from?
2. Why do they stay engaged?
3. What threatens their departure?

Interview Protocol

Thirty-one site directors were invited by email to participate in a sixty-minute phone interview. When a site director confirmed participation, he or she was sent a short eight-question, pre-qualification survey. Eleven of the thirty-one site directors responded to my first email. Of the eleven first responders, eight site directors passed through the pre-qualification instrument, which confirmed the growth rate of their volunteers against YFC’s provided sampling data. During the sixty-minute phone interviews, I worked through a series of questions in a semi-structured format. Keyword notes were taken and permission was gained to record the call. The recordings were reviewed immediately following the interview and compared to the keyword notes. I then began the process of coding the notes for emerging themes.

Survey Protocol

Following the sixty-minute phone interviews with the site directors, I sent an email requesting they send a special survey link to their volunteers. This approach provided me with
sixty-three survey responses from all eight ministry sites, as well as an entirely new data set.

Each survey was compared to previous surveys, and cross-correlated with the ministry site director phone interviews, in order to discover the emergence of a tentative core. Ultimately, the tentative core was strengthened from multiple data sources (including the literature review) which emerged into the grounded theory.

Conclusions

The grounded theory that emerged from this study has two primary components:

1. The ministry sites are led by site directors and volunteers who concentrate more on their own healthy, abiding relationship with Jesus Christ than on developing strong marketing or recruitment tactics. When asked, they unanimously and authentically deflect glory to God, who is primarily responsible for the “unexplainable” growth. This posture (and more importantly, the heart behind it) honors God and He is indeed rewarding their work.

2. Tactically, it is obvious that these leaders prioritize their time in building healthy relationships with area local churches and leveraging the local church as their cooperative base and primary recruitment pool. Whether these same healthy church relationships exist in stagnant ministry sites requires further research. My hypothesis is that they do not.

My grounded theory is that the two primary components above are sufficient to grow a volunteer team. However, I include four secondary themes in this theory, which may contribute tangibly, but only when supplemental to the two primary components described above:
• Longevity in ministry: A site director with at least six to eight years in youth work is more likely to grow a volunteer team (like 88% of interviewed site directors).

• Longevity at the same ministry site: A site director with at least three years at the same ministry site is more likely to have success in growing the team (like 100% of the interviewed site directors, whom had considerably more than three years at the same site on average).

• The site directors (and existing volunteer teams) who routinely and systemically present the “needs of kids” to prospective volunteers are more likely to grow their volunteer ranks (Most importantly, they present this need in local church contexts—or at least to audiences whose primary inclination for solution to the “need” includes a desire reach kids with the Gospel of Christ—instead of presenting the “need” in non-religious settings where the response is generically to “help kids.”).

• Successful site directors (and a strong majority of their deputized volunteers) regularly engage in direct, one-on-one “personal invitations and follow through” to prospective volunteers. Similar to naturally skilled salespersons, they are adept at “closing the deal” individually and directly. They do not rely on mass recruitment events, advertising campaigns, or public relations tactics (which is consistent with an abundance of available literature, confirmed by 75% of volunteer respondents point-of-entry).

I suppose that Jesus Himself negated the need for this entire study by directing us towards his own grounded theory: “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore
pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest” (ESV Study Bible, Mat. 9:37-38). No further inquiry is required. Faithful obedience is enough.
Works Cited
