



A Volunteering State of Mind

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Think you're too busy to volunteer? Think again. There are many ways to live a life of service.

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Lisa Dean-Erlander is about as busy as they come. Not only does she own a business and put in long workweeks, but the Boise, Idaho, Thrivent member has three teenagers, aging parents, and an exchange student at home. Yet she still does a ton of volunteering each summer: at church, in the community, and last summer doing repairs at a Bible camp in Montana. She is also involved in local politics and advocates for laws that benefit her community.

For Lisa, volunteering involves opening our eyes to community needs—and understanding that if we don't step up to help, perhaps no one else will.

"I believe our purpose for being on earth is to make the world a better place, and to do that we have to pitch in," she says.

Dean-Erlander isn't the only person who feels this way. Across the nation, volunteering is a high priority among those people considered the busiest: employed, college-educated, and middle-aged women, according to the most recent survey from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Yet lack of time is the most common reason many say they don't lend a hand, says the Stanford Center on Longevity.

"But you do have time. It's just where you prioritize it," says Eric Stolp, a Thrivent community engagement leader in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

Stolp and his wife have two young daughters, yet they make time to volunteer both individually and as a family. *"If things are important in your life, no matter how busy you are as a human being, you're going to make time for them,"* he says.

Here, Stolp, Dean-Erlander, and other real-world volunteers share why they help, how they manage their time, and how you can, too.



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Get Creative

Sometimes, volunteering means getting creative. Do you have children? Are you retired? How and when you volunteer can flex according to your life circumstances.

Jill Louis, an attorney in Dallas and a Thrivent Member Network–Texas Region board member, has prioritized volunteering all her life, even during her busiest periods. However, what that looks like has changed over the years, depending on her age, life stage, and financial ability.

"It's very important to leave a legacy of service, but you do this in different ways in different seasons in your life," Louis says. *"You have to pick the right way for the right season."* When her children were young, Jill was a hospital volunteer connecting new teen mothers with resources. Later, as her kids got older, she volunteered as a docent in the local museum's children's area.

Though she's still in a demanding career, her children are now grown, so Louis is at a different point on her *"arc of volunteerism,"* as she calls it. Today, she leads arts organizations, volunteers with The Links, Incorporated, is on the board at her alma mater, and also helps her husband, Randy Bowman, in launching a non-profit urban boarding experience for children in poverty.

For other people, like 85-year-old Carroll Hackbart of St. George, Kansas, volunteering becomes a passion later in life. The longtime Thrivent member began volunteering more when he retired, and he doesn't plan to stop anytime soon. He regularly builds Habitat for Humanity playhouses for nonprofit childcare facilities, delivers meals for homebound people, and more.

"Whenever there's an opportunity, I just go for it," Hackbart says. *"You're supposed to take care of your fellow man, you know? When you go back and see what you do, you get a good feeling, whether it's picking up food or delivering a hot meal to people."*

Find Your Passion

Deciding where to focus your energy can be as much of a stumbling block as finding the time. Jill Louis wanted to continue her parents' legacy of service, but when she was a young lawyer building her legal practice, time was scarce.

Becoming a member of her community's Junior League, which trains people in local volunteer options, was invaluable. Louis was able to learn both the real needs of her neighbors and how to identify her passions, two key things many say are critical to lifelong volunteerism.

"We want to share the love of God through our service. You have to be a portal for good in the world," Louis says. She notes, however, that this requires serving in an area that is a right fit for you personally. *"If you don't feel at home with the homeless or children, but you feel at home in the arts, that's your area."*





Others have discovered their service areas by identifying what ignites their heart and reflects their childhood values.

Lisa Dean-Erlander grew up watching her parents help others, particularly how they befriended a large Vietnamese immigrant family. Today, she continues what they started by helping her church be in ministry with other groups in the community.

Strong boundaries

Fearing that you'll be overwhelmed with requests for help also can be a barrier. Many people start as committed, enthusiastic volunteers, then become scared when they suddenly get called for everything just because they said yes once.

For Dean-Erlander, being a self-employed volunteer means people assume she has ample free time. *"It's easy to get roped into everything, so I have to set boundaries,"* she says. *"Sometimes I don't answer my phone, or somebody comes to the door, but I don't ask them in."*

Other times, the motivation to volunteer is there, but schedules don't mesh.

Stolp was excited when Craig Glass, a Thrivent Member Network–Rocky Mountain Region board member, started a Friday morning men's Bible study. But Stolp couldn't participate given his children's schedules. Instead of turning the entire family on end to accommodate this activity, Stolp made the decision to help in a different way: setting up chairs at 5 a.m. each Friday before the study begins.

"Even though I can't participate in the study, I can still get up and give back," Stolp says. ¹ Volunteering in the United States, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

Dean-Erlander advises people to work within their current limitations. For example, if you are homebound, don't jump through hoops to help in person, she says. Try phone banking instead. Or, if you are busy, ask if there is something you can do at a time that works for your schedule. Often there are more ways to volunteer than what appears on a sign-up sheet.

Realistic Expectations

At the end of the day, Stolp says, it's best to have realistic volunteering expectations. *"It starts with intentionality,"* he adds. *"Just take a simple step. If you enjoy knitting, Google 'knitting,' your city and 'volunteer opportunities,' and boom—there you go."*

Louis agrees. For her, it all comes down to the basics: having a willing spirit and making a decision to commit your time and heart. *"There's no greater feeling than when you allow God to be able to use you,"* she says. *"It's a lifestyle choice."*

