

RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

Introduction

This is a report of the discussions at a Seminar held at Long Crendon on May 10th 1997. It does not purport to be definitive but is an attempt at asking the relevant questions and providing some sort of answers to them. It is hoped that individual towers will consider the questions and answers as a framework for their own recruitment policy.

Towers differ in their needs and abilities to teach recruits. The contributors to the Seminar were very aware of these differences and that the proposed answers will not always be relevant in individual cases.

Towers should also bear in mind that their Branch and the Guild can provide help if it is required and it is hoped that tower leaders will not hesitate to ask for help if it is needed.

Recruitment

What for?

Before trying to recruit anybody, it is necessary to answer this question and to be clear what is being offered to the new recruit. Clearly the prime objective is to ensure that the bells are rung regularly for Sunday and other services. This service to the Church is a principal aim of the Guild's purpose and should be central to any recruiting campaign. It is also true that an active band of ringers can do a lot to raise the profile of the Church in the neighbourhood.

However, we are all aware that ringing offers much more. It is a cheap, absorbing hobby which brings together people of all ages and walks of life. The traditions, the social activities, the personal interest and satisfaction to be gained, the inherent companionship of ringers throughout the world and the focus of the Millennium are all factors to be presented to would be recruits.

Who?

Who make the best recruits?

We all have our own ideas of who might be the 'best' type of recruit but the group agreed that it was virtually impossible to be categorical here. Most people have the potential to be a ringer so anyone who expresses an interest will probably make a suitable recruit. We must remember that there are so many levels of activity within ringing that recruits may have differing aims when they start.

There are a number of skills which are desirable but it must be remembered that some of these may develop because of ringing. Such skills as reasonable co-ordination, sense of rhythm, ability to memorise/see patterns, determination, basic physical fitness and the ability to be a team member are all involved but above all the new recruit needs to have some commitment to learning to ring. Persistence and commitment are perhaps the prime attributes. If younger people are recruited, it is important to get the support of their parents.

Should any groups of people be approached or are Church groups best?

The general feeling was that any groups could provide a suitable recruiting situation. Clearly Church groups are more likely to be influenced by the 'service' aspect but all groups will probably be interested in other aspects of ringing. It was noted that by recruiting from a wider range we might well bring people into the Church. It was noted that recruiting family groups is often very satisfactory as they tend to support each other extremely well. Likewise, friends and lapsed ringers were identified as good groups to approach.

Are there any we should not try to recruit?

Members of the group felt very strongly that we should not turn anyone away if they show an interest. Even if they eventually decide that ringing is not for them, we must make sure that they take a positive image of ringers and ringing with them. It is clear that people with disabilities would need careful consideration as their training needs might well be different and it would not always be possible to find someone to train them. In coming to an agreement with a potential recruit, the safety of that recruit, the tutor and other ringers must be given a priority. In some cases a specified trial period may be worth considering.

Are there any 'best' age groups?

Again there was a strong feeling that we cannot be categorical about age. Young people tend to learn more quickly than more mature recruits because they are constantly in a high learning situation at school. But on the other hand young people can lose interest more quickly if other (peer group) interests come along. Older recruits usually are willing to give the commitment needed to learn and set themselves high standards.

Weight and 'go' of the bells may make it difficult for young people to learn in a particular tower and insurance cover may be another restriction. (The Guild insurance currently covers ringers who are 9 or over).

Should we approach groups or individuals?

Giving talks on ringing to groups is a good way of raising awareness and possible interest. It is worth noting that if one member of a group is sufficiently interested to follow up such a talk then others from the group quite often follow suite. Groups such as the various Church groups, Scouts/Guides/Youth Clubs, schools and local interest groups are all worth exploring as is the idea of a short Adult Education Course. Wedding couples and new parishioners are other groups who could be approached.

On the other hand, talking to individuals has the potential to really engage them if our enthusiasm and interest are obvious to the listener. This is also true when talking to families and friends. An invitation to 'come and see what happens' is very difficult to refuse in this type of situation and once someone has entered the tower the first big step has been achieved. Lapsed ringers can often be persuaded to come back if the right personal approach is used.

How?

How can we get people interested?

The enthusiasm of those trying to recruit is probably the most influential factor in any recruiting campaign. If we demonstrate our own enthusiasm we are more likely to give the impression that there is something worth exploring in ringing.

Clearly, well planned events such as Tower Open Days/Evenings or talks to groups can be very fruitful and raise the profile of ringing. Frequent and interesting reports in local journals (newspapers, Parish Magazines, Village Newsletters etc.) have all proved their worth in attracting recruits. Advertising and good displays of ringing information all have a part to play particularly when these are situated in Museums, Libraries or associated with local events such as Shows, Fêtes etc. restoration projects give a particularly good opportunity to recruit new ringers because of the interest created in the work to be done.

It must be remembered that many recruitment campaigns take a while to take effect so the 'drip feed' approach can be useful with regular advertisements, posters etc.. However it is important to be positive in such campaigns and to vary the approaches used. Always make sure that a contact name and phone number are provided so that interested people can get in touch with someone quickly.

What do we say to them?

The detail of what is said to people clearly depends on their interests and personality. However, in general terms, it is important to be positive and stress the enjoyment and advantages of ringing to the individual. Approaches which stress the traditions need to be used with care. Young people for instance, may not be too influenced by this approach but may be more attracted by the social aspects of ringing particularly when there is a group of youngsters

involved. The 'collectors' aspect of visiting other towers and badge schemes may also appeal to younger people.

Care must be exercised in mentioning the commitment involved and the length of time it takes to learn. We need commitment but it can be rather daunting to a potential recruit if it is stressed too early on. It is much better to suggest they try ringing for a while and introduce the commitment aspect once they are 'hooked'

Will what we say differ for different age groups?

This has been partially answered in the previous section. What is clear is that whatever is said must be delivered with enthusiasm and a desire to interest the listener.

Will what we say differ for individuals or groups?

The material for a talk to a group must be well researched and illustrated as well as being made relevant to the group concerned. Talking to individuals about ringing can be much more informal than this. The first objective is to interest the listener in the subject matter.

Will what we say to church groups be different to what we say to other groups?

Church groups are more likely to identify with the 'service to the Church' aspect of ringing than others but in terms of general content there is probably little difference. Making it interesting is still the most important aspect of what is said.

Are there approaches to recruitment which are counterproductive?

It has been mentioned before that negative statements can be very off putting and regular appeals for recruits which lack impact are also unlikely to succeed in attracting new ringers.

Which opportunities are best?

There probably isn't a 'best' situation for recruiting, but restoration projects, Church Fêtes, Village/town events, open days are all good events for raising the profile of ringing.

How many?

This must depend on the availability of competent teachers and the size of the existing band but needs to be a decision made by the whole band. Groups of learners tend to be better because of the group dynamics involved but care must be taken to make sure that they are all kept interested. This is particularly true for young people. Too many learners and the opportunities to progress can be lessened both for the recruits and for more established members of the band. On the other hand, individuals can make very rapid progress if they are integrated with the rest of the band as soon as possible. The number of bells suitable for learners may also be a limiting factor.

Should we try to accommodate all who come?

The general consensus was that we are likely to lose volunteers if they are made to wait before learning. If there are too many for the local band to cope with, serious thought should be given to involving other local towers or the Branch both in terms of tutors, helpers or use of suitable bells.

Are there advantages or disadvantages to having waiting lists?

Again the general feeling was that waiting lists probably wouldn't work too well, particularly with young people who will quickly find other avenues to explore. Obviously there may be an

attraction for some in the fact that there is a 'queue' waiting to learn but we will probably lose more than we gain.

Does the Millennium Project affect our views?

The focus of the Millennium Project will hopefully give some impetus to recruitment and an extra dimension to creating interest, but attracting and training new ringers is something we should be doing all the time. Well-established bands that usually have a policy of teaching only one or two learners per year may need to reconsider this, particularly if there is an increase in interest. (Do we have the right to turn anyone away in any case?)

Is it best to have mixed age groups?

Most of us will probably not have the luxury of having to consider this question. There are clear advantages in having similarly aged recruits in a group or having mixed age groups. Ringing as a whole has a very broad spectrum of ages and this is quite often reflected in our groups of recruits. With mixed age groups there is a potential problem of the younger learners making rapid progress in the early stages causing the more mature learners to lose heart. Great care needs to be taken to avoid this loss of interest.

Who should decide how many?

The whole band, as well as those doing the teaching, should be consulted on the numbers to be trained at a time. The learners will not progress well without the wholehearted support of the other ringers. When a new band is being recruited, then the teachers and their helpers will need to agree on a suitable number in discussion with the incumbent and other church personnel.

How can towers support each other when training recruits?

We know that recruits progress more quickly when they can ring at other towers and it is to be hoped that neighbouring towers will be able to support each other by welcoming each other's learners to their practices. New bands particularly need the support and encouragement of other towers and the local branch. Other ways in which help can be given is by making offers of help with the teaching or to help at learner's practices.

Is there a difference in training one or a group?

In terms of the progression, there is little difference but managing a group can be more demanding on time and energy as well as imagination in keeping their interest. But if this is done, the group dynamics involved can be an asset in maintaining interest. In all cases it is important to make sure that the learners' time in the tower is used profitably, particularly when they are not actually ringing. Group and individual activities need to be arranged to help to keep their interest.

When?

When do we need to take on more recruits?

Ideally it is best to take on new recruits before the situation becomes desperate. It has been suggested that 2 or 3 ringers per bell is a good size for a band and, to maintain this, it may be necessary to teach a few recruits each year, taking them in one or two at a time. Taking on more new recruits when there are already several in the band can be counter productive.

Are there 'best' times to start training recruits?

There were various views, ranging from "whenever I can get a recruit" to specific times. One suggestion was that it would be a good time after the summer holidays, with a goal of ringing

for Christmas and the New Year. Another was that, for younger children, the Easter before they leave Primary School is a good time to start. Clearly it is important that the recruits and the teachers can commit themselves to the time involved to learn with as few 'breaks' as possible.

Retention

What level of dropout is reasonable?

It is probably inevitable that there will be some drop out from our recruits. However, we should not be satisfied with the usual level of retention. It is often reported that 50 - 100% of our recruits leave. If this is the case, it is clearly not a satisfactory level of retention and we may need to rethink our approach to training.

Why do learners leave?

There are a variety of reasons why recruits leave. Some of them such as deciding that ringing really isn't something for them, pressures of work, moving house etc. we may not be able to do much about. Other reasons such as being frightened, feeling frustrated at a lack of progress, lack of parental support, finding it difficult, having some unfortunate experience such as a broken stay or a personality clash with the tutor or other ringer, we can do a lot about. Tutors need to be confident, competent, enthusiastic and sympathetic to the needs of the learners. Ringing needs to be interesting and enjoyable if it is to compete with the many other activities that lay claim on the learner's time.

The training we give must be of as high a quality as possible, take in the individual needs of the learner by providing a rate of learning which is satisfying and challenging for them. Some wish to see themselves making rapid progress whilst others need a steadier pace. In both cases, the learner will need constant reassurance that they are doing well. Probably the biggest help in the early stages, is to have frequent 'tied bell' practices to teach the recruit to handle a bell. By this we mean at least two or three sessions a week. In this way, they can be incorporated into the normal ringing of the band as soon as possible.

It is also vital that the learner is given a variety of activities to help keep their interest and that they are welcomed into the tower by all the band.

An award scheme such as The Bell Club is certainly worth using to help maintain this interest.

Why do more experienced ringers leave?

Apart from changing personal circumstances, the most likely reason for a more experienced ringer leaving will be frustration at lack of progress. This can easily happen if a band has a number of new recruits and the practice nights are given over completely to helping them. Sensitive organisation by the Tower Captain to ensure that all the band are catered for is vital to avoid this. 'Something for everyone' is a good goal.

There will always be a few personality clashes, but with an open style of tower management in which the whole band are involved in decisions, many of these can be avoided or diffused before they lead to conflict and ringers leaving.

It may be worthwhile considering a change of time or day for practice in order to accommodate band members who have difficulties related to their work or other responsibilities.

Why do others stay?

There are a number of reasons why people stay in ringing. Loyalty or commitment to the band/tower/church, following the example of other ringers, feeling involved, contentment with what they get from their ringing (at whatever level) are the most common. What we need to do is to cultivate these in our ringers.

What do we mean by a 'welcoming tower'?

A welcoming atmosphere in which all the ringers whatever their standard, feel valued and give and receive friendship is vital to maintaining a band of ringers. If our new recruits come into such an atmosphere, they will be encouraged to stay. It is important that all the band offer help and friendship to the newcomers. Having a varied programme of social activities, outings, dinners, barbecues etc. and making sure that the new members are involved in these will also be of great help in creating the feeling of belonging we need to encourage.

The physical appearance of the ringing chamber can also help to create the right atmosphere. A clean, warm, attractively furnished and well-maintained room can make all the difference.

Managing a band is a demanding job, and, if possible, towers should seriously consider changing officers every few years to give people a rest, encourage others and encourage new ideas.

What do we mean by good, stimulating training?

It has been mentioned before that high quality teaching in which the learner quickly feels secure and confident is essential. We can all learn something from discussing our approaches with each other or on courses so we must not be complacent that what we have done for years is necessarily the best way. All learners are different and may need differing approaches and it is essential to give them specific objectives as they progress so that they can begin to measure their progress. It is also essential to provide as much other activity as possible, using handbells, 'theory' sessions on call changes and methods, and background information on the history of bells and ringing can all help.

How can we involve our learners in the activities of the band?

Early involvement is clearly essential in creating the right attitude to band membership. Bands differ in their attitude to when to involve recruits in service ringing. Whatever your view, it is important to get them involved in it as soon as possible. There are many other activities such as tolling the service bell, helping with the belfry office, helping to organise social activities etc. which do not require particular ringing skills and so can involve the recruits. Remember that many people are reluctant to volunteer but will gladly help if asked.

When is it best to involve learners in Sunday Service ringing and Branch/Guild events?

Views on this question vary. Some like to have recruits come to service ringing as soon as they start and ring rounds on one stoke only whereas others use service ringing as an objective and involve them when they can ring competent rounds. This has to be a decision for the local band and the tutor. In terms of Branch and Guild events, the sooner recruits become involved the better as it will give them an added dimension to their ringing. Clearly, there is little point in them attending Branch practices until they can benefit from them. This usually means being able to ring competent rounds and possibly call changes but again this is a decision for the local Branch. Attendance at social events is clearly not dependent on ringing ability and should be encouraged as soon as possible so that the recruit meets other ringers. What is important is that all Branch members are welcoming to the newcomers.

What are the implications to other tower/Branch members?

The main implication has to be one of welcoming and encouraging newcomers. Learners are easily put off by unhelpful or excessive criticism from others. This also involves other ringers in being prepared to ring rounds etc with the learners. Reluctance to participate or mutterings about "not more rounds" do not go unnoticed and can quickly lower the learner's motivation and self esteem.

Is it feasible or desirable for each learner to have a 'mentor'?

This is a system which has been used in some towers and can involve a number of tower members. It involves a member of the band making sure that the recruit can, and does, get to practice or service ringing, encouraging them, taking them to Branch/Guild events and generally offering friendship. Whether you use the system as such in your tower is clearly a tower decision, but even if you don't, it is important that the recruit receives the support in some form or other. It is sometimes the case that younger recruits have difficulty getting to the tower and may need lifts.

How can the Branch/Guild support towers?

The Branch/Guild structure is set up to offer support to towers in whatever form it is needed. It is important that towers ask for help if they need it and that Branch officers make it part of their duty to find out what help is needed. In order to provide this, other members are usually prepared to help but may well need to be asked specifically. Many ringers are reactive rather than proactive.

The general impetus for help must come from the towers and tower bands should be prepared to ask if necessary. Branch officers can sometimes identify where help is needed and offer this help, but are not always aware of the detailed needs of a tower. Discussion between tower and Branch/Guild is essential if the potential help available is to be used effectively.