“How do I maximize my chapter so that members’ needs are met and people love to help out?” It’s one of the biggest questions that Mended Hearts and Mended Little Hearts members ask, and a breakout workshop at the Dallas convention earlier this year shed some light on the subject.

In Finding and Engaging Members: A Practical Approach, Pamela Donahoo, CAE, executive director of American Mensa in Arlington, Texas, shared her top 10 tips for identifying and engaging members — and we’ve expanded them here for Mended Hearts and Mended Little Hearts.
1 See yourself as others see you — and ask yourself these questions:

Does your active membership look like those you are recruiting?
What does your website say to potential new members?
Do other volunteers openly welcome newcomers?
Do you know how to speak to and attract a different demographic?

The No. 1 reason people return to a group meeting is because they make connections and feel that people truly care about them. You can help attendees feel welcome by:

- Assigning a greeter so that guests are warmly greeted by a friendly face.
- Going around the room for quick introductions. Let guests or new members share a little about themselves.
- Following up with guests (be sure to get their contact information). A phone call can make people feel welcome, while email may seem impersonal. Send a signed welcome letter or thank-you note as soon as possible.
- Learn how to attract people of different ages, races, cultures or lifestyles, and make sure your group is open to them. This may mean making your meetings accessible on a bus line or in an area that’s easy to get to. If you have a website, be sure it shows diverse pictures and uses open and welcoming language. People join when they connect with people similar to themselves.
- Recognize new members who join in the newsletter and at the next meeting.

2 Volunteers don’t always look and act the same — they contribute in different ways.

Don’t insist that people who want to help take a formal role or title. Ask new members to fill out a form to share their interests and talents. If someone loves photography, get them involved by asking them to take pictures at your next event. Be sure to ask them personally rather than sending an email to the whole chapter. People are more likely to volunteer if they are asked personally to help out.

Think beyond traditional volunteers. Sometimes the best volunteers are not heart patients or CHD parents. Caregivers of heart patients, including spouses, parents, children, grandchildren, neighbors and siblings, can make great volunteers. You might also consider partnering with other organizations on events to increase your volunteer base. And try online resources like volunteermatch.com.

3 Respect people’s time and calendars.

Setting events and programs in advance helps your chapter or group leaders feel more in control and put meetings on their calendars. Be sure to get your meeting information to cardiologists and other healthcare professionals so they can post it in their offices and alert the local media. Newspapers may post meetings in the health section for free with enough notice.

Varying the times and days of the week helps get different people to meetings. Always holding the meeting on the same day will inevitably exclude some people. Consider rotating between two different days and times and doing occasional events on a different day. You’ll have a better chance of meeting the needs of more people.

Some chapters alternate meeting locations every other month — meetings are held at one hospital one month and a second location the next time. This makes it more convenient to attend — and people feel like they don’t have to travel a long distance each month.

4 Remember that there isn’t always a fit.

Sometimes a volunteer isn’t right for the job. Recognize the trouble, toss a life ring and try to find another opportunity. A volunteer that’s a bad match can do more harm than no volunteer, and a bad experience can turn someone away from your organization forever.

It can be hard when a volunteer thinks he or she is a good fit for a certain role. Try finding an alternative role that is more suited for his or her talents. You could also objectively explain (using examples) why it’s not a good fit. Don’t blame or call names — just kindly point out that this may not be the best fit. Ask the volunteer if he or she has any solutions that might help or other areas of interest. This prevents the volunteer from feeling forced out of a role.

5 Avoid being a martyr leader.

Success will be about the work of others … not you. Don’t fall into the trap of thinking, “It’s easier to do it myself.” “That’s not how we do things.” “If I don’t do it, who will?”

This can be very hard for the doers out there, but you don’t want to burn yourself out — let others do things or let go of them. If no one will do it, maybe it doesn’t need to be done. Figure out what your chapter or group can do with the volunteers you have and be open to offers of help.
Finding and Engaging Members:
A Practical Approach

Also, be open to new ideas so that meetings don’t get stale. If you’re spending a lot of time on the business part of your meeting, consider taking care of business before the actual meeting, then start the meeting with icebreakers and speakers to liven things up.

Ask your members for feedback. They often have great ideas about doing things differently to keep the meeting energetic. Ask the member who makes the suggestion to get involved to help implement the idea or chair or champion it.

6 Minimize meetings!
Who needs or wants more meetings? Choose your meetings wisely, and try to pick times that accommodate those who work and locations that are convenient to where people live. Make it inviting and fun! Be creative and use terms like “educational workshop,” “educational program,” “fall member gathering” or another name that doesn’t imply work or boredom.

In addition, make sure people leave feeling that they got something out of the meeting. They need to leave with some helpful information that they didn’t have when they came in. You might end the meeting by asking, “What was the most helpful thing you learned?” You could also have handouts or educational materials, small items like MHI or MLH pens, wristbands or other donated items. Of course, the best way to encourage people to return is to make them feel welcome and supported, like they have developed new relationships with caring people.

7 Go where the prospective members are — don’t always expect them to come to you.
Sometimes it’s easier to have meetings at hospitals, and the benefit is that heart patients or CHD parents can attend if they are able to walk around the hospital. But sometimes a place other than a hospital makes members feel more relaxed (especially during cold or flu season.) Think about meeting at a coffee shop, grocery store, bookstore, community center, church, mall, walking trail or rehab center.

8 Reach members with a variety of communications.
This could include email, regular mail, Facebook or Twitter, depending on your audience. Not all members use computers, so don’t rely only on interaction over the computer. Communicate in a variety of ways to increase your chances of getting more people to attend meetings and to volunteer.

Make sure to include a meeting flyer or card with local contact phone numbers and meeting location and times in your educational visiting packs. A few days before the meeting, send reminders (a phone call, email reminder or postcard). Newsletters should include dates for the next several months so people can plan ahead.

9 Don’t make volunteering like work.
The key is engagement. Make it fun. Be the party! Heart disease and heart defects aren’t happy subjects, but gatherings can still be enjoyable. Plan some lighthearted activities while letting members know that while it’s OK to be sad, angry and scared, they can still have some fun and enjoy themselves. Sharing stories is inspirational and healing, so capture some each month in your newsletter or other communication.

10 Channel your inner passion by showing yours.
When things are hectic or when we feel like no one is stepping up, it can be hard to remember why we do what we do. Think back to when you needed support and would have loved to have had MHI or MLH — or, when you were so thankful that you did.

Use your passion to move forward and make your group great. You are a leader in an organization that helps so many people. Don’t take volunteers for granted! Always recognize them — with a word of thanks and in the newsletter — however large or small the task. It takes a village of many volunteers to continue to grow a community organization.