

Wondering through Service Learning

Mark Jackson, Trinity Lutheran College

PRE-LESSON INFORMATION:

SESSION DESCRIPTION

Service learning moves service projects and mission trips from one-time events to experiences that open minds and hearts to new ways of thinking and acting. For example, youth might ponder tough questions about poverty in your hometown, notice the incredible artistry within God's creation, or glimpse the wisdom of a senior citizen in a simple conversation. By emphasizing adequate preparation, intentional reflection, and sharing stories with others, service experiences can be brought to life in profound, astonishing ways.

ELCA FAITH PRACTICES

- Study
- Serve

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Participants will:

- Desire to engage in a service or mission experience to address a current topic or issue
- Understand how the service learning process can be used to enhance service and mission experiences
- Be able to identify and beginning planning a potential local service experience that addresses an identified topic or issue

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Computer, projector, and screen for PowerPoint that accompanies this session
- Ability to access and project video that accompanies this session (if utilized)
- Sticky notes or index cards (several per participant)
- Service Project Planning Guide handout (see appendix; one copy per person)
- Pens or pencils

LESSON PLAN:

Introduction

Welcome the participants to today's workshop. Explain that the session will explore how service experiences can be utilized to help youth explore and wonder about topics and issues that are important to them and your community. Your group will have the opportunity to identify what those topics might be, as well as consider how to engage in a service, mission, or immersion experience that provides an opportunity to reflect on the topic or issue.

Getting into the Conversation: Why Service?

First, we turn attention to exploring the role of service and mission experiences and the powerful impact they can have on youth.

To begin thinking about this session's topic, ask participants to find a partner and spend 3-4 minutes discussing the following two questions:

- What impact can service experiences have on youth?
- What role might service and mission experiences play in "opening up" important topics and issues relevant in their lives and in today's world?

Invite the whole group together and ask 3-4 participants to briefly share responses or thoughts.

We Wonder – Identifying Issues and Topics

The following exercise is intended to identify a number of topics and issues that your group might be able to wonder about together (and later used to discuss a service experience that might aid your group in exploring issues further).

Pass out sticky notes or index cards (several to each participant). Ask participants to consider:

- What issues do you think or wonder about? What concerns you?
- What controversial issues are being faced in our community?
- What are "hot topic" issues in our nation or world?

Give participants a couple of minutes (on their own) to brainstorm responses. Ask them to write one topic or issue per note/card and encourage them to come up with several. Remind participants these might be topics that are difficult to talk about, are controversial, or don't necessarily have an easy answer. (If you need to provide suggestions, you might offer several, such as homelessness, violence, immigration, senior citizens, bullying, racism, terrorism, water shortage, climate change, world hunger, etc. Or, you might suggest they think of major issues talked about in the news recently.)

As they finish, have participants post their responses on a wall or board (if sticky notes) or spread them on the floor or a flat surface (if index cards). Ask a couple

of individuals to help group the notes/cards according to themes, moving them around as necessary. Other participants may offer suggestions as they observe the process. The goal is to quickly identify similarities among responses and group them accordingly. Don't be too concerned about making the categories perfect.

Describe what you see as the topics or issues that seem to have emerged for the group (for instance, "Over here I see ... We've also identified ... Over there I see ..."). Invite sharing if a particular response needs further explanation, though affirm responses (i.e., do not question or make fun of responses). Continue to move or reorganize topics if necessary. You might end the exercise with a statement such as "Wow, we've identified a lot of issues and topics we can wonder about and discuss together."

(Note: As an alternative to this exercise, you could plan an extended time together and take your group for a brief walk in a neighborhood or community around your church or another part of town. Have participants think and wonder about what issues/topics/questions emerge as they observe the context.)

We Wonder – Digging Deeper into Issues

From the exercise above, identify one issue that your group can use for the following discussion. You might choose the topic/issue that seemed to be more common, generated comments or interest from the group, or is more controversial. The goal of the exercise is to dig deeper into describing an issue that has been identified.

Invite conversation on the following questions, spending a couple of minutes on each set. You may wish to invite a participant to write responses on a board or large paper; paraphrase as needed to keep the conversation moving.

- What's the issue/problem/question? How can it be defined?
- Who does it involve? Who has a stake? Who is affected?
- What perspectives exist concerning the issue? What do people say and do regarding the issue? Where is there controversy or conflicting views?

(Note: If your group is larger than 10-12, you may wish to split into smaller groups, perhaps assigning a different topic to each group. Adapt as needed.)

We Wonder – We Learn and Act

The group now has the opportunity to consider how a service or mission experience can "open the issue" identified earlier. The purpose is to design a service experience based on what the group might wonder about and use the

service learning process to provide insights, dig deeper, or bring about a solution.

Write the topic or issue identified earlier in large letters on the board or a large piece of paper. Make sure the topic is clear, summarized in 1-5 words. Below, write “What if we ...?”

Ask participants to think of a service, mission, or immersion experience that would allow the group to explore the issue, posed in the form of a question beginning with “What if we ...?” Invite participants to share as many responses as possible. (For example, if your group identified an environmental concern, responses might include a highway litter cleanup project, assisting with [or starting] a neighborhood community garden, planting trees, or touring a local water treatment facility.)

You might need to challenge participants to think beyond service projects (in which participants “do” something tangible) and consider immersion experiences (such as visiting an individual, organization, or community) for the sake of listening and learning more about the topic.

Introduction to Service Learning

This segment utilizes the video that accompanies the session. A script with the video’s content is provided in the appendix for leader use in preparing the lesson and for those who do not have access to or do not wish to utilize the video during the session.

Play the video that accompanies this session to introduce the service learning model and how it can be used to open up possibilities for youth to wonder about, explore, and wrestle with topics important to the group.

Try It Out: Using Service Learning

Your group now has the opportunity to begin creating a service, mission, or immersion experience using three key elements of service learning (introduced in the section above). For this exercise, choose an example from the “What if we ...?” exercise earlier. You might choose the idea that seemed to have the most energy surrounding it, is unique, or you as the leader see potential for combining meaningful service with a learning opportunity. Alternatively, you could have suggest three options and have the group decide or vote to choose one.

Pass out copies of “Service Learning Planning Guide” (see appendix) to each participant. Spend 10-15 minutes (adjust according to the time you have remaining) working through the worksheet to develop a potential outline for a

service learning experience. (Note: If your group is larger than 10-12, you may wish to split into smaller groups and compare thoughts later. Adapt as needed.)

As the leader, keep the conversation lively and moving forward; don't become too involved in specific details. If your group intends to move forward with an actual service experience, additional planning time will likely be required.

(Note: It might be difficult to determine what your group might do for the debrief and sharing stages until after the actual service experience happens. Even so, be intentional now in thinking how you might make space for these important elements of service learning, even if details are determined later.)

A Final Note: Unresolved Issues

Remember there may not be an “easy answer” to every question, issue, or topic; in fact, many issues that are important to us or are controversial are incredibly complex and may not be answered or quickly resolved. As you engage in service learning experiences, trust the Holy Spirit's work in aiding participants to wonder about, wrestle with, and be challenged by important issues of the day. Service learning experiences can offer fresh perspectives and insights, lead to changes in attitudes and behaviors, reconstruct understanding of another culture, identify systemic issues, affirm or open a vocational calling, and more. Ultimately, the hope is that your participants move toward more faithful action in responding to issues and topics that are important in their lives or within the group, community, or world.

Closing the Conversation

Thank the group for their participation and make any final remarks or announcements. Then offer this closing prayer (or one of your own):

Gracious God, give us insight into issues we think and wonder about, questions we wrestle with, concerns we raise, challenges we face, opportunities we identify, and stories we share. Provide us with courage to wonder and explore, and call us into a faithful response as Christians in the world. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

SUPPLEMENTAL INFORMATION:

SUGGESTED RESOURCES

The following are suggested as resources for further exploration of this session's topic.

Service and Learning Leadership Team (SALLT) Project at Trinity Lutheran College. Resources, videos, and links for leading service and mission experiences utilizing an intentional four-step service learning process. Learn more and access free resources at www.sallt.org.

"The Story of Service," Practice Discipleship 2015. Explore the concept of "story" and how service learning can be used to listen to, embrace, and honor the stories of others. Access session resources at www.practicediscipleship.org.

Digging In: A Leader's Guide to Service Learning. ELCA World Hunger, 2013. A guide for planning service and mission experiences related to food, hunger, and poverty. Order a free copy or download at <http://resources.elca.org> (search "Digging In").

Talking Together as Christians about Tough Social Issues. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1999. A multi-session resource providing guidance to conversations about difficult social issues and topics. Order from <http://resources.elca.org> (search "Talking Together").

Act 2Day 4 Tomorrow. ELCA World Hunger, 2015. A four-session curriculum for youth groups to experience the spiritual practice of fasting for 24 hours built around the theme of table fellowship. Order a free copy at <http://resources.elca.org> (search "Act 2 Day").

Powell, Kara E., and Brad M. Griffin. *Deep Justice Journeys Leader's Guide: 50 Activities to Move from Mission Trips to Missional Living*. Zondervan/Youth Specialties, 2009. A leader's guide for designing mission trips with deeper purpose and attention to critical justice issues.

Journeys for Youth. Online list of service experiences available at Lutheran camp and retreat centers across the United States. Learn more and find locations at www.journeysforyouth.org/service-journeys.html.

Thrivent Action Teams. A program for members of Thrivent Financial to identify and fund short-term local projects that meet community needs. Learn more at www.thrivent.com/actionteam.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Mark Jackson is Professor & Chair of Children, Youth & Family Studies at Trinity Lutheran College in Everett, Wash., teaching courses in youth and family ministry, program planning, and organization administration. Through the Service And Learning Leadership Team (SALLT) Project, he develops training and

resources for youth ministry leaders in creating meaningful service and mission experiences using an intentional service learning model.

APPENDIX

Ideas for Reflection on Service Experiences

- *keep a reflection journal*
- *write a poem*
- *compose music or write a song*
- *paint a picture, draw, or doodle*
- *capture and share photographs*
- *gather for group conversation*
- *create a photo slideshow*
- *produce a video*
- *choreograph a dance*
- *create a sculpture*
- *create a dramatic presentation (such as monologue, skit, or pantomime)*
- *design a brochure, information sheet, or flyer*
- *create a blog, inviting each person to contribute reflections*
- *use lectio divina or other reflective prayer practices*
- *create an artistic piece from items collected at the service site*
- *create a scrapbook of memories associated with the service experience*
- *create a website or social media page to share photos and stories*
- *write a story from another person's perspective (such as a person encountered during the service experience)*
- *write a "Letter to the Editor" of a local news publication*
- *stage a debate to discuss two opposing views*
- *create role-play situations to demonstrate issues raised*

- *create a question-and-answer panel, with participants serving as panel members*

Service Project Planning Guide

Topic/issue selected:

STEP 1: PREPARE WELL

- (1) **Study the issue.** Spend time studying the topic/issue to better understand it, consider who is involved or affected, what perspectives exist, etc. You might utilize books, videos, online resources, guest speakers, or facilitated conversation.

How can we study and more fully explore this topic/issue?

- (2) **Listen to others.** Listen to voices of those specifically affected or impacted by the issue (perhaps through a pre-service gathering, on-site orientation, or video clip).

Who can we invite to share their story and perspective(s) regarding this topic/issue?

- (3) **Explore Scripture.** Select a biblical passage or two that speak to the topic/issue. Identify insights that emerge, as well as Christian faith perspectives that might be helpful in exploring the issue.

What biblical passage(s) can be explored related to this topic/issue?

What perspective(s) from the Christian faith speak to this topic/issue?

STEP 2: DEBRIEF THE EXPERIENCE

- (1) **Reflect on the experience.** Provide time and space to debrief the group's experience to discuss insights, answers, solutions, new questions, concerns, etc. Use a variety of reflection methods to honor multiple learning styles.

When and where can we provide an opportunity for reflection and debriefing?

How will we debrief? What reflection methods can we use?

- (2) **Return to Scripture.** Revisit the Scripture passage(s) used previously to reinforce the experience or discover new meanings or insights in light of the group's experience.

When, where, and how can we revisit the Scripture passage(s)?

- (3) **“What's next?”** Consider how the group might continue learning, be involved in action related to the topic/issue, how the experience leads them to act differently, or how attitudes or beliefs might be changed.

When, where, and how can we invite the group to consider “what's next?”

STEP 3: TELL THE STORY

- (1) **Craft the message.** Determine what message or story can be told in light of the service learning experience (such as describing the issue, sharing how perspectives changed, insights gained from Scripture, etc.).

When and how will we determine the message/story we have to share?

(2) **Share with others.** Determine one or more ways your service learning experience can be shared. Find ways to incorporate insights from the reflection process earlier. Be creative!

Who might we share our experience with? How might we do it?

Video Script

The following script is, generally speaking, the content contained in the video segment of this lesson, provided as information for those who cannot access or do not wish to utilize the video.

Service learning is an intentional process that can give deeper meaning and value to service and mission experiences. While “volunteering” and “community service” are often seen as one-time events with little preparation or follow up, “service learning” is concerned with preparing well, debriefing the experience, and sharing what you've experienced with others. Using the service learning process will open possibilities to wonder, explore, and wrestle with topics that are important to the group.

Three components of service learning that will enhance your group's experience are preparing well, debriefing the experience, and telling the story.

(1) **Prepare well.** What is done in the preparation stage provides a framework and foundation for the actual service or immersion experience. Without preparing well, service experiences can be misguided or lack focus. Suggestions for preparing well:

- **Study the issue.** Spend time studying the topic/issue to better understand it, consider who is involved or affected, what perspectives exist, etc. You might utilize books, videos, online resources, guest speakers, or facilitated conversation. Remember to hold the conversation in a spirit of wonder and exploration (as opposed to problem solving).
- **Listen to others.** Listen to voices of those specifically affected or impacted by the issue (for example, a homeless teen, senior citizen, agency worker, or elected official). This might come through an on-site orientation or a pre-service gathering. If you don't have access to someone to speak with the group directly, attempt to locate an appropriate video clip (a great exercise for one of your student leaders).
- **Explore Scripture.** Select a biblical passage or two that speak to the topic/issue and identify insights that emerge. Discuss perspectives that might be offered by Scripture or a Christian faith perspective that might be helpful (even if challenging) in exploring the issue.

(2) **Debrief the experience.** Reflecting on your group's experience is key to a successful service learning project. In fact, reflection is what makes service

learning different than volunteering or community service, as there is a potential for learning that comes with reflecting critically on a personal experience – if adequate time is given.

- **Reflect on the experience.** Provide time and space to debrief the group's experience during, immediately following, or at some point in the near future. What insights have emerged? Where have you found answers or solutions to questions you had? What new questions or concerns have been raised? To honor diversity of learning styles, use a variety of reflection methods, such as journaling, group conversation, or creative reflection (music, art, roleplays, etc.)
- **Return to Scripture.** Revisit the Scripture passage(s) used previously to reinforce the experience and to discover any new meaning or insights. How might the Scripture passage(s) be reinterpreted in light of the group's experience?
- **Consider "what's next?"** Invite the group (as individuals or collectively) to consider how they might continue to be involved in action related to the issue or topic. Challenge individuals to think about how the experience leads them to act differently, or how attitudes or beliefs may have been changed. The group might discuss how to continue the conversation, engage in another service experience, deepen learning, or find ways to become further involved in action.

(3) **Tell the story.** Sharing the experience not only provides education and inspiration for others, but also continues the debriefing process. Telling one's story reinforces the experience and provides opportunities for new insights and discoveries.

- **Craft the message.** Invite the group (individually or collectively) to determine what message or story needs to be told in light of the service learning experience. You might describe the issue that was explored, discuss the perspectives of the group prior to the experience, describe the service or mission experience you engaged in, identify moments of challenge or discovery, share insights gained from Scripture, and reflect on how perspectives or attitudes changed following the experience.
- **Share with others.** Determine one or more ways your service learning experience can be shared. Examples include leading a class or workshop for church members, hosting a forum or panel, creating a blog, sharing a skit or roleplay, or designing an informational flyer – all using the experiences and insights of group members. Find ways to incorporate the

work or insights from the reflection process earlier. Be creative in thinking of how you can share the group's experience.

Prepare well. Debrief the experience. Tell the story. These three important aspects of service learning can provide a greater level of impact on your youth as they engage in service and mission experiences.



**PRACTICE
DISCIPLESHIP**

*This curriculum was developed for the Practice Discipleship Initiative. Practice Discipleship is a ministry of the ELCA Youth Ministry Network in close partnership with the ELCA and its synods. It is funded by the Congregational and Synodical Mission Unit of the ELCA as an extension of the ministry of the ELCA Youth Gathering. Permission is given to use these resources in your local context, so long as no organization or individual profits from the use of these materials. For more information please visit www.practicediscipleship.org