



Story of Service

Mark Jackson, Trinity Lutheran College

PRE-LESSON INFORMATION

SESSION DESCRIPTION

What stories get told through service experiences? Explore biblical stories of service and practices that make room for recognizing and honoring others' stories, including using a holistic service learning model to create meaningful service experiences. When service and mission experiences are thought of as more than projects and trips, service can become a lifelong spiritual practice and way of life.

ELCA FAITH PRACTICE

Serve

LEARNING OUTCOMES

At the end of this session, participants will be able to:

- Explore stories of Scripture as related to service
- Understand the importance of place and context in designing service experiences
- Utilize a four-step service learning process to guide meaningful service experiences
- Understand the opportunity of service experiences to embrace the stories of others

BIBLICAL FOCUS

- John 13:3-9, 12-16 – Washing the disciples' feet
- Luke 24:13-35 – Encountering Jesus on the road to Emmaus
- John 4:5-30 – Samaritan woman at the well
- Matthew 25:31-46 – When did we see you hungry?

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Computer, projector, and screen for PowerPoint that accompanies this session
- Ability to access and project video/sound that accompanies this session (if utilized). It is highly recommended that you download online videos prior to the presentation.
- Bibles
- Pens or pencils
- Assumptions Exercise Worksheet (see Appendix; one copy per person)
- Connecting Stories and Service: A Service Project Planning Guide (see Appendix; one copy per person)
- Identify a service project or mission trip that participants can work on during the session (see "Try It Out: Design a Service Experience" section)

LESSON PLAN

GETTING INTO THE CONVERSATION

Service projects and missions trips are increasingly common practices among church youth groups. Many groups focus on local projects, where young people gather for a couple of hours to complete a specific project, such as collecting items for a food bank, visiting elderly church members, or cleaning up a neighborhood park. Other groups embark on short-term mission trips across the country or overseas to build houses, serve the homeless in another community, install fresh-water wells, or to learn about another culture or context different from their own. Some congregations do both.

Invite conversation on the following questions:

Why do you think youth service projects and mission trips are increasingly common?

What are the positive aspects of this trend?

What are the potential downsides and challenges of this practice?

This session will explore service projects and mission trips related to the theme of “Story” and how such experiences can be used to listen to the diversity of stories present within the service dynamic, including stories of others, ourselves, groups, organizations, communities, as revealed in Scripture, and more. Your group will also have the opportunity to think about a future service experience that can be designed to more deeply capture and embrace the stories of others in your community.

ASSUMPTIONS EXERCISE

Ask the group to split into pairs, preferably with someone they do not know very well. Give them several minutes to observe each other and answer the questions below. (If you wish to provide a handout, use the Assumptions Exercise Worksheet found in the appendix.)

Participants cannot ask questions of each other, but must attempt to answer based on what they see or observe about the other person. Participants are free to skip questions that make them feel uncomfortable or they would prefer not to answer.

How old is this person?

Which languages does this person speak?

Does this person come from a large family or small family?

What kind of music does this person prefer to listen to?

What does this person usually order to drink at a restaurant?

Is this person good at math?

Does (or would) this person enjoy salsa dancing?

Which musical instruments does this person play?

What are this person’s hopes and dreams for their future?

After several minutes, invite the pairs to share some of their assumptions and observations with each other to determine the extent to which they could or could not answer the questions correctly.

Call the group's attention back together and invite conversation on the following questions:

How easy or difficult was it to come up with answers to the questions?

What did you base your answers on?

What does it take to know a person well enough to answer more of these questions?

The point of this exercise is to demonstrate that we cannot assume who a person is simply by what we see and observe. So, while engaging in service experiences, how might our group move beyond forming assumptions about an individual, group, or a community, to truly getting to know them and their stories?

(Note: If participants found it easy to answer questions about each other, point out that it's likely because they know each other, precisely reinforcing the intent of the exercise: That getting to know someone beyond appearances and assumptions requires time and interest.)

THE STORY OF SERVICE IN SCRIPTURE

There are dozens of passages in Scripture related to service, mission, and justice. A few are explored in previous sessions and this exercise introduces several more, specifically from Jesus' life and teachings. In looking at these biblical texts, you might remind participants that acts of service may not be overtly stated, but examined with a more holistic understanding of service and mission, including themes introduced in previous sessions (such as listening, hospitality, crossing boundaries, and place/displacement).

Split participants into groups of 3-4 and provide each group with one of the following Bible passages:

John 13:3-9, 12-16

Luke 24:13-35

John 4:5-30

Matthew 25:31-46

(Note: If you have fewer than 12 people, use the first 2-3 passages either within small groups or as a whole group. If you have more than 16, you can assign a Bible passage to more than one group. Adapt as needed!)

Have one person in the group read the passage out loud, then discuss the following questions:

What story (or stories) do you see present in this passage? Who's telling the story?

Who's listening? What message is being conveyed?

In what ways might this passage deepen your understanding of service and mission?

In light of this passage, how might service experiences be better designed to provide intentional opportunities to listen to, embrace, and celebrate the stories of others?

Call the whole group together and invite each group to briefly share their insights. (Don't feel the need to analyze each passage in detail.)

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.

Now, we turn attention to thinking about ways service projects and mission trips can be designed to give attention to the richness and diversity of stories we encounter in others, within organizations, and within communities.

“Service learning” is an intentional four-step process that can add deeper meaning and value to service and mission experiences. By contrast, “volunteering” and “community service” are often seen as one-time events, with little preparation on the part of participants and little (if any) debriefing and follow up. Through the process of Preparation, Action, Reflection, and Celebration, service learning emphasizes service as more than projects and trips, but an on-going process of service and learning, if not a spiritual practice and way of life.

Play the video that accompanies this session to introduce the service learning model. As participants watch the video, ask them to think about:

How can the service learning process be used to enhance a service experience?

What is the potential for connecting to stories of others or the community through service?

Which practices might our group question or reconsider in order to be more fully present as servants and partners?

TRY IT OUT: DESIGN A SERVICE EXPERIENCE

Your group now has the opportunity to put what you've learned about service and service learning into an action plan. For this exercise, choose a service project or mission trip you are planning in the near future. Alternatively, the group can choose a recently completed service experience and determine what in the process might have been improved. *(Note: If participants are from multiple churches or contexts, they can break into smaller groups or just use one example [even hypothetical, if needed] that all can work on together.)*

Provide each person with a copy of the Connecting Stories and Service: A Service Project Planning Guide (see appendix) and spend about 15-20 minutes guiding the group through the questions in the exercise.

As the leader, keep the conversation lively and moving forward. Resist the temptation to get involved in minute details of planning a service experience; instead, remember this conversation provides a broad introduction to how service learning can enhance service experiences. In many ways, this conversation might only serve as a catalyst for continued conversation and action in the future. If the time is running short, it's appropriate to say, "Let's stop here for now ... you get the idea," and invite the group to return to the conversation (and the planning guide) as they plan a future service experience.

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):

Holy God, inspire us to be your servants in your world and among your people. Give us strength and courage to listen deeply for the joys, concerns, opportunities, and challenges of others and of our community. Open our ears and hearts to the incredible opportunity to embrace, honor, and celebrate the stories we encounter. Bind those stories to our own, and ultimately gather them into yours. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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.

Digging In: A Leader's Guide to Service Learning. ELCA World Hunger Program, 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").

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.

Bass, Dorothy C., and Don C. Richter. *Way to Live: Christian Practices for Teens.* Upper Room Books, 2002. A resource to explore spiritual and faith practices with youth. A leader's guide is available as a free download at www.waytolive.org.

Service And Learning: A Way of Life. A five-session training program to explore using service to teach biblical stories and concepts with children and youth. Includes DVD. Order a copy at www.selectlearning.org/store/all/service-and-learning.

Journeys for Youth. List of service experiences available at Lutheran camp and retreat centers across the United States. Learn more and find locations at www.journeysforyouth.com/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.



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Video Script – Story of Service

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.

Introduction

Hi, I'm Mark Jackson, professor at Trinity Lutheran College near Seattle, and author of *Story of Service*. I want to take these few minutes and describe the service learning process and how it can be used to create meaningful service and mission experiences with youth. And, to tie in with the overall theme of "Story," I want to specifically focus on how service and mission experiences can facilitate our ability to listen to, embrace, honor, and celebrate the stories of others that we encounter through service.

Defining service learning

First of all, what is "service learning?" Service learning is an intentional, experiential process to provide richness and meaning to service experiences.

It's intentional in that we're thoughtful in our approach, intending the service experience to be rich, meaningful, and something to learn from.

It's experiential in that we expose our youth to service through active engagement ... actually doing something, as opposed to just talking about it.

It's a process in that service experiences should be thought of as more than individual projects and trips – or moments in time – but that learning can happen through the process of preparation, engagement, reflection and debriefing, and celebration. In this way service can become more than just a day or week of service, but a lifelong spiritual practice.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, service learning adds the important element of reflection. The time to reflect and debrief provides a key opportunity to learn from the experience, whereas "volunteering" or "community service" often focus just on "doing."

With this definition in mind, let's explore the four steps of the service learning model: Preparation, Action, Reflection, and Celebration.

Step 1: Preparation

In preparing for service experiences, our preparation is often focused on logistics:

- Fundraising
- Gathering paperwork
- Gathering supplies and equipment
- Making travel arrangements

These items are definitely important, if not crucial for a successful experience. But, preparation can –and should be- a bit more.

First of all, it's important to listen and learn from stories of our community or the context in which we'll be serving. Instead of assuming what a person, an organization, or a community needs –and run the risk of being wrong—it's important to explore the identified needs, concerns, and opportunities and then select a service experience that allows your group to address what you've heard. In this way, you can be confident you're engaging in something that matters. For example, a church in my hometown wanted to do something in the fall months to serve people experiencing homelessness ... so, they asked a number of them what they would need or appreciate. The answer came back: Clean, warm socks. A meal that included homemade desserts – nothing packaged. Live music. And not a sermon. For three years now, this faith community has hosted "Socktoberfest," where anyone can come to get new socks, enjoy bratwurst and hotdogs, cold local-made root beer, have homemade pie, cookies, and brownies, all while listening to live music. And instead of a sermon, the gospel of Jesus is shared by guests being fed, clothed, and loved.

I've also seen international mission trips chosen because of their destination to a warm, tropical climate or because it's connected with another vacation-type experience (such as an ocean beach, theme park, or shopping) ... and only occasionally do I see a group travel to the same place twice with the intention of developing a continued, mutual relationship. So, our practices in determining mission trips might be re-examined.

During the preparation stage, there is an opportunity to listen to the story of Scripture, to center your group's experience in God's Word by exploring biblical stories or themes related to your service experience. For example, if your group's service project is working at a local food bank, you can introduce Scripture passages related to food and hunger.

Building community with your group is also important prior to your service, so it's valuable to spend time getting to know each other's gifts and passions, as well as each other's expectations for what is to come. This provides the opportunity for youth to think about what they uniquely can contribute to the process and experience and you might find who in your group, for example, speaks Spanish, is excellent at organizing, has musical gifts, or knows how to swing a hammer. And asking the simple question "What are you expecting to gain from this?" causes young people to think about their interests or hopes for the experience – which can be valuable to reflect back on later.

Step 2: Action

The second step of the service learning process is Action, the time we engage in the service experience, whether for an hour, a morning, part of day, or over a week or two.

As your group engages in the service experience, find ways to ensure that everyone in your group has a meaningful role and way to contribute. This can be done by exercising the gifts, skills, and passions you identified earlier.

Related to our theme of “Story,” think about how your group can best recognize, honor, and embrace the stories of others. My simple suggestion is to listen, listen, listen. These are the moments when the stories of others begin to mingle with your own. Those who serve become just as blessed as those they serve with and among, where host becomes guest, guest becomes host, and barriers are slowly broken and removed. We find out that the teen living on the streets didn’t run away, she ran from home and the years of abuse she suffered. The third grader struggling with reading isn’t “falling behind” – he’s doing the best he can. The old woman in the nursing home isn’t slow and forgetful – she’s a fount of wisdom from a life fully lived.

I earlier mentioned Socktoberfest. When I approached a young mother carrying a baby boy, it wasn’t long before we realized our sons were born just one day apart at the same local hospital – in fact, her son’s first day of life was taking place just several doors down from where my son took his first breath. You could immediately sense that barriers of life circumstance were replaced with a common story of two proud parents delighting in their children. This is the gift of opening our ears as much as we open our mouths.

This is also a good time to examine practices that might inhibit your group’s ability to be fully present as servants and partners. For example, you might consider your use of technology and realize that frequent picture taking, texting, and social media posting might be seen as intrusive or keep participants from fully engaging. Or, consider your group’s dress: Are you aware of local cultural customs or is your clothing inappropriate or potentially offensive? You might even consider whether or not your group’s matching t-shirts on a mission trip facilitate or hinder the group’s ability to integrate within the community you’re serving.

Step 3: Reflection

This brings us to step 3 in the service learning process: Reflection. Sometimes we don’t give much time for debriefing or following up, but adequate time for reflection is THE key opportunity to turn service projects or mission trips from short-lived “mountain top experiences” into experiences with deeper, richer, and lasting meaning.

Common reflection and debriefing exercises are group conversation and journaling. Providing time to ask questions, consider our response, and listen to the perspectives of others can

deepen our experience and create space for “aha!” moments to take place. But instead of seeing this as an “add on,” definitely plan on spending time in this type of individual and group reflection.

It’s also important to remember that reflection does not always come in words. Sometimes kids need to use their creativity to express their reflection, such as through painting, drawing, taking pictures, composing music, producing a video, or staging a role play situation. I recommend providing at least 2 or 3 options that youth can choose from.

Through the reflection process, we can also move participants to the “Now what?” question, to consider how the service experience and listening to the stories of others can begin to shape future attitudes and behaviors. For example, we can ask “What are you interested in learning more about?” “How does this experience challenge you to live as a faithful Christian?” or “How might God be calling you to use your gifts in light of this experience?”

And there’s also an opportunity to return to Scripture to examine a passage or two with a fresh perspective. For example, after a particularly impactful service experience in which participants received overwhelming blessings in return, the story of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples – taking on the servant’s role when he should have been the one being served-- might take on new meaning.

Step 4: Celebration

The fourth and final step is Celebration.

This is the opportunity to worship and celebrate the experience through Scripture, prayer, and spiritual practices ... not for the purpose of patting ourselves on the back and saying “look what we’ve done,” but to honor and celebrate the group’s common experience, stories heard and exchanged, and lives forever changed.

A key opportunity for Celebration is to consider how you can share your experience with others, such that they can also be brought into the story of the experience. So, invite your group to think about what story they have to tell and who should hear it. This part of the process invites continued reflection on the experience, which only reinforces the learning and meaning that service experiences can provide.

Assumptions Exercise Worksheet

Answer the questions below based on what you can see or observe about your partner, without asking questions. You are free to skip questions that make you feel uncomfortable or you prefer not to answer.

How old is this person? _____

Which languages does this person speak? _____

Does this person come from a large family or small family? _____

What kind of music does this person prefer to listen to? _____

What does this person usually order to drink at a restaurant? _____

Is this person good at math? _____

Does (or would) this person enjoy salsa dancing? _____

Which musical instruments does this person play? _____

What are this person's hopes and dreams for their future? _____

Connecting Stories and Service: A Service Project Planning Guide

Preparation: Listen

(1) ***Listen and learn from stories.*** How will we listen to and learn from our community to identify priorities, needs, concerns, and opportunities?

(2) ***Listen to the story of Scripture.*** To center our group's experience in God's Word, what biblical stories or themes can we explore that relate to our service experience?

(3) ***Listen to each other.*** How will we build community by learning more about each other's gifts, passions, stories, and expectations?

(4) ***Make a plan.*** What preparations do we need to make? (Consider schedule, supplies, transportation, and other logistics.)

Action: Engage

(1) ***Engage in service.*** How will we ensure that everyone finds a meaningful role and can actively participate?

(2) ***Honor stories.*** How will we give attention to others' stories in our service? How will we respect, honor, and celebrate the stories we encounter?

(3) ***Our story is God's story.*** How will we seek and identify God's presence during the experience?

(4) **Question practices.** What practices might we question in order to more fully be present as servants, partners, and allies as we engage in service with and among others?

Reflection: Learn

(1) **Debrief the experience.** What are specific ways we can provide for personal and group reflection on the service experience?

(2) **Impact of stories.** How can we best learn from the stories and experiences we have encountered? How might this experience shape our future attitudes and behaviors?

(3) **Return to Scripture.** How can we return to the story of Scripture to bring deeper meaning to this experience? How might Scripture be reinterpreted given the group's experience?

Celebration: Share

(1) **Worship and celebrate.** How might we celebrate our experience through Scripture, prayer, and spiritual practices?

(2) **Tell the story.** How can we share the experience with others, such that they can also be brought into the story of our experience?