

INTRODUCTION TO SERVICE LEARNING

Service projects and mission trips are becoming increasingly common in churches and youth ministry programs: Youth groups gather for a couple of hours to tackle a local project, embark on an overseas mission trip, and everything in between. Service activities are also excellent ways to teach young people about issues of food, hunger and poverty that exist in our world today – both locally and globally. At the same time, youth service projects aren't without critics. Even well-planned service activities can unintentionally result in reinforcing poor attitudes, habits and stereotypes. Without adequate preparation and follow-up the “mountain top” feelings of service can quickly fade.

This guide introduces leaders to service learning, an intentional process for facilitating meaningful service and mission experiences with youth. One goal of service learning is seeing service experiences as a process, not a solitary event, meaning that the entire process of preparation, service, reflection and follow-up is as important as the service activity itself. Using the service learning model can inspire youth and adults to engage in experiences that address hunger and poverty in ways that can open eyes, ears, minds and hearts to the realities many people face, often in our own neighborhoods and communities. God bless you as you serve and learn!

What is service learning?

Service learning is defined as:

An intentional experiential learning process that combines hands-on service and reflective thinking to provide richness and deeper meaning to service experiences while fulfilling the biblical invitation to serve in Christ's name.

Service learning is not synonymous with volunteering or community service. While traditional volunteerism emphasizes “just going and serving,” service learning adds the important elements of preparation and reflection in an effort to create a deeper and richer experience.



A closer look

Key words in defining service learning

- **Intentional:** Service learning experiences are carefully planned.
- **Process:** Service learning is a process, not an event, and includes elements beyond the service activity itself including adequate preparation, debriefing and follow-up.
- **Hands-on service:** Service cannot be substituted by books, videos or anecdotes. In service learning, people share a common service experience.
- **Reflective thinking:** Purposeful reflection provides key opportunities to debrief the service experience and to apply the experiences to one's life, including possible changes in attitudes and behaviors.
- **In Christ's name:** Service learning provides an opportunity to serve God's people and God's creation in the name of Jesus. Youth and adults can together explore and deepen their faith, being challenged to live as servant leaders in daily life.

Service learning in four steps

The four-step service learning model used in this resource was created by the Service And Learning Leadership Team (SALLT) Project at Trinity Lutheran College. It provides a simple, easy to remember framework youth leaders can use when planning service and mission experience with youth.

STEP 1 PREPARATION

While preparation does include the logistics of gathering supplies, raising money and making travel arrangements, there's more to be done in order to set the stage for a positive service experience. The preparation step should include intentional efforts to build community with time dedicated to sharing expectation, acquiring skills needed for the service experience, and learning about the organization or community where you will serve. Don't forget to include listening to the organization or communities' expressed needs and expectations.

STEP 2 ACTION

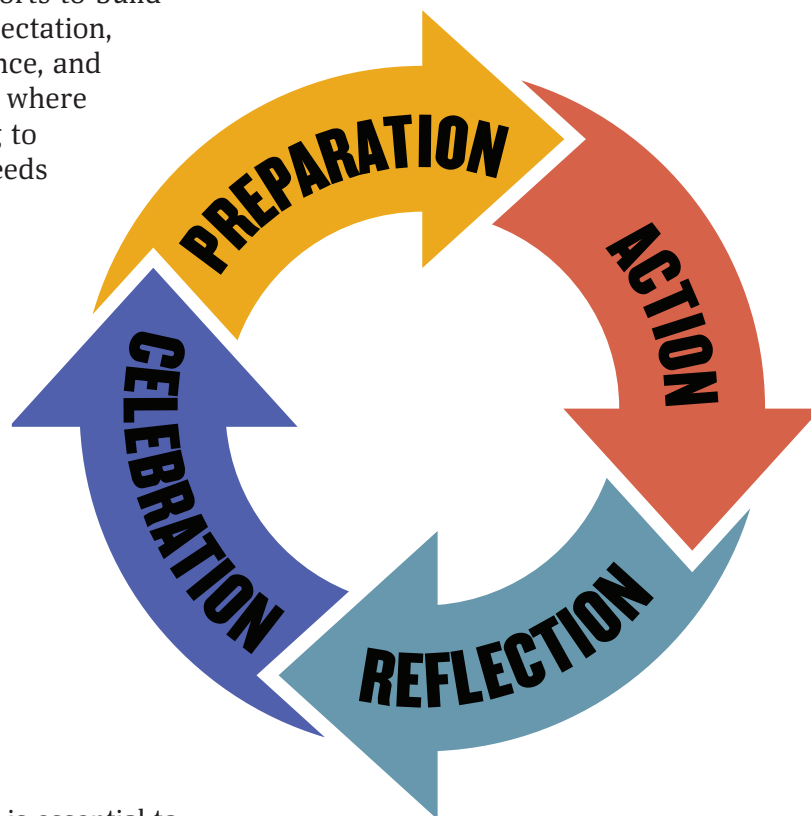
The service learning process includes an actual service experience. Leaders should choose service activities that are meaningful and engaging, are realistic for the group's resources (including time available), and address expressed community needs (versus imposing your own expectations).

STEP 3 REFLECTION

Often overlooked or delayed, the reflection stage is essential to the service learning process, because it is through critical reflection that individuals learn and grow from their experiences. Debriefing activities provide youth with opportunities to consider thoughts or feelings that have emerged and the potential impact on their attitudes or behaviors. Reflection can happen in a variety of creative ways, including small-group discussions, art, dance, journaling, storytelling, Bible study, devotions and more.

STEP 4 CELEBRATION

This final step ties together the other three steps, as youth find ways to celebrate what was accomplished and share their experience with others. It's a time of worship, as you recognize and rejoice in the ways God has called you to serve and challenges you to continue to live as servant leaders.





A closer look

Imagine you are leading a trip to Mexico to build homes for migrant worker families. The following examples illustrate the value of using the service learning model in your planning process.

Traditional “service project” mentality:

- Rent a van. Buy tools. Get medical release forms.
- Go to Mexico to build houses.
- Show the congregation a slide show. Serve tacos.

Using the service learning model:

- **Preparation:** Understand the specific needs and requests of the host community. Learn about the local Mexican culture, including some Spanish phrases. Engage in meaningful community building with people going on the trip.
- **Action:** Build houses. Interact with area residents. Study God’s word about serving others.
- **Reflection:** On the trip and once home, discuss poverty, racism, housing issues and how we are called to advocate for the poor. Write a song, paint a picture, produce a video or write poetry about the experience.
- **Celebration:** Plan a worship service for the congregation. Show a video, share pictures or tell stories. Find ways to continue using young people’s gifts of leadership and service. Talk about what it means to serve others in daily life.

Outcomes of service learning

What happens when young people serve? How are our lives transformed? The Service And Learning Leadership Team Project has identified six areas of impact that service experiences can have on young people when the service learning process is used.

✓ Compassion

Service learning seeks to develop young people who hold a deep sense of compassion for the world and God’s people. Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) provides a great example of one person’s deep concern for another, even when crossing social barriers. Service learning often involves walking alongside others and in that relationship youth begin to see, sense, feel and engage with “the other.” Or, a significant encounter in God’s creation leads to a deeper sense of caring for the world God made.

Biblical references:

- Luke 10:25-37: Parable of the Good Samaritan
- Luke 15:11-32: Parable of the Prodigal Son
- Colossians 3:12-14: A call to care for each other

LEADER TIP: Use the parable of the Good Samaritan as a way to start a discussion about service, servant leadership and not missing opportunities to care for others.

✓ Community

Service in Jesus' name has the ability to draw people into community, break down existing barriers, and forge new relationships where acquaintances or strangers can become valuable friends and partners. Service learning provides a context for community as participants. While working together, it is discovered that the Christian community is not formed because of similar physical traits, abilities or lifestyles, but that we are all children of God (Galatians 3:26-28). Service experiences also open possibilities for youth to see themselves as part of the global community of God's people and active participants in the collective response to hunger and poverty.

Biblical references:

- Mark 3:20-35: Christ's family are those who do his will
- Mark 12:28-34: The greatest commandments
- Acts 2:44-47a: The actions of the newest Christians
- Galatians 3:25-28: We are all God's children through faith

✓ Advocacy

Through service learning, youth can begin to ask the deeper, tougher questions, probing the root causes of issues such as homelessness, hunger, poverty, housing or environmental destruction. While addressing such issues is not always easy, young people can begin to challenge systems, policies, and societal values and norms that create oppressive structures. As young people wrestle with these questions, an opportunity emerges to move beyond one-time relief efforts to consider long-term systemic change, sustainable development and advocating with and on behalf of others for the urgent needs of God's people.

Biblical references:

- Exodus 5:1-2; 6:10-13, 28-29: Moses seeks freedom for the Hebrew people
- Matthew 5:1-12: The Beatitudes
- John 4:5-26: Jesus meets the Samaritan woman

✓ Lifelong servanthood

Service is a spiritual practice that calls us to repeated and frequent acts of service, no matter the size of the task, context, amount of preparation or recognition received. The Christian life involves a call to servanthood (Micah 6:8, Matthew 25:31-46) and the more young people "practice" service, the more it becomes a regular and natural part of their daily life. Engagement with issues of hunger and poverty can shape the ways youth think and act as they become increasingly aware of, and seek to respond to, the needs of others.

Biblical references:

- Micah 6:8: Do justice, love kindness
- Matthew 4:18-22: Jesus calling the disciples
- Matthew 25:31-46: Serving "the least of these" is serving Jesus

✓ Leadership

Through service learning, young people can become empowered to make contributions to the world in which they live and discover ways they can be leaders among peers – in their congregations and within communities. Paul encourages the young Timothy to embrace his youth and to teach what has been entrusted to him (1 Timothy 4:12; 2 Timothy 2:1-2). Adults play an important role in promoting leadership development by inviting youth to share the gifts God has entrusted to them.

Biblical references:

- 1 Timothy 4:7b-16: Don't be despised because of your youth
- 2 Timothy 2:1-7: Teach others and the Lord will provide understanding
- 1 Peter 4:10-11: Serve one another based on your unique gifts

✓ Exploration of vocation

Meaningful experiences in service can provide a vocational “learning laboratory” where young people experiment with how their gifts, passions and values intersect with the world’s most pressing needs. It’s not uncommon for a service experience to shape a young person’s sense of identity, vocational call or future career. As youth live out their faith in daily life, they see opportunities to apply their Christian beliefs and values in homes, families, communities, congregations and the workplace.

Biblical references:

- Romans 12:3-13: All have been given gifts to share
- 1 Corinthians 12:1-31: The body is made of many parts
- Ephesians 4:1-13: God gives a variety of gifts