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# Service Learning in congregations

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When young people publicly affirm their baptisms, they are asked to continue in the covenant God made with them in holy baptism:

- To live among God's faithful people
- To hear God's Word
- To share in the Lord's supper
- To proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed
- To serve all people, following the example of our Lord Jesus
- To strive for justice and peace in all the earth

As they stand before us and say, "I will, and I ask God to help and guide me," think about how they are taught to follow these five promises. Service Learning is a good tool for both teaching and living the promises of baptism.

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## Volunteering or Service Learning. What's the difference?

From the outside, Service Learning might look a lot like volunteering, but Service Learning has some intentional components that set it apart. Service Learning is a method of teaching and learning that deepens your understanding by engaging you in hands-on service with the community, while gaining knowledge and skills that integrate with learning goals. It focuses on critical reflective thinking and experiential learning that also addresses local issues and fosters a sense of civic responsibility.

## Distinctions:

- **Integration:** In Service Learning, volunteer projects are directly linked to learning objectives, whether that is learning about the story of the feeding of the five thousand, the biblical mandate to care for the widowed, the sick and the oppressed, or contemporary issues Christians are concerned about. Attaching service to biblical teaching becomes a new way to “hear God’s word.”
- **Discipleship:** Through Service Learning, young people learn about acting out their faith in their own communities, in other words, “proclaiming the good news of God in Jesus Christ through word and deed.”
- **Reflection:** Participants take time to reflect on their activity before and after service. In pre-reflection, participants prepare to serve by learning about an issue and the people and communities related to the need for service. As they reflect after service, they process what they experienced in direct relation to the learning objectives as well as those experiences that came as unplanned surprises.
- **Partnership:** Service Learning activities are planned in partnership with community contacts who work with the issues you will be involved with through service. Instead of it just being your church, you “live among God’s people” and plan together so that outcomes on both sides are met. We learn best in relationship, so consider long-term service commitments whenever possible. This is helpful on both sides: A community agency benefits from having long-term volunteers because they don’t have to train people over and over again, and clients don’t have to see a new parade of volunteers come in each day. Youth are served because they will gain far more insights from regular work throughout the year, where they get to know people and places and issues and become close to them, rather than going in and out in a short period of time. As they get to know the people and the issues, your group can begin to think beyond filling short-term needs and start identifying long-term justice solutions.

Thoughtfully arranged Service Learning will address most of the five promises we make as we affirm our baptism, as we all practice serving all God’s people and striving for peace and justice in the entire world.

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## Approaches to Service Learning: symptoms and root causes

Service Learning can be approached in a variety of ways. Consider what makes the most sense for your group, how you can be most effective, and where your group has gifts to offer. Different approaches also address different parts of an issue such as the symptoms experienced (by people or creation) as a result of an issue, problem, or crisis (e.g., unemployment, drought), or the root causes that create those situations (e.g., injustice in education system, changing climate).

You can find examples of addressing both symptoms and root causes in the Bible: The story of the Good Samaritan tells of someone helping out someone in their time of need by attending to their symptoms through an act of compassion. The story of Moses tells a story about changing an unjust social structure and freeing slaves. In our hearing, telling and reflecting on these biblical stories, God’s Spirit is at work to change our hearts,

behaviors, values, and view of humanity and creation that we might be attentive to both symptoms and root causes.

- **Direct service:** Responds to a basic need and is directed at the symptoms of an issue (e.g., providing shelter for homeless families, rebuilding homes after a hurricane, etc.).
  - **Education:** Researches an issue and educates others; might examine systems and root causes (e.g., inviting community leaders or residents to talk with your group about the challenges and realities of living in a neighborhood where business and factories are closing).
  - **Advocacy:** Proposes laws or regulations and speaks on behalf of others; can address symptoms or root causes, but may not empower the people most affected (e.g., writing letters to a legislator or city council member about a community problem).
  - **Direct action/organizing:** Organizes people to work on long-term solutions directed at the root causes of an issue and empowering citizens to speak and work for change (e.g., organizing a meeting of community leaders and residents to address a lack of public transportation in a neighborhood).
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## Sample Service-Learning program: hunger and homelessness

Many young people are nervous about being around people affected by homelessness, but it is a great way to broaden someone's ideas about who "God's people" are. While projects that put your students face-to-face with people experiencing homelessness or hunger are best, sometimes there are more immediate needs of an agency that should be met. If you develop a long-term relationship with an agency that works with these issues, there are a number of things you can do:

- **Organize food drives.** Be creative! Around Halloween, go trick-or-canning. Make it an hour-long scavenger hunt, with a list of what is needed most, and send people out in teams, or have people contribute in the narthex in two different containers, labeled for two different church leaders. The one with the most food items has to color their hair or shave their head.
- **Organize and coordinate year-round opportunities for volunteering** in local agencies, programs, and shelters.
- **Collect money.** Even with food donations, it is essential for an emergency food assistance or shelter program to have cash to pay for their space, staff, and fresh food to supplement donated food. Talk to other faith communities and set up a community challenge. One such project in Seattle collects money for a post-thanksgiving walk, the "Turkey Trot," during which participants learn about hunger issues, collect donations, and give away prizes to the church that has the most participants in the walk and the church that collects the most pledges.
- **Plant a community garden** and give the harvest to a local food provider. Invite people from the neighborhood to help with the gardening.
- **Plan education and awareness** studies, forums, experiences or workshops for the congregation and community.

- **Serve dinner or lunch at a local shelter, or host regular dinners at your church.** Better yet, be intentional about inviting all people to your congregation's meals!
- **Put together food baskets** for an emergency food shelf, and help hand them out. Or, if it seems like there is a need, set up an emergency food shelf in your church.
- **Host a hunger awareness meal in your church** (for more information on this, go to [www.lutheranpeace.org](http://www.lutheranpeace.org) and click the link to "Youth Work." Look for the "Peace Points" link on how to host a "Hunger Awareness Meal.")

The possibilities are endless. Sit down with your youth group and a community agency to figure out where your gifts are, what agencies and people have to offer, and the most effective way to address hunger and homelessness in your community.

### Reflection sessions on hunger and homelessness

- **Ask the group to write down ten things they know or think they know about homeless people.** Invite participants to share their thoughts, and be careful not to correct or demean people for their answers. Have someone record the conversation, and use it to reflect after your service is done.
- **Ask participants to close their eyes for a moment, and think about themselves at the shelter.** What do they see? What do they smell? What kinds of noises do they hear? What are the people there doing? How do the people there feel? What are their attitudes towards you? How will you try to connect with them? What do you want to know about them? Again, have a conversation about what kinds of thoughts people had, and then refer back to that conversation after you serve.
- **Ask people to think about how Jesus treated people who were homeless or hungry,** and lessons he taught. Jesus often used parables to prepare or motivate people for service. Split into groups to explore this, using texts like Matthew 25: 34-40, Luke 14:7-24, Luke 10: 25-37, or Luke 16:19-31.
- **Show the movie *With Honors*** (Warner Bros., 1994. PG13), about a man who lives in the boiler room of Harvard and develops a relationship with an economics major; both lives are changed by what they learn from one another.
- **Listen to the song "Mr. Wendell," by Arrested Development, or "What If Jesus Came Back Like That" by Collin Raye** for some discussion starters about our attitudes about people affected by homelessness.
- **Get statistics about people affected by homelessness or poverty in your community.** How many pounds of food are given away? How many young people live in a shelter during the year? How many beds are available in your community, and how many estimated homeless people are there?
- **Invite the director of the shelter and, if possible, a few shelter residents to speak with you** so that you might learn some of the stories and causes behind being homeless.
- **Read *Nicked and Dimed: On (not) getting by in America*** by Barbara Ehrenreich.
- **Find out what minimum wage is in your community.** Bring newspaper classified ads in to find an average apartment price and try to set up a monthly budget and compare it with an income based on minimum wage. See the Web resource available through Microsoft to guide you through this (noted at the end).

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## Consider your own community as you plan Service Learning

Your community is unique. As you think about the best ways for your youth group to be engaged in community, take some time to consider who is out there for you to partner with. In one town, a refugee resettlement program offers many possibilities: setting up apartments, tutoring, sorting donations, mentoring a family through the community systems, or setting up a play group between children of refugees new to the community and members of your congregation. As you think about your own community, consider issue such as:

- AIDS
- Animals in danger
- Community safety
- Older adults
- The environment (pollution, recycling, water quality, etc.)
- Refugees and new immigrants
- Hunger and homelessness
- Literacy
- Employment and economic development
- Social change
- School issues
- Special needs and disabilities
- Crime
- Substance addiction
- Peace and justice
- Housing issues
- Health care
- Equality
- Religious freedom
- Social services

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### A prayer for justice and lives of service:

*May God bless us with discomfort at easy answers, half-truths and superficial relationships, so that we will live deep in our hearts. May God bless us with anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people and the earth, so that we will work for justice, equity and peace. May God bless us with tears to shed for those who suffer, so we will reach out our hands to comfort them and change their pain to joy. And may God bless us with the foolishness to think that we can make a difference in the world, so we will do the things which others say cannot be done. Amen*

(Interfaith Council for Peace and Justice. [www.icpj.net/index.html](http://www.icpj.net/index.html))

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## Resources

### Books

- ***An Asset Builder's Guide to Service-Learning***. Search Institute, Minneapolis, MN, 2000. A workbook for youth ministers and educators for connecting Service Learning with developmental asset building.
- ***The Complete Guide to Service Learning: Proven Practical Ways to Engage Students in Civic Responsibility, Academic Curriculum, and Social Action***. Catheryn Berger Kaye. Free Spirit Publishing, Minneapolis, MN, 2004. This book is for K-12 teachers in public schools, but is a very creative resource.
- ***Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets***. John P. Kretzmann and John L. McKnight. Acta Publications, Chicago, IL, 1993. This book on community organizing helps us think about a community's assets and capacity rather than only viewing its deficiencies and needs.

### Web sites

- **ELCA Hunger Program**  
[www.elca.org/hunger/default.asp](http://www.elca.org/hunger/default.asp)  
(information on hunger, poverty and natural disasters and how to be involved in solutions and relief work)
- **Journeys for Youth and Young Adults catalogue**  
[www.elca.org/dcm/camps/journey/journey\\_search.asp](http://www.elca.org/dcm/camps/journey/journey_search.asp)  
(catalogue of ELCA-related Servant Events and hunger/justice programs for youth)
- **Microsoft Education Lesson Plans**  
[www.microsoft.com/education/lessonplans.msp](http://www.microsoft.com/education/lessonplans.msp)  
(education ideas for exploring a variety of issues)
- **Office for Social Justice, Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis**  
[www.osjspm.org/index.html](http://www.osjspm.org/index.html)  
(information on defining and understanding charity and justice)
- **Charity and Justice comparison chart (Office for Social Justice)**  
[www.osjspm.org/charjust.htm](http://www.osjspm.org/charjust.htm)
- **Campus Compact**  
[www.compact.org](http://www.compact.org)  
(resources on models in Service Learning, resources for reflection, and more)
- **ELCA Advocacy Web site**  
[www.elca.org/advocacy](http://www.elca.org/advocacy)  
(resources and opportunities for becoming involved in advocacy)
- **Search Institute**  
[www.search-institute.org](http://www.search-institute.org)  
(resources for Service Learning and developmental asset building)
- **United Way of Milford**  
[www.unitedwayofmilford.org](http://www.unitedwayofmilford.org)  
(link to the Ogre story, a great way to illustrating charity and justice)

- **National & Community Service Resource Center**  
[www.nationalserviceresources.org](http://www.nationalserviceresources.org)  
(tools and trainings for volunteer and service programs)
  - **Unity College in Maine *Guide to Reflection***  
[www.unity.edu/VCP/ServiceResources/Reflection.asp](http://www.unity.edu/VCP/ServiceResources/Reflection.asp)  
(resources for reflection from Unity College and other places)
  - **National Service-Learning Clearinghouse**  
[www.servicelearning.org](http://www.servicelearning.org)  
(programs, training and resources for Service Learning)
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