



Innovations with Youth

Service that Transforms Youth, Congregation, and Community

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St. Stephen the Martyr Catholic Parish in Renton, Washington is an active parish located 20 miles outside of Seattle. The parish has a long tradition of dynamic youth ministry. One of the pillars of this tradition is the summer mission trip the youth make to Yakima through the Young Neighbors in Action program. For over ten years, St. Stephen's has sent young people to Yakima to spend a week of their summer serving people struggling in poverty. Listening to the stories of the adults and youth who experience this summer mission trip, one cannot help but be inspired by the way this experience draws their young people to a deeper understanding of what it means to be a disciple of Christ. What is even more inspiring is how this yearly mission trip has transformed the whole parish.

Building a Tradition

Every year, St. Stephen's parish brings over fifty youth and adult participants on summer mission trips. Over the years it has become a part of what the parish youth do in the summer. Little brothers and sisters look forward to their opportunity to serve during the summer just like their older siblings did. The parish community looks forward to their annual spaghetti dinners and pancake breakfasts which not only serve as fundraisers, but as parish community events.

This tradition started over ten years ago with the idea of giving youth in the parish an opportunity to serve the poor and learn about their Catholic faith. Youth ministry leaders chose the program Young Neighbors in Action, a Catholic week-long service learning experience, and decided to participate in the Yakima, Washington, location. It was only three hours away and provided an experience that focused on learning Catholic social teaching while serving the poor. Bill Swedberg, the youth minister, says they chose the Young Neighbors in Action (YNIA) program because it pushes participants to think

beyond the six-day experience and actually write an action plan to implement their insights and experience back home. He also noted that the evening program helps process the experience they are having and really helps make the connection to their faith.

Choosing the right experience is just one of the factors for their success. Good preparation helps to make the experience of the week more profound and more transformational. Their preparation consists of teaching the values of faith that motivate the service that they do, creating a sense of community among those who are going on the mission experience, and creating a sense of identity that informs how they approach service. This identity is shaped by the values of faith and a commitment to acting as ambassadors of their parish community.

Bill sums up the goals of the preparation experience this way: "We prepare the kids to encounter Christ, but not necessarily in the way that they expect to encounter Christ." The leaders challenge the young people to be prepared to share themselves with the people they will be called to serve. In other words, participants are called to see and affirm the dignity of each and every person whom they encounter on their mission trip experience.

Expanding the Tradition

About five years ago something happened that changed this mission experience from a youth program to a whole parish event. It started when Debbie, the social outreach coordinator of the parish, volunteered to be an adult participant on one of the annual YNIA trips. Their service site led them to a family home on the Yakama Reservation. Debbie noticed that while their task that week was to repaint a house, the family had many more needs. Debbie helped to create an action plan that included engaging the whole parish in a strategy to meet some of these additional needs. When they returned home

from that trip, the youth and adults held a furniture drive for the family. The parish responded generously and they went back months later with furniture and volunteers to help response to the other needs the family had.

That was the beginning of what would become an intergenerational parish service event that is anchored in the youth mission experience in the summer. Here is how it works. Youth and adult volunteers experience Young Neighbors in Action and spend a week in Yakima serving a family in need. The youth come back to the parish with an action plan that describes the ongoing need that the family is experiencing. The whole parish gets involved by raising money and supplies to fulfill those needs. The parish plans a service day-trip back to Yakima with parish members to help finish up projects and deliver supplies to help the family. This follow-up trip involves seniors, empty nesters, families with children, and even some of the teens who served in the summer. What started as a youth mission trip has become a whole parish project.

A Parish Transformed

Bill Swedberg notes that this tradition of mission has changed the parish in many ways, some of the most significant include the following:

- The parish is inspired by the youth and has come to really value, respect, and celebrate the gifts of the young people of the parish.
- Intergenerational service is the regular way that the parish serves.
- Adults have become eager to do mission trips themselves so the parish has started to offer adult mission trips as well.
- When the parish does service, whether it is youth, adult, or intergenerational, the focus is not only on meeting the immediate needs of the people they are serving, but also on getting to know them, sharing stories, praying together and connecting with each other as brothers and sisters.
- Individuals who are engaged in mission experience solidarity with those whom they serve.

Bill says very succinctly that this experience helps the parish look beyond the parish walls and into the community.

Service That Is Transformational

St. Stephen the Martyr Parish experienced doing service with youth as a transformational experience for the whole parish and it did not happen by accident.

First, they did **intentional justice education**. They chose Young Neighbors in Action, a program that not only engages youth in service, but uses a pedagogy for justice education called the pastoral circle.¹ This is a process that not only engages participants in the gospel values that compel one towards service, but helps participants to see the broader social issues, probe for causes and consequences, and work for the transformation of society. Good justice education seeks to transform doers of service into people of justice.

Second, they **prepared well for the experience**. Their preparation for the summer event started the previous fall and the preparation was holistic. Participants prepared spiritually by praying together and examining the attitudes and behaviors that shape the way that they serve. Their financial preparation (fundraising) reflects the values that they are living out in the service project. A sense of community and the responsibility that being a member brings is of high value to St. Stephen's and so their community-oriented fundraising exemplifies that.

Third, they **engaged the whole parish**. What started out as a youth event became a whole parish event because they asked the question, "What resources does our parish community have that can help us do more?" Asking the question led to what has become a whole parish tradition of service and learning that is anchored by the mission activity of their youth.

Involving the whole parish, however, is more than a question about resources. The follow-up day of service is an intergenerational service event that brings community members from all stages of life together to serve.

Finally, **the parish communicated and celebrated the vision**. This vision of mission and service is not a secret in the parish. From liturgical celebrations to parish community events to bulletins and newsletters, community members not only know the "what" and "how" of service, but why the service is done. They even have blogs where parishioners engaged in service trips share their thoughts and experiences for the whole parish.

Service that transforms helps those who do service not only see need and respond to it; it invites them to be in real relationship with those who are experiencing need. It is entering into these relationships, letting them affect the people who are serving, and then working to end the need of our brother and sister. This is where service transforms into justice. It is the challenge of the Gospel.

End Notes

¹ For more information on the pastoral circle process see recommended resource list.

Recommended Resources

Calderone-Stewart, Lisa Marie. *Changing Lives: Transformational Ministry and Today's Teens*. Dayton, OH: Pflaum Publishing Group, 2004.

Clark, Chap and Kara E. Powell. *Deep Justice in a Broken World: Helping Your Kids Serve Others and Right the Wrongs Around Them*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007.

Holland, Joseph and Peter Henriot, S.J. *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983.

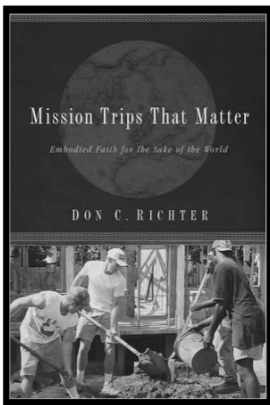
Payne, Ruby K. and Bill Ehlig. *What Every Church Member Should Know about Poverty*. Highlands, TX: aha! Process, Inc., 1999.

Roelkepartain, Eugene C. and Jenny Friedman. "Supporting Families in Service." in *Families and Faith: A Vision and Practice for Parish Leaders*, ed. Leif Kehrwald. New London, CT: Twenty Third Publications, 2006.

Toton, Suzanne C. *Justice Education: From Service to Solidarity*. Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2006.

Young Neighbors in Action Web Site
www.youngneighbors.org

Resources for Service and Mission Trips

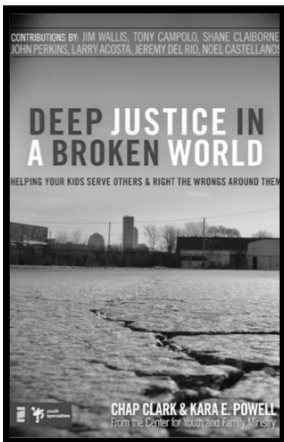


Mission Trips That Matter: Embodied Faith for the Sake of the World

Don Richter

(Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2008. \$15)

Explore Christian practices for pondering the body as your group prepares for, engages in, and interprets mission trips and outreach projects. Life in the body is at the heart of Christian faith. What wisdom might the Spirit whisper as mission team members get immunization shots, pack bags, fill water bottles, lace up walking shoes, strap on cameras, and pull out maps for the journey? Focusing on faith practices can shift mission trips from being episodic and event-focused to be woven into the larger fabric of a way of life, weaving human activities into God's redemptive activity for the sake of the world.



Deep Justice in a Broken World: Helping Your Kids Serve Others and Right the Wrongs around Them

Chap Clark and Kara E. Powell

(Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007. \$18.99)

It probably doesn't take a long list of statistics to convince you that our world is broken. Mission trips, service projects, and supporting children through relief organizations are just a few of the ways that many youth workers engage their students in serving the least, the last, and the lost. As good and helpful as these things may be on the surface, that's where they remain—at the surface. The problems run far deeper than an occasional paint job or fundraising project can solve. Kara Powell and Chap Clark provide you with research and insights that will help you go beyond simply trying to motivate youth to serve those in need, and invite them to wrestle with why those people are in need in the first place. You'll hear from well-known social justice leaders and youth workers who are making a difference in urban, suburban, and small town settings. There are also online resources to take you even deeper into the journey.

Fuller Youth Institute Web Site for Justice Resources:
<http://fulleryouthinstitute.org/deep-justice>