

Service learning in Lutheran schools

A theological perspective

Preamble

Service learning can be embraced by both teacher and students alike because it seeks to intervene helpfully in the needs of others and provides opportunity to develop skills, practical experience and understanding. It helps equip for useful citizenship as well as 'equipping the saints for works of service'. It is enough that it seeks to make a positive contribution in the lives of individuals and/or the community, and contributes to the common good.

It is, however, absolutely fundamental that in developing an understanding of service in our students it is recognised that biblical injunctions, including the good samaritan and reference to the qualities of life-long learners, are a proclamation of law. The law ought not be the motivation for service for the Christian nor do we want to motivate non-Christian students to service through guilt – 'you must or you ought'. The Christian is motivated by the Gospel from a sense of their new identity in Christ. The non-Christian operates best from their own self-understanding. For both, it is imperative that they operate with integrity.

This document has been written with that in mind. An abbreviated style has been used in the hope that this will make them more accessible.

Frequently asked questions

Why should Christians engage in service learning?

Service is the response of the child of God to God's grace and goodness towards us. 'We love because he first loved us.' 1 John 4:19.

We serve because in Christ that is who we are – servants. Therefore, we are called to service because we are:

- 'God's workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works which he has prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.' Eph 2:10
 - humans God created them to be like himself; made men and women. God gave them his blessing and said: 'Have a lot of children! Fill the earth with people and bring it under your control.' Gen 1:27-28
 - control does not mean domination. Since we are created in God's image, it means control as He exercises it, through willing service of His creation.
 - human selfishness (sin) has twisted this control to service of our own ends rather than creation.
 - a new creation in Christ; 'the old has gone, the new has come!' 2 Cor 5:17
 - real neighbours who 'show mercy to the one who was beaten up' Luke 10:37 *Service learning in Lutheran schools*
 - '...reconciled to God through Christ and given the ministry of reconciliation' 2 Cor 5:18
 - disciples of Christ whose coming was 'to tell the good news to the poor. The Lord has sent me to announce freedom for prisoners, to give sight to the blind, to free everyone who suffers, and to say, 'This is the year the Lord has chosen.' 'Luke 4:18,19.
 - creations of a kind and loving Father and recipient of His undeserved, gracious provision, protection and preservation 'for which all we can do is thank and praise, serve and obey him.' *Luther's Small Catechism*
 - '...perfectly free, lord of all, subject to none.
 - ...perfectly dutiful servant of all. Subject to all.'
 - 'These two theses seem to contradict each other. If, however, they should be found to fit together they would serve our purpose beautifully. Love by its very nature is ready to serve and be subject to the one who is loved.'
- Luther: Liberty of a Christian

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- ‘...not anyone's slave. But I have become a slave to everyone, so that I can win as many people as possible.’ 1 Cor 5:19
- ... lovers. Who love God through their love for their neighbour. 1 John 4:7-1

Do we risk creating the impression that service and good works earn us salvation?

‘So the Christian who is consecrated by his faith does good works, but the works do not make him holier or more Christian, for that is the work of faith alone.’ Luther: Liberty of a Christian.

‘And if a man were not first a believer and a Christian, all his works would amount to nothing and would be truly wicked and damnable sins. The following statements are therefore true: ‘Good works do not make a good man, but a good man does good works; evil works do not make a wicked man, but a wicked man does evil works.’ Consequently it is always necessary that the substance or person himself be good before there can be any good works, and that good works follow and proceed from the good person, as Christ also says, ‘A good tree cannot bear evil fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit’ [Matt. 7.-18J. It is clear that the fruits do not bear the tree and that the tree does not grow on the fruits, also that, on the contrary, the trees bear the fruits and the fruits grow on the trees. As it is necessary, therefore, that the trees exist before their fruits and the fruits do not make trees either good or bad, but rather as the trees are, so are the fruits they bear; so a man must first be good or wicked before he does a good or wicked work, and his works do not make him good or wicked, but he himself makes his works either good or wicked.’

Where Christian and non-Christian alike are challenged to act out of a sense of their identity – either as human beings or the gifted children of God, the risk is reduced. Their actions need to be taught as an expression of that identity rather than something that establishes that identity. It is the tree that produces the fruit not the fruit that makes the tree.

Simply put, we cannot create the impression that service merits God's favour. Only Christ's life, death and resurrection do that for those who receive him by faith.

Should we be compelling acts of service from those who are not Christian and therefore are not motivated from a response to the grace of Christ?

There are two ways God cares for his world: generally, through all people who act for the welfare of others, eg government, police, the judiciary and secular charitable organisations etc and specifically, through the community of believers who share the Good News of God in Christ. Through both ways the welfare of mankind is served (though differently) and the earth is cared for.

God provides for the care of his world through sinful people everywhere – in that he does not have any choice, if he is to use human beings at all. In responding to the needs of others, both Christian and non-Christian act as servants of God, whether they know it or not, or are motivated by the gospel or not.

Schools are educational institutions that seek to equip people for life. Service learning provides opportunity where empathy, a sense of compassion, practical skills and understanding can be developed. In a very real sense it should be seen as ‘equipping the saints for works of service’.

Does the idea of the provider benefiting from the service he provides, rob the exchange between persons of genuine Christian service, since service should not expect reward for simply doing its duty?

Some express concern that service learning, as it is currently structured, is deliberately planned to benefit the provider of the service as well as the one to whom the service is provided. This mutuality of benefit is seen as robbing the service of its Christian integrity. ‘I am serving you because I will benefit from this service.’ There is certainly a danger that Service

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learning could be engaged in for selfish motivations. The balance should be that benefit to the recipient should always be paramount and the benefit to the provider incidental and contingent on that benefit.

Where this balance is maintained then the act of service of one person to another can become a place of divine human encounter - where Christ is encountered in both the served and the server. When an act of service is approached as a mutual exchange of gift then the recipient is unlikely to be patronised and will have their dignity as a fellow human being respected.

Service learning – an expression of identity

Since the school context has people who are developing their personal ethics and are strongly influenced by a plurality of attitudes and experiences, it is necessary to explore service learning from both a Christian and a secular perspective. The following is an attempt to provide both points of view, which need to be considered in our school communities.

It has two key ideas: living authentically – faithful to our identity and acting responsively, from our giftedness. When our action is fully grounded in these two ideas then we have a real sense of purpose and feel validated. When this occurs we move from an act of service as our duty or obligation, an adjunct to our lives, to services being fundamental to our existence.

We were created in the image of God, an image that was lost when we chose a path of selfishness and disobedience (sin) ... and also ... It is beyond question that the earth suffers and is threatened by human selfishness and our greedy quest for domination. A selfishness that exists within us all.

In Christ we have been restored to our original purpose to be images of God in our world. To be in God's image means to operate as He operates using his power in willing service of his creation ... and also ... Our highest aspirations as human beings lead us to enrich, beautify, and manage resources for the benefit of all.

Service is response to our gifting – what we have been given. It is also response with our giftedness – what we have for the benefit of others. ... and also ... Service of the other comes from knowing that I have something that the other lacks and needs and here there is opportunity to respond to that need.

God is active, he has shown himself throughout history as one who is active and continually involved with his creation as its servant Lord. He continues to provide for, preserve and protect his creation. Humans were created to play their part in God's continuing creation. ... and also ... Human beings have a capacity to change and adapt the environment, to think and reason, to utilise the earth's resources in a way that no other creature can. This capacity can be used to exploit and destroy or to enhance and benefit the earth for ourselves and all living things.

In Christ we have the gift of identity as loved children of God, co-heirs with Christ of God's Kingdom. We are chosen, set apart, holy and loved. Colossians 3:12 ... and also ... We have identity as humans, equal with all members of our species. We are people of worth, loved and loving, capable of contributing to the welfare of others.

My calling as a Christian is to live out my new identity in Christ. I am a child of God because of God's undeserved gift in Christ. This is who I am. I deny the gift and do violence to myself when I do not live a life which is consistent with that identity ... and also ... All people seek to find or live a life that is consistent with their sense of self, and suffer fragmentation and guilt when they don't. This is as true for the Christian as it is for the non-Christian.

All we have and are is a free, undeserved gift of a loving creator. Our ability, time, possessions and health are all gifts given which can be used to bring glory to God when they are used to benefit others. In serving others we serve Him ... and also ... The earth sustains us and all living things. All that I have and am is dependent on this sustenance. I give expression to this when I care for the earth and share with other living beings.

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The Gospel brings us into the community of God's family. In this community, there is both gift and responsibility ... and also ... Living life without a sense of the value and worth of other persons is denial of our shared humanity; the interconnectedness of our community – the community which nurtures and sustains us and on whom we all are dependant.

Service learning – a trinitarian perspective

- God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, three persons one God.
- God is love.
- Love is the true nature of God and love is born of God.
- Service is the way love expresses itself.
- God is Trinity, an intimate relationship of three persons who are one; whose interpenetration (cooperation with each other in each others particular work) is nothing less than loving service, one of the other.
- The call to service is the call to live out our original identity as children of God created in the image of God who is love. An image that has been restored in Jesus.
- Service learning then is learning that equips, motivates and challenges us to fulfill our human purpose.

From the perspective of creation

- God's activity in creation is not a matter for our speculation on his past activity, but His participation in continuing provision, protection and preservation of His world and the part we are to play in that.
- The hymn of creation in Genesis 1 is an invitation for us to participate in the resting of God in his creation by assuming our created purpose as procreators and managers.
- God's care for his creation occurs through all persons and human structures that contribute to peaceful and ordered society, irrespective of their faith.
- God's continuing concern in creation is in part carried on through, in spite of, and because of human agents of all races, creeds and nationalities.
- This continuing care is not exclusively the domain of Christians but rightly occurs through the activity of all people 'good' and 'bad' alike.
- Any action by any person that contributes positively to the world is part of God's continuing care.
- All people everywhere have the calling to be responsible caretakers of creation.
- this is a vital part of what it means to be in the image of God

From the perspective of redemption

- From His 'consideration of the lowly estate of his hand maiden' (Mary) that led to His conception, through to opening paradise to a condemned criminal, Christ's ministry is to the little, lone, lost, the marginalised and the sinner.
- His declared purpose - to preach good news to the poor, freedom for the prisoners, sight for the blind, to release the oppressed (Luke 4:18), clearly indicates that His coming would have timebound social, political and human consequences as well as eternal ones.
- Jesus describes his purpose: '..... did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.'
- Jesus' life of patient, self-giving service is the model that all Christians should seek to emulate. Phil 2:5-11, 1 Peter 2:21.
- Christ is so closely identified with suffering humanity that when we serve the suffering we serve Him. Mt.25:40

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- We are new creations called to do the good that God has prepared for us to do. Eph 2:10
- We are saints, chosen and loved by God, so we put on compassion, kindness, forgiveness and love. Col:3-12

From the perspective of sanctification – Romans 12

- We are part of many communities but especially part of the community of the people of God.
- In the community of God's people we find our true identity.
- Everyone has gifts for the building up of the community.*
- Our gifts differ, but when complemented by the gifts of others, the community is strengthened.
- We are not called to be Christians alone but to be part of community - when we are baptised into Christ and in him we are united.
- The community is both gift to us and responsibility. We are served in love by that community just as we are called to serve that community in love.
- God is glorified and loved, as our gifts are used to love and serve others.

*I have deliberately chosen not to specify these as spiritual gifts, though of course they are, because the term 'spiritual gifts' makes us think particularly of the gifts listed in 1 Cor.12 &14. Romans 12 lists some different, less spectacular gifts (service, generosity, teaching) and 1 Cor 13 clearly indicates that love is greatest because it cuts to the attitude not specifically to the action. It is not the possession of some supernatural ability that is important but the gift of the heart that places concern for the other above self-interest. It is then I (the whole person) become a gift to others.

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