Connecting the dots: Service-learning as a Viable Option for Discipleship Curriculum

Abstract
This paper analyzes the viability of service learning as a valid curriculum for discipleship, as a response to Christianity’s “Exodus Problem” with youth and young adults. It elaborates on possibilities for such a curriculum to provide a platform for ongoing spiritual development. As research ponders issues of youth, young adults and church, Service-learning provides an alternative approach to Christian education and faith formation. The discipline re-focuses energy towards practical application of religious principles rather than memorization of concepts. Studying the relationship between service and learning provides a challenging new option for education.

A Google search of the question “why do young adults leave the church” reveals approximately 8,020,000 results addressing the question, in just .59 seconds.¹ This example demonstrates the immense interest in opinions and research in the Christian community regarding the issue of young adults and church. The consensus is that young adults are abandoning the traditional church during or right after their high school years and not returning until their late 30s, if at all.² The wealth of interest in this young adult “Exodus Problem” has resulted in significant writing and study that is long on opinion and short on solutions.

Compounding the problem is the evidence that the departure actually begins with students during their high school. An underlying, and false, assumption is that young adults leave when they go off to college. The reality is that students begin to drift during their later high school years, particularly around the age of 16.³ While there is almost universal agreement that this exodus is actually happening, little consensus exists on how to turn the tide. In spite of all the hand wringing over the issues that the exodus has caused, it is difficult to find consistent ideas for addressing the problem, particularly in the area of youth ministry education. The question remains: How can churches foster commitment in students, before they become statistics in another online article about the young adult exodus?

Beginning in their late teen years, youth and young adults develop a strong desire for a theology of doing faith rather than simply hearing or talking about faith.⁴ Unfortunately, these younger generations also have a strong sense—either real or perceived—that valuable

¹https://www.google.com/webhp?sourceid=chrome-instant&ion=1&espv=2&ie=UTF-8
opportunities are not happening in and through the church.⁵

One concept that can help youth and young adults “connect the dots” between faith and action is the educational discipline of Service-learning. This paper will review writing and research related to Service-learning, in order to offer greater understanding of the principles involved in the discipline. Further examination will explore research and writing related to youth ministry, demonstrating how impactful service can become a valuable component of educational faith formation. This will ultimately lead to a study of work related to ministry with young adults, and how serving others can create the connections between faith and action that young adults may be seeking.

Definition of Terms

In an effort to use more positive terminology, the remainder of the work will refer to young adults when referring to people roughly between the ages of 16-35.⁶ Although not limited to these exact parameters, this creates a framework for the ages of the people involved. Since the study also focuses on youth ministry discipleship, youth will refer to students age 12-18, which is a fairly standard age range for church youth ministries. Older youth means ages 16-18, and younger youth refers to ages 12-15. The crossover between older youth and Mosaics/Busters is explained by the similarities in the two groups. While there are still distinctions, older youth are taking on young adult characteristics, including a propensity for skepticism about church and religion.⁷

Why Service-learning?

In order to help youth and young adults connect the dots between faith, action, and church, Christian leaders and educators can take multiple lessons from the field of service learning education. Service learning is a curriculum-based practice in which direct service clearly connects to concepts, principles and ideology expressed in the classroom and other educational settings.⁸ Three components of Service-learning make it ideal as an educational response to the Exodus Problem: The learning component, the depth of service, and the potential long-term outcomes for participants, including meaningful relationships.

The first step to understanding Service-learning is to distinguish it from volunteerism or community engagement. While all three types of service are valuable, the learning component makes Service-learning distinct from other forms of service. Service learning is an intersection of knowledge, inquiry, compassion, and ongoing reflection at a point of action that meets a clearly identified community need. It empowers all partners involved to further action, based on research and greater understanding.⁹ It is a particularly popular educational technique among colleges. This popularity continues to filter back into the high school ranks, as students prepare

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⁶Ibid., 18.
⁷Ibid., 18.
⁹Thomas S. LeGrand, Jr., “Live Learning: How Serving Others Opens Student Minds” (Faculty Training Session at Gardner-Webb University Faculty Retreat, Boiling Springs, NC, 2016).
for the more intensive expressions found in higher education.\textsuperscript{10}

Effective projects focus on direct engagement with community members and stakeholders who benefit from the service. The discipline seeks to develop relationships between learners and community partners who receive ongoing benefits from the service. Best practices include projects that are ongoing and sustainable, rather than temporary or short-term.\textsuperscript{11} Projects are marked by ongoing discussion and reflection on the nature of service, as well as research into the effectiveness of the project.\textsuperscript{12} The depth of learning, as it is deeply rooted in the curriculum. For example, a college Biblical Studies class might work to help refugee families. They would research Biblical passages related to slavery or being an “alien,” and write on how those passages relate to how Christians might respond to modern refugee problems.

Service learning also seeks to engage learners in deep levels of service that create a path to understanding and advocacy for social justice, both in local and global communities. As a long time practitioner in the field, Susan Benigni Cipolle writes that service learning enhances self-awareness, awareness of others, and awareness of social issues.\textsuperscript{13} During the service project, teachers and/or professors provide opportunities for discussion, written reflection and research on service. They should seek to develop projects that not only help others, but also empower them to improve their circumstances. Such practice enhances the learning experience of the student, while also allowing them to analyze the effectiveness of the service. Because service learning impresses the importance of deeply imbedded and well-researched projects, it prompts learners to ask more intense questions of \textit{why} and \textit{how} they can most effectively serve. The desired outcome is that they will develop a lifelong ethic of service and become agents of social change in their communities well into, and hopefully beyond, their young adult years.\textsuperscript{14}

Long-term impact is the most hopeful aspect of the service learning approach. Cipolle’s ideal is that teachers/facilitators guide students from acts of charity to impactful Service-learning. As the depth of their involvement increases, they develop the awareness of self, others and social issues that compels them to form a lifelong ethic of meaningful service. Such an ethic empowers them to become change agents, both locally and globally.\textsuperscript{15} In addition to these potential outcomes, significant evidence exists regarding long-term impacts of service learning. Students who engage in the practice in high school or college are more likely to continue serving as adults, to engage in civic activity (such as voting or political advocacy) and to give time and/or money to civic and social service organizations.\textsuperscript{16} Finally, it also tends to create deep and lasting relationships between those providing service and community stakeholders.\textsuperscript{17} As further evaluation of the literature will demonstrate, these may be the very ideals that older youth and

\textsuperscript{11}Ibid., 36.
\textsuperscript{12}Ibid., 38.
\textsuperscript{13}Susan Benigni Cipolle, \textit{Service-learning and Social Justice: Engaging Students in Social Change} (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, Inc. 2010), 40.
\textsuperscript{14}Ibid., 58-59.
\textsuperscript{15}Ibid., 11.
\textsuperscript{17}Ibid., 7.
young adults are seeking.

Perhaps this sounds like a fine ideal; however, it also leaves difficult questions. How can Christian educators utilize service-learning principles; and why would it work for keeping young adults involved beyond their years in youth ministry?

**Youth Ministry: Fresh Ground for Growth**

Service is not a new concept in the world of youth ministry. Volunteer projects and basic service are almost “par for the course” in youth ministry settings. While these activities might create an initial interest in charity, it is most likely minimal service with minimal learning. How can youth ministry teachers and leaders elevate these initial projects to facilitate formation into full-fledged service learning?

A starting point for this discussion comes from Zach Hunter, author of *Generation Change*, a book that he wrote as a teenager and had published in 2008. Although not necessarily a work of academic research, Hunter’s expression provides an excellent starting point for understanding youth views on faith and service. He argues for the validity of service as a path to education and discipleship for youth with a similar perspective to advocates of service learning: Youth learn by doing, not by sitting. Older youth in particular are seeking identity and purpose that is not found in the typical adornments of youth ministry, but instead are found in radical service in the name of Christ. He proceeds to describe various issues of service and social justice, including education, poverty, slavery, and environmental justice. Hunter also adds ideas for integrating service in these areas into the life of the church and the discipleship practices of the youth ministry. The connection that Hunter draws between service and discipleship creates a solid basis to grow service-learning education.

Christian education authors lend significant support to Hunter’s idealistic perspective on service. Jim Dekker outlines the significant impact of service projects on youth ministry participants in the United States, both from positive and negative perspectives. He argues that significant theological reflection must become a significant component of service if the actions are to have lasting, positive influence. He also points out that projects must consider the interactions and the impact with the recipients of service (stakeholders). Dekker’s argument mirrors Cipolle, in that he advocates for significant reflection as a pathway to growing service towards ministry for social justice. Pamela Erwin furthers this case, stating that youth ministry, at its best, is a cross-section of theological/Biblical understanding, social science, and performing practical ministry service. The connection between these three aspects of faith, life and action open the door for youth to comprehend what they believe and to act on it in life. This multidisciplinary approach to ministry is similar to the intersection that defines service learning.

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19 Ibid., 22-23.
20 Ibid., 6.
22 Ibid., 61.
23 Ibid., 62.
25 Ibid., 13-14.
earlier in the paper. By bringing these ideas together at a point of action, youth ministry can begin to utilize service as a viable method of Christian education.

Although few would identify it as such, these and other Christian educators are describing service learning theory for youth ministry education and discipleship. In an article written even before Hunter’s book, Catherine Stonehouse makes the case that children and youth learn first through experience, and encountering Christian action within Christian community opens the door to discipleship formation. “Children and teens are blessed when they have a faith community to show them how to be Christians and live as Christians…Christian spirituality requires service to others, and the young are spiritually enriched when service becomes a part of who they are during the early years of life.”

Ellen Charry warns against the “malforming culture” of youth in North America, and the obligation of religious communities to guard youth against the dangers of such a culture. Taking this concept a step further is Joyce Ann Mercer, as she articulates the importance of acting on behalf of social and economic justice as mandates of Christian life.

The key to developing these ideas into Service-learning curriculum is clearly connecting the service to Biblical and theological principles. As Erwin says, the diversity of cultures within youth ministry demands that it become an “integrative discipline” that ties together social issues, theology, and practice. To talk about abstract Biblical concepts such as grace or compassion without demonstrating how to act on these through serving others nullifies their meaning. Likewise, to serve without understanding deeper questions of why and how is to abandon Christian formation. Additional research indicates that connecting the dots between service and scripture brings theological ideas to life for youth, particularly older youth. When service is left to itself, then it loses its power to impact the faith formation of youth and deters their understanding of both the service and the scriptures behind it. True Service-learning will

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31 Ibid., 122-123.
develop Bible studies and discussions as well as interesting and engaging service projects. Such study and discussion will challenge youth to seek deeper and more impactful projects rather than surface level religious activity.

Several authors and researchers note that young adults are seeking—and not finding—these connections in the church. Service-learning might be a viable option for youth ministry, but why and how could it connect to young adults?

Young Adults: Questions in Demand of Answers

As stated at the outset, most ideas on addressing the “Exodus Problem” seem to be opinion rather than suggestions for tangible action. The discipline of Service-learning, on the other hand, provides a valid and achievable response that this problem demands. The research regarding the thoughts and ideas of young adults reveals why Service-learning can possibly make a difference.

A significant portion of this research suggests that young adults are more interested in what religious faith is doing and less interested in what it is saying. While older youth and young adults want deeper, more engaging study of the Bible and faith, they have significant interest in participating in the application of faith through rather than the mere discussion of it. They also seek enhanced, meaningful relationships with both believers and those outside of the church. Service-learning principles and goals address all of these desired outcomes. If it is to be successful in keeping youth engaged, the practice and principles must continue on through young adult ministry.

One of the early authors to point out this trend is religious researcher George Barna in his book Revolution: Finding Vibrant Faith Beyond the Walls of the Sanctuary. Barna describes disinterested young believers who shun “established systems” of religious expression in favor of integrated faith that is part of daily life and practice. While they may participate in religious discussions and perhaps even acts of Christian charity, these “revolutionaries” often do this outside of the church. They are much more thoughtful and savvy about where and how they invest their abilities/resources than traditional generations of church members. They seek meaningful relationships and in-depth conversations around their faith. As the research about Service-learning demonstrates, serving together can provide a productive environment for these types of relationships and conversation. Without service as a key component of the community, the church is missing a valuable incubator for relationships with and among Barna’s “revolutionaries”.

In their book un-Christian, Barna researcher David Kinnaman and Catalyst cofounder Gabe Lyons build on Barna’s assertions through specific research with young adults. Older youth

33 Ibid., 14.
35 Ibid., 123.
37 Ibid., 12.
38 Ibid., 33.
39 Ibid., 34-35.
and young adults tend view Christianity/churches as insincere and uncaring; too “sheltered” from real-world realities; and more judgmental than loving towards others. Serving others in meaningful capacities can provide a valid and engaging response to these perceptions. Young adults have a strong desire to serve as a way of demonstrating that they are not typical “church people”. They hope for a Christian experience where the church looks beyond itself to meet the variety of needs of those who are not a part of the church. Rather than viewing acts of service as individual events, young adults are anxious to embrace a “culture of compassion” that integrates serving others into all avenues of life.

Young adults are not merely seeking opportunities to make donations or send emergency relief packages to distant lands. They are willing to serve, but want to know how their service engages people and creates opportunities to build community, even across well-defined lines of faith and culture. The desire for genuine, meaningful expressions of love and service for others demonstrates the potential impact of service as a means of reconnecting, or remaining connected, with young adults.

A popular article from The Huffington Post perhaps sums up the case that engaging service is a key to connecting the dots with young adults, and perhaps the non-Christian world as a whole. Writer and activist Christian Chiakulas makes the case that young adults like him are open to church, perhaps even “yearning” for some avenue of organized faith expression; and yet, “…no number of projectors, hip, youthful pastors, or Twitter hashtags…” will compel them to attend. What young adults are seeking is a faith community that gives expression to Jesus as someone who “took up the cross of the poor, the weak, and the marginalized” and for whom “social justice is love.” If this is the Jesus that young adults are seeking, then serving those who are marginalized creates a golden opportunity to establish a community that gives tangible expression to their understanding of faith.

Conclusion

The “Exodus Problem”, as described by the literature, is almost literally screaming for Service-learning. Beginning a Service-learning education ministry with youth, and continuing that ministry with young adults, would provide the valuable active learning experiences that they seek. As youth grow into young adults, they can expand the depth of their service to move from helping underserved populations to empowering them. Service-learning fosters ongoing development of all stakeholders involved, both those offering service and community members who benefit from it. The development of this ideal can begin with even younger youth, and can thread through their high school years and well into young adulthood. This may provide the very

41 Ibid., 121 and 181.
42 Ibid., 212-213.
43 Ibid., 129.
44 Ibid., 215
47 Ibid.
connection that both churches and young adults are seeking in order to continue the formation of faith and practice.

One more point that must be made is that Service-learning is a valued discipline in education, particularly in colleges and universities. If youth and young adults are experiencing it in other settings, then it builds on an ideal that they already understand and have practiced on some level. Christian ministries can further develop what is already familiar, thereby providing a level of comfort to the very population they are trying to reach. Once again, these natural points of connection provide opportunity to tap into an existing practice within the context of faith.

Merging impactful, well-researched service with theological/Biblical study and reflection creates the potential for a powerful link that connects the dots between the church, youth ministry, and young adults; as well as between faith, understanding, and action that youth and young adults long to find in their religious experience. These are the very connections that older youth and young adults appear to be seeking in their faith formation. Implementing them into the life of the church could move Christianity away from the ledge and towards tangible responses to the “Exodus Problem”--perhaps to the point that it is no longer a problem.
Bibliography


