

Icebreaker

“Your Ideal Service Project”

By Tami Rudkin

Discuss the following question with your small group members: If you could go on a service project anywhere in the world, where would you want to go? Why?

Coaching Tip

“Taking the Next Step to Serve”

(An overview of small-group service projects)

By Kerri Wyatt Kent

Just before dawn on Saturday morning, a few of us gather in my driveway with dozens of eggs, gallons of orange juice, fruit, bagels, and cheese. We drive to a women's shelter in the city, then cook and serve breakfast to the 30 women who live there. Two hours later, we head back to the suburbs to get our kids to their various activities. It's the perfect service project for a group of busy suburban moms.

Several of these women are in my small group, but some are just friends of people in the group. We welcome anyone from the neighborhood who wants to go with us. We've been doing this for more than two years. At least ten different women have gone with us, usually three or four at a time—which we've discovered is optimal in the shelter's kitchen. Some people go nearly every month, others go once in a while. It's been a way for our group to rally around a cause, to share an adventure, and to begin living out the biblical love and compassion we've been studying.

Doing service projects together builds camaraderie in a group. In a way, they are the "lab" to small group's "lecture." If you're studying the Bible, they allow you to live out what you are learning. They provide some space to show the love and compassion of God to those in need.

The Bible says that faith without works is dead. And it has plenty to say about the poor. For example, Proverbs 22:9 says: "The generous will themselves be blessed, for they share their food with the poor." And Proverbs 19:17 says, "Those who are kind to the poor lend to the LORD, and he will reward them for what they have done."

Serving those in need is part of what it means to be a Christian. Performing that service together with your small group can be a life-changing experience—if you approach it the right way. Here are some tips for adding this important element to your group life.

Start With Prayer

Henry Blackaby famously observed that prayer is noticing where God is at work, and then joining him in that work. This is precisely the kind of listening prayer that must precede any small-group service project. Where is there a need? What are group members passionate about? Where is there, perhaps, an organization that is working to meet that need and could use a little help? Where is God calling your group to serve? What passions has he placed on the group members' hearts? Are there some needs right in your own neighborhood?

Pray together as a group, and ask God to lead you. Hashing it out is part of listening to God in community. Listen to each other as you listen to God.

For example, our group serves breakfast at a women's shelter run by Breakthrough Urban Ministries. There is a huge need in the part of Chicago where this ministry works. Before we started doing our monthly breakfasts, I knew of Breakthrough and their work. They have a system in place where volunteers come in to serve meals. They were looking for a group to take one meal a month (ours is always breakfast on the second Saturday). And our group members had a passion for the homeless, and for domestic violence victims. This was a great fit.

Start Slowly

Give the group time to process the idea of doing a serving project, and make sure everyone has input. You may want to start by selecting a one-time project. Check with your church or another local charity to research possibilities. Our church, for example, packs meals once a year to send to Africa through an organization called Feed My Starving Children. Our church also runs a food pantry where they need volunteers on a regular basis. Going once to a soup kitchen, Habitat for Humanity build, or some other one-time project can be a good way to start. Our group first went to the shelter to serve a meal during the holidays. A year later, we went again, and after that, we decided we wanted to go on a regular basis.

Designate a Point Person

As you pray about where to serve, you may notice that some people in the group have a lot of passion about serving, or about a particular need. Ask one of them to be the organizer of your service project. In our group that person is me, but I have another woman who will organize things if I happen to be out of town. In our case, that person confirms with the shelter that we will be there, coordinates who's coming and what each will bring, and figures out transportation.

Go With Humility

Your group should not only expect to serve, but to learn. Remind them to be open, to notice how helping others ministers to them. We have learned so much from the women at the shelter. Many are escaping abusive situations, and despite their trials, they are women of great faith. Every person you meet matters to God, and they have something to teach you, if you are open and humble. Treat them with respect. See the value of the people you're serving—and expect God to speak to you through them.

Serve Regularly

While one-time projects can be great, real life-change happens when you serve consistently. Not everyone in the group may be able to make it to a one-time project. If you do something monthly or quarterly, more group members will have opportunities to serve. Perhaps you want to adopt a school in a needy area and volunteer to tutor there on a regular basis, or help out at a food pantry once a month.

Understand the Purpose

Serving others, whether through a one-time project or on-going involvement, is not a way to earn points with God. Rather, it is a way to open ourselves and allow God to form us. It is obedience to Scripture. By serving others, we allow God to develop our compassion. Serving

helps others, but also forms us spiritually. By imitating Christ, who came to serve, we grow in Christ-likeness. It is not about impressing God, or others. Talk about these ideas with your group. You may want to discuss some of the countless verses in the Bible that talk about the poor. (Isaiah 58 and Matthew 25 are great passages to start with.)

Be Flexible

We serve in a pretty rough neighborhood in the city. Some of our suburban group members simply don't want to go. That's okay. For those who go, it's an act of faith—we trust that God will protect us on our "urban adventures." The group members know they are always invited to the service project, but we don't force it. Sometimes I look for another way to include them, such as asking them to donate food. Ask group members to suggest projects they have a passion for—you'll see participation increase.

Invite Others

I have found that non-Christians are often more open to doing a service project than they are to coming to church or small group. Inviting non-group members to come along on a service project can often be a first step toward inviting them into the group itself. One of my neighbors, who was not yet a Christian, was always glad to come to the shelter. She was very comfortable talking to the women there, unlike some of the others from our group, who preferred to stay in the kitchen rather than come out and interact with the guests in the dining room.

I noticed, out loud, how loving and accepting she was. I affirmed her for what she was doing. She heard the women who lived in the shelter talking about their faith. She saw their struggles. Her heart was moved with compassion. She's now in our Bible study, seeking God, reading the Bible for the first time in her life. For her, the service project was an "on-ramp" into the group.

Take Time to Debrief

Ask your group to talk about what they're learning from serving. Do they feel guilt or gratitude for their own privilege? Let them process. Then, push them to go deeper. How does their affluence isolate them, for example? How do the poor have to trust God more than the well-off? Let them wrestle with the feelings and questions that come up. Service projects, especially ongoing ones, will help your group bond, and help individual members to grow in their faith. Perhaps this is the next step your group needs to take.

—Keri Wyatt Kent is a small-group leader, speaker, and the author of seven books, including *Simple Compassion* (Zondervan). Learn more at www.keriywyattkent.com. Copyright 2009 by the author and Christianity Today International.

Discuss:

1. What was my most recent experience with someone who could be considered "poor"?
2. When would be a good time for our group to pray about serving together? What steps can I take to make that happen?
3. Who are some people outside of our group that might like to join us in a service project?