



**Education**  
By Dr. Thomas A. Peterson

## *Finding Service* **in Education**

**I**n the late 1960s, while attending La Sierra University in Riverside, California, I explained to 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> graders that I would be involved in a service project in a remote part of Africa. There was a critical need for a medical clinic to be built in the tiny, inaccessible village of Masenjere, Malawi. When the students heard that, their eagerness to be involved evolved into a whirlwind of activities to raise money for the village.

These students were drawn into an ever-deeper relationship with the project when they later received letters, tape recordings, and pictures about my experiences in Masenjere. They also received a carved piece of ironwood given to me by the chief and engraved with the words, “THANK YOU FROM MASENJERE, MALAWI.”

### **Integrating service into the classroom**

After I became a teacher, I was inspired to find ways to integrate service into my classes in order

to respond to the sense of disconnection many students experience in their daily lives. Many young people feel a growing loss of connection with family, teachers, learning, the church, and their own hearts.

The challenge for educators is to reveal to students the joy and connective value of service and to remind them of our moral and spiritual responsibility to care for one another.

Ellen White reminds us of how service powerfully builds a sense of spiritual connectedness: “Our Lord teaches that the true object of life is ministry. Christ Himself was a worker, and to all His followers He gives the law of service—service to God and to their fellow men. Here Christ has presented to the world a higher conception of life than they had ever known. By living to minister for others, man is brought into connection with Christ. The law of service becomes the connecting link which binds us to God and to our fellow men.”<sup>1</sup>



### A classroom experience

I decided to introduce my Educational Foundations class to the concept of service. I wanted it to be more than a theoretical or abstract discussion. Consequently, I built into the syllabus of a teacher education class the opportunity for them to participate in a service project. This was presented as an option, not a requirement to be graded. Those who opted for the project were asked to perform five hours of service for a person or a group with a particular need.

### Sharing stories

Students were to document their service and then write an appraisal of the experience. Most of the selected projects dealt with service to individuals—such as cleaning someone’s house, listening to a senior citizen’s storytelling, helping a student who was having difficulty with coursework, or visiting a child in the hospital.

A couple of weeks after announcing their projects, students began to share their stories in class. One student described her service project at a homeless shelter as a memorable, life-changing experience and the “most rewarding project of this class.” After hearing these stories, some students who were initially uncertain or fearful about participating in a service project also decided to participate.

## Student experiences

Kelley described what unfolded when she and Lori apprehensively chose to work at a local soup kitchen: “I was thrilled to be feeding all these people. I was asked to ride in the van and deliver food to the people who could not make it to the soup kitchen.

“I will never forget how grateful most of the people were. When we dropped the last meals, two older ladies, who were sisters, hugged my neck and told me they loved me. I know now that this will not be the last time I will do this kind of work. This has been a life-changing experience.”

Kelly and Lori found this experience meaningful to their lives in many ways. It was through service that they met others who helped people in need. Before this experience, Lori said, “[we] were unable to understand that there are people who are less fortunate, and sometimes they need a helping hand.”

Service experiences like this stimulate compassion in ways that nothing else can. This experience led them and everyone in the class to understand the possibility of developing a deep level of connection through service.

## Personal insights

My students told of their struggles with values, their need to be involved in service, and their ability to connect with someone. They told of the “rewards” they received—the joy and peace they found throughout the experience.

After collecting and distributing food and clothing to a needy family, Gloria said: “Being able to help someone less fortunate than me was the best feeling I could ever experience. We need to put helping and giving to others at the top of our priority list. We must all help one another and love one another.”

Michelle had never before considered giving up some of her time to visit people in a nursing home. She had no idea what to expect.

“My experience taught me about love and caring. If the family members do not take the time to see their parents or relatives in the nursing home, people like me can make a difference by just stopping in their rooms and saying, ‘Hello, how are you doing today?’”

Kevin’s only regret about his experience at a soup kitchen “is that I have not been involved before, and I can’t do more for some of the people I met.”

Jamie no longer takes for granted her ability to do simple tasks after working with a child with Down Syndrome. She received much self-satisfaction from the experience and planned to go back.

Service is not only a missing element in the lives of many students. It also starkly contrasts the codes of social order and conduct that typically govern modern life. They are now better able to understand children who face the challenges of poverty, dysfunctional homes, and abandonment, as well as the pressures from an increasingly competitive and narcissistic educational and cultural climate.

More importantly, the service option raised questions about the role of the teacher as a servant and colleague who can relate from the heart. Rather than merely learning a theoretical rationale for performing a service project, these students’ understanding of service developed directly from the positive impact the experiences have had on their lives.

## Implications

Teaching students about service reaches far beyond helping needy people or fulfilling some altruistic notion; it teaches about connection, caring, compassion, and moral responsibility.

Loving service is the most powerful gift on earth to draw people together and link them on a deep spiritual level. Through such service, students are drawn into relationships and come to know someone in a way that is impossible through any other means.

Students saw these experiences as transformational, spiritual, insightful, rewarding, and necessary. Doubtless, such experiences will awaken compassion and empathy in the heart of each student, and some will choose a life of service.

Again, Ellen White reminds us of the importance of focusing on service in education: “In our life here, earthly, sin-restricted though it is, the greatest joy and the highest education are in service. And in the future state, untrammelled by the limitations of sinful humanity, it is in service that our greatest joy and our highest education will be found.”<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, we have been redeemed for service!

## References

<sup>1</sup>Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1900), p. 109.

<sup>2</sup>\_\_\_\_\_, *Education* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1903), p. 309.

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