



Practicing Service

The Essential Practices Toolkit for Service

introduction

Have you ever volunteered to help at your church's workday? Everyone arrives early on a Saturday morning and is greeted with coffee, cider, and doughnuts. The trustees are busily organizing teams, trying to figure out what needs to be accomplished before lunch. Some groups are given rakes and trash bags to clean up the leftover leaves, while others are armed with polish and rags, ready to make the pews shine. Though much work will be accomplished by those present, given the level of laughter you wouldn't know that this is a "work-day." And, perhaps that's what makes this kind of service so meaningful. Service connects us to one another and to the work God calls us to do. While it may look slightly different in your church, service, in this way, is a response to God's love through active participation in God's work in the world. Sometimes this service is in the church, but often it's outside the walls of your church building. Either way, serving others is directly connected to our identity as a Sabbath people.

Service may not seem like a Sabbath practice at first because you're engaged in some form of work or labor. After all, you don't need to be a Christian to help clean something, serve soup, or sort food for a pantry. In Sabbath, we engage in activities that are set apart from our everyday activities. These holy activities ought to start within the boundaries of your faith community. At the last supper, Christ called his disciples to serve one another. This internal service then turns our eyes to those outside of our community. It's in service to God's people that we are reminded that we were created for relationship. We celebrate that relationship by showing love in tangible ways to our neighbors and those in need.

"When we serve others we live into our identity as co-laborers with Jesus Christ."

why service matters

When we participate in the practice of service, we are living out what Jesus called the "greatest commandment": to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Loving our neighbor is a demonstration of our love for God. We are partnering with Christ in bringing about the Kingdom of God on earth. We pray, "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done." The act of service is acting out what we pray.

Even more, when we participate in the practice of service, we are responding to God's grace toward all humankind, so that God's grace is evident to the world in and through us. This is our demonstration of gratitude for the grace we have received. In doing so, we live out the words of St. Francis of Assisi, "Preach the gospel at all times. When necessary, use words." Our actions speak much louder than our words ever can; therefore, when we serve our neighbor, we preach the Good News with our very lives.

When we participate in the practice of service, we live in obedience to Christ's call, remembering that injustice to one is injustice to all. When we participate in the practice of service, we help to right the wrongs that have been perpetrated on our siblings in Christ throughout the ages and around the world.

service in scripture

Consider these passages as you prepare to lead others in this practice:

Serving Those in Need—Matthew 25:31-46

'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

We recognize Christ's call to be a church of action, where God's love, justice, and mercy shine forth and are contagious. The Presbyterian Church calls upon congregations to act boldly and compassionately to serve people who are hungry, oppressed, imprisoned or poor.

The Good Samaritan—Luke 10:30-37

But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.'

The story of the Good Samaritan reminds us again that loving our neighbor demonstrates our love for God. It is the fulfillment of the commandment to "Love God and love (our) neighbor as (ourselves)".

Washing the Disciples' Feet—John 13:1-20

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them."

This story of Jesus washing his disciples' feet is a demonstration of our call to serve those who also follow Christ. Jesus was demonstrating that no disciple is greater than the other and until we learn to serve one another, the world will never fully see Christ's love. Washing feet was a humbling and hospitable act of service in Jesus' day, usually done by servants. Looking for ways we can show the same kind of humility and hospitality to those around us is an act of service to neighbors and strangers alike.

James 2:14-17

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

Being able to make a statement of faith is one thing. Acting out what we believe is another. If we believe that Jesus came to proclaim release to the captives and Good News to the poor, then our job is to work for justice for those unfairly imprisoned and share what we have with those who have nothing. Faith by itself is not a living faith. Living faith makes a difference in the world. Faith in action is the Good News.

service in action

Service as a Sabbath practice takes place both in and outside the walls of our churches. Internally, we serve each other through the daily rhythms of our congregations. Externally, there are endless ways we can serve our neighbors. Whether you are engaging in service in your church, in your community or out in the world, it is important to remember that we practice service as a response to our faith. Consider these ideas as you cultivate the practice of service in your faith community.

- ✦ **Look for ways to partner with your local organizations.** Consider having your outreach and mission committee's spend time discerning what partnership in your local community looks like. Often, there are many one-off projects happening in congregations. Having intentional, long-term partnerships with organizations that offer opportunities for service and engagement will foster a culture of service in your faith community. Pay special attention to having a variety of organizational partnerships and include some that allow for service of all ages and intergenerational opportunities. Make sure you have a way to listen to your community and their needs as you look for ways to serve.
- ✦ **Advocacy as a form of service.** Advocacy can be a powerful way to serve, especially when our normal ways of serving in large groups is difficult. Consider studying issues that are impacting your community and our country. Don't forget to include the study of scripture and how God has called us to respond. When we understand how different communities are marginalized, we can better advocate for and serve with those communities. As you discern different issues, how can you listen to all ages? Remember that your young people have issues that they care about.
- ✦ **Offer opportunities to serve outside of your community and even internationally.** Intentionally partner with organizations that will offer opportunities to serve and learn about systemic issues outside of your local community. Short term mission trips, when done well, can be a powerful learning tool and provide an opportunity for your group to serve and retreat together while learning about systemic issues. Don't shy away from intergenerational trips that can include children. Make sure that your trip planning includes learning about the place that you are traveling to and the issues that the area faces. Also provide opportunities for storytelling and sharing upon return. Long-term partnerships attached to short-term mission trips can be a meaningful and lasting experience for your faith community.
- ✦ **Service also happens in the daily rhythms of your faith community.** Look for opportunities to have different generations serve one another. Each generation has something to offer. Consider partnering with retirement communities that your members may live in. Work with deacon boards to visit the home-bound or start a pen-pal program. Think about your worship service and your fellowship events, even if they are virtual. How

might a young person offer technology support as a way of service? How about greeters both in-person and virtually? Do you have a program for delivering meals? In these times of virtual school and online work, remember that parents have a new level of exhaustion. How can they be served by their congregation?

notes

service resources

Books

Exodus from Hunger: We are Called to Change to Politics of Hunger by David Beckman. Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

Good White Racist?: Confronting Your Role in Racial Injustice by Kerry Connelly. Westminster John Knox Press, 2020.

When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor... and Yourself by Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert. Moody Publishers, 2014.

I See You: How Love Opens Our Eyes to Invisible People by Terence Lester. InterVarsity Press, 2019.

Toxic Charity: How Churches and Charities Hurt Those They Help, and How to Reverse It by Robert D Lupton. HarperOne, 2012.

A Credible Witness: Reflections on Power, Evangelism and Race by Brenda Salter McNeil. IVP Books, 2008.

A Framework for Understanding Poverty, 6th edition by Ruby K. Payne. aha! Process, Inc. 2018.

The Hole in our Gospel: The Answer That Changed My Life and Might Just Change the World by Richard Stearns. Thomas Nelson, 2010.

Just Family Nights by Susan Vogt. Brethren Press, 1994.

Curriculum

[Call to Mission](#), Leader's Guide & Participant Guide. (Being Reformed Series). Congregational Ministries Publishing, 2010.

[Called to Mission: Finding our Place in God's Mission](#). Presbyterian Mission Agency.

[Deacons: The Ministry of Compassion and Service](#). (Being Reformed Series). Congregational Ministries Publishing, 2016.

[When God's People Travel Together](#), three volume set. Presbyterian Mission Agency.

[Don't Invite Them to Church: Moving From a Come and See to a Go and Be Church](#) by Karen Wilk. Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2010.

Online Resources

[Craftivist Collective](#).

["Facing Racism: Stories and Resources for the Church."](#) *Presbyterians Today* (vol. 107, no. 5), October/November 2017.

[Habitat for Humanity.](#)

[Heifer International.](#)

["Matthew 25 in the PC\(USA\): A Bold Vision and Invitation."](#) Presbyterian Mission Agency.

[Presbyterian Disaster Assistance.](#)

[Racism and Environmental Justice.](#) "Lift Every Voice and Sing." *Presbyterians Today*, January/February 2020.

[Rise Against Hunger.](#)

["Short-term Mission Trips Toolkit."](#) World Mission, Presbyterian Mission Agency.

[Souper Bowl of Caring.](#)

[Tiny Hats for Tiny Babies.](#)

["Virtual Mission Camp."](#) Building Faith, Virginia Theological Seminary.

["What is Hands and Feet?"](#) PC(USA) General Assembly.

["World Kindness Day."](#) Random Acts of Kindness Foundation.