

Social Action Projects: A More Excellent Way

Sheryl A. Kujawa-Holbrook

O God, you have made of one blood all the peoples of the earth, and sent your blessed Son to preach peace to those who are far off and those who are near. Grant that people everywhere may seek after you and find you; bring the nations under your fold; pour out your Spirit upon all flesh, and hasten the coming of your kingdom; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

As the summer program season approaches, many congregations and dioceses begin planning social action or "mission" trips with young people. But just how meaningful are these "trips"?

Such learning experiences can build self-esteem and leadership skills, as well as a greater sense of social responsibility. Yet well-intentioned projects far too often fall short of potential benefits, becoming primarily opportunities for travel on the part of the sponsors, and sources of anger or feelings of powerlessness for those visited. Some projects, emphasizing work and the desire to help others, only reinforces the status quo, rather than offering a transformative opportunity for young people to see the world anew.

Social action projects for young people, in order to be transformative experiences, need to both educate young people on how oppression operates in our society, and stress how we, who are part of the dominant culture, participate in that oppression. Rather than patronize the poor and the oppressed, participants need to learn to recognize how God is already at work among those they encounter.

Here are some criteria for congregations and dioceses planning social action experiences for youth:

The project is built on a long-term relationship between people.

Though many groups sponsor one-time work camps, these isolated projects are not as effective for young people to learn about society as are on-going projects where lasting change—for all involved—is possible.

The project has a direct relationship to participants' home community.

Projects that are little more than opportunities for tourism convey to young people that the poor live elsewhere, rather than in our own communities, congregations, and dioceses. Programs that do require travel to another location need to have a component that emphasizes how participants can incorporate learning in their own communities, and they should only be conducted in locations where there is a relationship between the groups involved (such as a companion diocese relationship), and with the consent of the local congregation and diocesan bishop.

The project emphasizes the mutual relationships between people rather than working for other people.

Although manual labor can be a helpful component of social action projects for youth, it does not, by itself, set the stage for young people to learn more about society, nor does it advocate social change. All projects should specifically include training for all participants—youth and adult—in the areas of cultural sensitivity, history, and socioeconomic conditions of the local area.

The project demonstrates a "systems approach" to issues, rather than a approach emphasizing charity or service.

A "systems approach" to social action programs focuses on issues of empowerment, the development of networks, and community organizations, rather than simply giving time or money and receiving immediate satisfaction. Include a reflection-and-action process that helps young people confront issues concerning their project. These need to include: who are the oppressed; who/what are the oppressors; what are the classes of interest (e.g., racism, sexism, classism, ageism, and others); what action opportunities will allow participants to dialogue with and learn from the poor and oppressed; how is God present in this experience; how does the people's struggle relate to the process of history; what are the possibilities and plans for future action. Critical reflection helps young people see how we are all interconnected, and sets the stage for a mutual understanding which allows different communities to work together for change.

The project design allows for those who are visited to define their own needs.

The type of mutual education needed for social action is one that allows both groups to define what they want to get out of the project, rather than the sponsoring group solely designing what they would like to accomplish. Instead of one group "helping" the less fortunate, the focus of the project is on listening, identifying, and sharing. Both groups are then empowered; neither is left depressed and hopeless.

The project design demonstrates a planning and evaluation process that includes the full participation of young people and adults, who reflect the diversity of the sponsoring congregation or diocese, as well as the host community.

Well-designed social action programs often take more than a year to plan, execute, and evaluate. Just as adults should not plan social action programs without the input of young people, sponsoring groups should not plan or evaluate such programs without the full participation of the host community. Participants in social action projects—youth and adults—should also reflect ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity. Designs for mono-cultural groups visiting people of another culture should be avoided.

The project design clearly incorporates intentional community building.

The decision making process should allow young people and adults to speak openly and honestly, trusting their experience. Any residential program needs to take seriously the community needs of the entire group, and allow for young people to participate in all phases of group life.

The project includes an educational pre-project orientation for all young people and adult participants.

This design should include the following information:

- The names and addresses of the participants
- Information on the community or region, including maps and demographic information
- Any pertinent contextual and logistical information about the program
- A clear statement of who is sponsoring the program and who has financial responsibility for the program,
 - including a complete budget
- A clear outline of non-negotiable behavior and consequences
- A listing of resources or supplementary reading related to the project
- Due dates for registration materials

The project clearly demonstrates how the project will be supervised and evaluated.

Project guidelines need to reflect the structures of accountability for the project. Project sponsors are responsible for seeing that the program is insured and that health forms are obtained from participants. In addition, the project must be evaluated, including on-site and post-event evaluation. The project design should also include a debriefing or reentry process.

Prayer for the Oppressed

Look with pity, O heavenly Father, upon the people in this land who live with injustice, terror, disease, and death as their constant companions. Have mercy upon us. Help us to eliminate our cruelty to these our neighbors. Strengthen those who spend their lives establishing equal protection of the law and equal opportunities for all. And grant that every one of us may enjoy a fair portion of the riches of this land; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

[Book of Common Prayer, page 826]

These guidelines were developed through the youth ministries network and tested through various provincial social action projects. Those interested in further resources on this subject, may read the following classics:

- Benson, Peter L., and Eugene C. Roehlkepartian. *Beyond Leaf Raking: Learning to Serve/Serving to Learn* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993)
- Hunt O'Connell, Frances. *Giving and Growing: A Student's Guide for Service Projects* (Winona, MN: St. Mary's Press, 1990)
- Holland, Joe, and Peter Henriot, S.J. *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990)
- Lewis, Barbara A. *The Kid's Guide to Social Action* (Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing, 1991)
- Shields, Kartina. *In The Tiger's Mouth: An Empowerment Guide for Social Action* (Newtown, N.S.W., Australia: Millennium Books, 1991)

