

Engaging In Service From A Small Group Ministry Base

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A particular small group in our congregation had been meeting for several years, with some changes in membership over time. The members volunteered in various ways as individuals within the congregation, and considered this as their service. Engaging in service, not just as individual members, but collectively as a group, was an expectation of groups in our Small Group Ministry Program. What would entice the members to engage in a group service project? What would be meaningful? It so happened that group members all enjoyed books. We also were concerned about the rising costs of fuel, especially for those on a limited budget. Put those two together, and the Books for Fuel Sale! was held.

The sale itself occurred on a weekend of hard rain that kept people homebound, and thus was less than a howling success. However, the time that we spent together engaged in the sale, working on a common project, raised the bonding in the group to a new level. In fact, the group then decided, on short notice, to adopt a family from the devastation in Mississippi after Hurricane Katrina. Again, in putting together a box of supplies for that family, we learned so much about each other's interests and how we make choices.

Reflection on these service project activities brought us several basic insights. First, bonding is the first step in the "Five Steps to Building Community" that are part of the UU Youth culture. "The first step in building community is to break down the cliques and barriers that exist, and to establish a relationship of trust among the individuals in the group. A problem-solving task or other activity that requires group members to work side by side can create communal bonds. As they discuss solutions and help one another accomplish the goal, group members transcend their diverse backgrounds. Cooperation is the goal." Although our small group had been meeting for several years, these service activities provided a bonding that refocused the group. In the group, we had bonded around our individual needs, but the service activities created a group bonding. And rather than "transcend their diverse backgrounds", we "incorporated" our backgrounds that brought a richness to our very activities. (Deep Fun, <http://www.uua.org/YRUU/resources/online/deepfun.html>)

Second, the activities that we selected were of interest to the members of the group. For a project to be successful, the group needs to connect with the activity on a meaningful level.

Third, there needed to be various ways for our group members to participate in a project, if they so choose. For example, raising money implies that everyone is able to contribute financially, which may not be the case. Writing notes to go with the box for Mississippi, or gift wrapping or making sure that the items were packaged and delivered is a contribution that does not involve financial resources.

A reluctant group need not take on a lofty service project. The important thing is to begin moving together beyond ourselves to an experience of our connection with the larger world.