

SOCIAL ACTION PROJECTS: A MORE EXCELLENT WAY

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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 opportunities for travel on the part of the sponsors. 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 become 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 ongoing 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 an 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; and 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 that 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 monocultural 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 the community needs of the entire group seriously, 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 it will be supervised and evaluated. Project guidelines need to reflect the structures of accountability for it. 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 re-entry 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 choose to read the following:

Benson, Peter L., and Eugene C. Roehlkepartian. *Beyond Leaf Raking: Learning to Serve/Serving to Learn*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993.

Hunt O'Connell, Frances. *Giving and Growing: A Student's Guide for Service Projects*. Winona, Minn.: St. Mary's Press, 1990.

Holland, Joe, and Peter Henriot, S.J. *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990.

Lewis, Barbara A. *The Kid's Guide to Social Action*. Minneapolis: 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.

When a faith community or a diocese discerns that they are called to engage in a mission experience or pilgrimage, it is amazing how many people jump at the chance to go on a

IDENTIFYING YOUTH PARTICIPANTS

“trip.” It sounds really exciting and fun to think about going on a mission trip, and it also usually makes one feel good to think about going somewhere to help other people.

There’s no doubt that mission experiences are exciting! They represent a hands-on opportunity to serve God and to help other people.

However, it’s important to remember that mission trips and pilgrimages are an experience within another culture, whether in your own community or a faraway place. They require a tremendous amount of preparation and personal sacrifice from all participants.

You will want to carefully choose who participates in your mission experience or pilgrimage. An application process conveys the message that this opportunity is for individuals who are serious about their spiritual journey. See the sample application in this Manual for ideas on what information to gather and types of questions to include.

Establishing basic criteria can help youth who are not yet prepared for a mission experience and select themselves out of the process. Criteria could include:

- **Age and maturity:** What are the upper and lower age limits for the experience? Often, mission experiences to faraway places are for high school youth while more local experiences may serve middle school youth or youth in both stages of schooling.
- **Youth group participation:** Decide whether regular participation in a youth group is necessary to qualify.
- **Faith community membership:** Decide if your mission experience will be open to youth outside your congregation or diocese.
- **Commitment:** Can the individual meet the participation criteria, such as participating in programming established to prepare for the mission experience or pilgrimage, including Team meetings, Bible studies, retreats, and fundraising?

Finally, there is debate in the youth ministry community about whether or not to include youth with identified eating disorders, extreme psychological issues, or behavioral problems. Know your youth and their mental and

IDENTIFYING YOUTH PARTICIPANTS

physical abilities! Remember your purpose for this mission experience and ask yourself if the needs of any individual might greatly hinder the identified goals.

It is entirely reasonable to decide that a particular young person is not yet ready for the intensity of a mission experience or pilgrimage. If this difficult decision is made, inform the youth/adult and family in a pastoral manner, being honest but caring. Make sure you are in communication with your church leadership and the parents/guardians and meet with the young person, their parents, and your Rector/Vicar to talk through your decision. More conversation is better than less in this circumstance. Know that, even though this seems difficult, your honest reflection is best for the Mission Team as well as the young person involved.

Youth Mission Experiences require that adults act as full participants, living within the community covenant just as the youth are expected to do. Prior to departure, everyone participating must explore what it means to

IDENTIFYING ADULT LEADERS

“seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself,” and determine if they are called to serve in this way and if they are physically and emotionally prepared to accompany youth on a mission experience or pilgrimage.

It is important for the adults who are called to this special ministry to be active, open, and willing members of the group during all aspects of this journey of faith. Through the process of growing together during the pre-trip meetings, many old attitudes, opinions, and beliefs may be altered. This can be a challenging process for an adult and you want to be careful in choosing spiritually mature individuals who can embrace this type of transformation.

It is critical that prayer and discernment are part of the selection process for qualified adults. In putting together your adult team of leaders, put together an application or job description that incorporates the following selection considerations:

- Participation and membership: Will you require that the adults who want to go on this mission opportunity participate as an active member of your faith community?
- Spiritual maturity and commitment to practice: Do they worship

regularly and are they actively seeking to grow spiritually? Will they be willing to pray with and for the other team members, and will they seek to empower all young people to be the spiritual leaders that God is calling them to be?

- Youth work: Do they enjoy and understand the special time of development known as adolescence, yet realize they are adults, called by God to be companions on this journey of faith and not to be teenagers again?
- Physical and emotional resilience: Will they be full participants even if they are tired or have not had that second cup of coffee? Will they be willing to uphold all trip policies and the covenant even if it causes conflict?
- Availability and willingness to participate in necessary training: Will each adult be willing to participate in a Safeguarding God’s Children training and background check and be willing to live within those standards and norms?

It is important to discern the adults who are called to this special ministry— not just accept the first few who volunteer.

Yes, there are many things to think about when selecting the adults who will be accompanying your youth on this mission opportunity. Pray, pray, and pray some more...listen for God's still small voice. Ask questions. Watch and listen... then select the adults who will join this mission opportunity. Proper prior planning prevents plenty of pitfalls. A good sense of humor also helps a lot!

Legal Concerns

As you prepare your group for service, you must also be vigilant about details regarding insurance concerns, medical concerns, and transportation concerns. Please read over the list below and make sure you and the other adults involved in this mission experience have covered each area.

Participant Identification:

You should have the full, legal name of each participant in your group along with all information required on the Participant forms. Make copies (or scans) of all drivers' licenses, health insurance cards, and photo IDs. If you are crossing international borders, you will need copies of everyone's passport. Every adult participating should have copies of these forms with him/her at all times. Leave one copy of these documents with your home congregation.

Release Forms:

You should have a current medical release form for all minors and a medical history on all participants. Every adult participating should have copies of these forms with him/her at all

times. Leave one copy of these documents with your home congregation.

International Travel Letters:

If you are crossing international borders, be sure you have a notarized participant letter for every young person traveling. The letter needs to be signed by all legal and custodial parents/guardians. While these were not always necessary in the past, Immigration and Customs procedures, especially in the United States, have become more strict in requiring these documents. You will find a sample letter in this Manual.

Immunizations:

All participants must also have an Immunizations Record card to present at Customs and Border Crossings. Check the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for required vaccines.

Insurance Information:

Review your insurance information to see exactly what it covers. Bring a copy of the policy, the policy number and the name of the contact person with you. All adults participating should also review their personal insurance policies.

Safeguarding God's Children training and background checks:

All adults from your parish/diocese going on this mission experience must have gone through the Safeguarding God's Children training (www.cpg.org/productsservices/preventingsexualabuse.cfm) and should have a

criminal sexual background check completed by the sponsoring organization within five years of the travel date.

Emergency Procedures:

You and the other adults participating in this mission experience should develop an emergency plan in case there is an accident during the mission experience. This includes:

- who will take the youth to the hospital,
- who will contact the family and parish/diocese, and
- who will stay with the other youth

Remember, there should never be one adult with one youth, even if the youth is injured. This plan should be reviewed with the youth participants and families before you leave.

Emergency Contacts:

You should leave a complete itinerary with all families of participants and with your faith communities. This itinerary should include information on the location of the nearest hospital and phone numbers for each of the responsible adults participating in the mission experience.

Transportation:

Here are some standards to use when driving:

- All drivers' DMV Records should be checked prior to the trip if they will be transporting youth during the trip.
- All adults who will be driving

complete the "Transportation of Youth" form included in this Manual.

- Only adults over 24 years of age should be allowed to drive youth.
- All passengers must wear seatbelts at all times while the vehicle's engine is running.
- No drivers should use a cell phone for texting while vehicle is in motion.
- For trips 8 hours or longer, it is recommended that there be at least two adult drivers who will rotate driving responsibilities. It is highly discouraged that one adult drive with one youth; should circumstances force this arrangement, the driver should call the parents of the youth and one other adult from the group at the time of departure and arrival.
- Many insurance companies, including Church Insurance Company, do not allow use of 15-passenger vans. If your policy does allow use of a 15 passenger van, it is recommended that there be no more than 12 passengers.
- If you have any questions about any of these issues of a more legal nature, please contact The Episcopal Church Office of Youth Ministries for explanation and assistance.

sample form

TRANSPORTING YOUTH IN A MOTOR VEHICLE

All adults who will transport youth during our trip to _____ are to complete this form. Completed forms will be kept on file at the parish or diocesan office.

Name: _____

Address: _____ Home Phone: _____

Cell #: _____ Work #: _____

Parish _____ City: _____

Vehicle Information (if you will be driving your own vehicle):

Make and Model: _____ Year: _____

Color: _____

Is your vehicle in good repair and equipped with safety restraints? If so, how many?

If there is another vehicle you might use in the course of transporting young people, please describe in the same way as above.

Have you received any traffic violations with the last five years? _____

If so, give details of each on the back of this form.

Attach to this form a copy of your current driver's license, current car insurance, and vehicle registration information.

In transporting youth, I agree to abide by the diocesan policy of having all passengers buckled while the vehicle is running; to obey all traffic regulations, including speed limits; not to drive while under the influence of alcohol or any medication taken within 8 hours that may impair my driving; or if I suffer from lack of sleep.

Adult Leader's Signature: _____

Date: _____

MEDICAL, LEGAL *and* MEDIA RELEASE FORMS

Online, the current sample medical and legal release form from The Episcopal Church Office of Youth Ministries is here:

http://library.episcopalchurch.org/sites/default/files/changeable_youth_agreement_and_release_form.pdf

As you develop your forms, please note the following requirements that should be included:

- Each participant must provide a copy of their government—issued identification – passports are best. In fact, they are required if you are traveling abroad.
- Each participant must have a recent tetanus shot (within past 5 years).
- Each participant must provide a copy (both sides) of their health insurance card. If a participant does not have insurance, you will need to secure this in advance.

Full disclosure on the forms about medications and known physical limitations and illnesses is critical. To ensure your information is current, you will collect these forms at the beginning of the process to cover all preparatory events and then revisit them just before travel.

The Sample Release Form is available in PDF form on The Episcopal Church website:

http://library.episcopalchurch.org/sites/default/files/changeable_youth_agreement_and_release_form.pdf