

Strategies for Serving, Working for Justice, and Caring for Creation with Children and Adolescents

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Children and youth love putting their faith into action. It is easy to see their faith lived out in simple acts of compassion and powerful displays of advocacy. While adults can often justify the injustices around them, have become numb to issues, or have given up on what they see as “lost causes,” youth and children have not. They gift the Church and the world with a combination of optimism and passion that can be simply described as hope. As right and wrong become clear to children, they are committed to fairness. As youth begin to see the gray in-between, they become critical of hypocrisy. Our children and youth can serve as examples of faithful servants and also be accountability partners for older generations that have forgotten many of their dreams.

Serving others, working for justice among all peoples, and caring for God’s creation are all different expressions of the great commandment’s basic notions: to love God and love others. We encourage children and youth to love God through the care of God’s creation, taking seriously the command to have dominion or responsibility for what God has made. We also show love of God by the way we care for each other. Even if we didn’t have Jesus remind that, when we serve the “least of these” that we do it for him, we would know that caring for others is our calling as God’s people. From the law of hospitality to Jesus call to feed his sheep, Christians inherit a heritage of compassionate service and advocacy that is core to our faith.

As children and youth engage in acts of care for God and others, we are called to accompany them and serve as mentors and partners while also remembering how much they have to teach us. Each year, thousands of high school students take time away from summer jobs (making money) to go on trips (spending money) to serve other people (for no money) on mission trips. This is a far cry from the typical image of youth. Their example can be an inspiration to the Church, even as the Church helps shape and mold them through such experiences. The following practices are opportunities for the Church and its children and youth to grow in faith while shaping God’s kingdom.

Serving, Working for Justice, Caring for Creation: Five Settings

Growing in faith as an individual

There may be no greater diversity in the Church than the expression of gifts, visible through acts of service, care, advocacy, and compassion. Living out our faith finds very personal expressions in the causes we take on and the way we approach our service. Some may be advocates for abused children while others may become foster parents. Still, others may become fund-raisers or even chose a career where they support vulnerable children and families. The range of needs and responses is endless. Helping individuals find a way to express their faith through service is vital to a lifelong faith experience.

Church is one of the many places children and youth can express their personal call to serve, and Church can be a vital place in helping young people claim their gifts and learn to share them. While we

are exploring individual practices, that doesn't mean they have to be shared in a vacuum. The community helps call us all to be our best self and the work of the individual is often lived out in partnership with others. Just remember that these practices are intended to strengthen personal expression of service, advocacy and care. Their impact on other people and the larger Body is bonus.

Growing in Faith with Peers

Serving can be fun and standing up for others often requires the support of others. The role of friends in living out a person's faith can be powerful. In the Boy Scouts, when a scout seeks the rank of Eagle, they are required to organize a project that helps their community and engages their peers in helping complete the project. We can see this same dynamic in other advocacy and service projects. Those standing up for others need partners to stand with them. Those reaching out to help others need partners to fill all the needs. Those who wonder if they are making a difference need a cohort – others to question, lament, and keep inspiring each other.

The practices described are tasks that can be done in a faith community but can grow with a child so that when they are a youth, and find their way into adulthood, they know some great ways they can pull others together to serve. Different service projects reach different communities and engage different gifts. Use these projects as opportunities to identify, affirm, and develop the gifts of the children and youth in your community. While each individual grows, you will also see them growing as a community.

Growing in Faith with My Family

One of the most difficult places to express faith in service and mission is the family. While families may be very faithful and committed, they are also very busy and often going in different directions. Parents feel like taxis and may be more accustomed to dropping off a child for a service project than staying and participating together. When families do share common experiences in hands on service, social justice, or creation care, it can have a powerful and lasting effect. Such experiences show young people that faith is real for the adults around them and that what we celebrate weekly in worship applies to daily life. When families engage the world as people of faith, youth and children will see God at work in the world in new ways.

The role of the local congregation is always one of encouragement and equipping. In this case, there is also an element of role modeling. If congregations are not involved in hands on mission and never speak about justice issues, then families are less likely to engage in such practices. Hearing a prophetic word about justice and service in worship goes a long way to engaging people in service outside the walls of the Church. Sometimes the acts of encouragement and equipping needed are related to clergy and worship leaders as much as the families. Get your congregation talking about justice and serving others and families will follow the Church's lead.

Growing in Faith in the World

It is hard to serve others without going out into the world. Our service to others ends up teaching us about ourselves and helping us grow closer to God. It is hard to speak out for others without speaking to people who are different from us. Our call for justice puts us in contact with those we advocate on

behalf of and those who petition on their behalf. In both relationships, we are more connected to the boarder community and world in which we live.

Finding opportunities for children and youth to engage the world in ways that are relatively safe and financially realistic can be a challenge. We may not be able to take everyone on a global service trip to a developing country. We may not be able to take everyone to Washington D.C. to meet with leaders and learn about issues. While these may happen on occasion, they are events where as smaller group will represent the congregation and then share their experience. The practices below are for a local congregation to use locally and internally to connect with a broader world. They do not replace the value of a hands-on service or learning trip, but instead offer some opportunities for everyone to participate.

Growing in Faith with Intergenerational Faith Community

Serving others is a great way to build bridges between. The service itself connects those in need with those who are called to serve. Relationships begin to form and we serve each other. Other connections form among those who work together to serve others. There is something about working hand in hand that helps overcome differences, transcends biases, and pulls everyone together. Millard Fuller talked about “the theology of the hammer,” describing how shared work brings unity. This is true for theological differences but also applies to generation gaps. People who work together have common ground. Allowing children and youth to serve with adults is a great way to impact the faith journey of the entire community. Adults teach new skills to young people and youth and children remind adults why they are serving. At its best, shared service helps everyone grow while meeting the needs of the broader community.

As you bring generations together for service and justice ministries, be mindful of who has power and authority. There are some clear adult roles and some clear child and youth roles, but power and authority should be shared as evenly as possible. This way, the work is shared and a partnership rather than feeling like an apprenticeship where one receives and one gives. Relationships are at their best when everyone has something to learn and something to share. Encourage young people to share their gifts and remind adults to be open to learning something new.

Serving, Working for Justice, Caring for Creation Strategies

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Children

1. Stewardship 101

Stewardship is one of the first commandment given to humans. In the midst of creation, God tells the first people to have responsibility for creation. Earth's care is entrusted to these inexperienced creatures and we have been fumbling through, trying to do our best ever since. In the church, we often associate stewardship with money. In our culture, that is a simple aspect of stewardship we can all grasp. Money has value and potential, depending on how it is used, and what we do with the value we possess is at the heart of stewardship. We can hoard, share, invest, waste, idolize, give or hide our financial resource.

While the most visible act of stewardship in the Church is a weekly collection in worship, there is often a decision made long before the plate is passed. Givers often come with their chosen gift, already set aside. The practice of setting aside a portion of our money to share with God and others is an important spiritual discipline. This is also one of the first and easiest practices in caring for others.

A simple way to equip this practice is to provide a small offering box. Invite children and youth to place loose change or other donations in the box. This can be a good time to share a lesson on tithing, or you can introduce the box with a specific project. Children and youth try to collect as much as they can for a specific cause, then bring their box to combine with the gifts of others to make a difference.

The smallest children will simply enjoy putting coins in the slot of a box or jar, hearing them clink or seeing the small circles disappear into the dark hole. As children get older they can connect the gift they give with specific causes and they learn about the needs of others. Youth will be able to articulate the need for others, and possibly take their box around the community to collect, adding to the gift they bring. Talking about financial stewardship needs to begin with children and youth. Money is too core to the culture we live in and issues of money and faith are too often corrupted by secular messages. Don't be afraid to talk about the need to give – especially the need of the giver to give.

2. Recyclers

Children are very creative but also creatures of habit. They like to know the rules and love to enforce rules. Teaching children the rules to what goes in recycling and what goes in traditional trash can empower them to be the head recycler of the family. Children can also help with recycling at Church. Teaching recycling in each setting is a little different but each can help children care for God's creation in a very tangible way.

In the local congregation, children can help collect left-over bulletins, set up aluminum can collection locations, and sort the trash in class-rooms and activity spaces to pull out recycle. While this can be a helpful practice and make the connection between faith and earth care, the individual practice is best lived out at home. Help families make a recycling plan, or figure out how their child can be part of the recycling process. This may be done best with a workshop on recycling with examples for the kids to see and sort. Coaching and encouraging families is your primary role, as is giving children an opportunity to share about their role in recycling.

At home, children are capable of understanding where bottles, cans, and paper go. They can keep track of what day recycling needs to be taken to the curb (or taken to recycling center), and even make signs to designate different cans at home. Children can show guests where to put their recyclables, and pull some dry goods out of recycling if placed in the wrong container. Beyond the tasks of remembering and sorting, children are learning to be advocates for a cause and share their cause with others.

3. Birthday Bags

Children understand and appreciate special days. Empowering them to help other children celebrate special days is a wonderful way to connect them with the needs of others. The basic concept is a bag that holds all the supplies needed for a parent and child to celebrate a birthday away from home due to illness, poverty, or abuse. You will need to gather supplies to make birthday bags, and connect with a local shelter or Ronald McDonald House to find a good partner to receive your bags.

The bags can be given to shelter or care partner to give out to families. Each bag should be filled with cake mix, can icing, candles, party hats, streamers, balloons, plates, napkins etc. Children can help collect supplies, divide up ingredients, and even decorate paper bags to hold the items. Children can even make cards, or write a birthday message to go along with the bag. Along the way, be sure to take time for prayer and education, helping the children involved understand what they are doing and who will benefit from their work.

4. Family Ark

Children have a fascination with animals. This may be the reason the story of Noah's ark gets so much attention with children despite the complicated theological issues involved. Animals can be a great tool to introduce children to themes of service, creation care, and even bring about some global awareness. This practice can be done digitally, but is probably best done with a photo album or scrapbook. Parents can help children take pictures of animals they see or learn about and place them in an "Ark Book."

Along with the picture, parents can help children add information about where the animal lives, what it likes to eat, and what threats the animal faces.

This collection can be expanded with family trips to the zoo, an animal reserve, a farm, or even a local shelter. Anytime a child sees an animal, they can think about the information that goes in their book, and add a new creature to their collection. Placing the Ark Book in an easily accessible place will invite children to look through it at various times. This can be a great tool for conversation about endangered species, ecosystems, and generally caring for the environment. Families might even put some scripture quotes about creation and stewardship in the child's book.

When children learn about animals that live in distant places, they are also learning about countries and communities around the world. This can be a great introduction to the global community for young children. As children get older, they can connect what they know about animals with what they learn about other people and their cultures. A family Ark Book can be a great tool for learning while also providing a fun project that the entire family can enjoy.

5. Work, Jobs, and Service

Children dream of what they will be when they grow up. Youth are asked to make educational choices based on what career they think is in their future. Young people are introduced to many careers by the world around them but the ones they know best are the jobs that impact their family. The career of parents can dictate much of family culture. Hours for meals and bedtimes, transportation and homework help- many family realities are dictated by work schedules of parents and caregivers. Helping children and youth understand how these careers were chosen and why they are important to the family is important. It is also a great place to talk about faith and service. Some people are blessed to have jobs that they feel called to and understand it as a vocation of service. Others have their current job out of necessity – paying bills and supporting the family. This too, is a noble calling.

These conversations can be guided in a Church program for families, or encouraged at home. There is no wrong way to talk about careers, jobs, and service to God. You might consider having a career fair at the Church and let different adults talk about why they hold their current jobs. Be sure to have a diverse group of speakers, including various educational levels. All jobs and people should be affirmed. A pastor has clear ways to serve God on a daily basis but a grocery clerk can also show care for others and be a blessing. A factory worker can care for those they are around every day and take pride in their work.

By talking about the nature of work and why parents do what they do, children and youth can better understand the challenges around them. Older children and youth will have greater respect for the work their parents do, and better understand what motivates their parents. These conversations can also have a powerful impact on the choices youth make as they become young adults and take their place in the work force. A parent who works two jobs to support the family can inspire a child to complete their education. A parent who works lots of hours may inspire their child to be more intentional about their balance of career and family. Honest conversation can have a big impact, and in the midst of such honest conversations, God can be seen at work.

6. Scarf in a Bag

Hands on projects that can teach about the needs of others are a great intergenerational activity. This one allows all ability levels to help in some way while helping those who struggle to stay warm on cold days. The final product is a scarf which can be donated to shelters, or other clothing distribution programs. Another option is sealing each scarf in a plastic bag, then placing them on fences, trees, or posts where someone homeless is likely to find it. Include a note that invites the finder to take the scarf and include a prayer of blessing. Local social workers or police can recommend good locations to place the bags.

For the actual creation of the scarfs, cut two pieces of fleece long enough for scarf. Cut 2-3 inch slits in the fabric about every 1-1.5 inches, making tabs long enough to tie together. Make sure you are cutting both pieces at the same time so they will match up. Tie the two pieces of felt together using a simple knot on each of the 1 x 3 tabs you have created. The two pieces of fabric can be different colors, or you can use a combination of solids and prints to add some creative flare. Once you finish, place each in a plastic bag and make sure it is sealed.

Some can cut while others tie. Some can fill bags while others write notes. Some may simply hold while others do the cutting. There should be something for most age groups to do in this project. The knots are the most labor intensive and take the most time. If you are using an assembly line model for making the scarves, be sure to assign more tiers than anything else.

How the bags are distributed is up to you. If you are going to leave them for homeless people, be sure to do so during the day, and do not send children or youth out alone. This is a project that can be adapted for blankets or pillows and can be done for senior adults or families having a baby. Use your creativity and adapt the practice to fit your community. Just remember, however you share this practice, to do it together.

7. Farm Days

One of the best places to learn about the world is a farm. Food, family, economics, modernization, and creation care are all observable in the microcosm of a farm. While young children may be oblivious to these issues, they will one day wrestle with questions about food security and the rights of workers. They will wrestle with environmental concerns the tension between industry and rural life. Exposing them to a farm and teaching them how food is grown and raised is a wonderful way to prepare them for the future. Of course, there is the added benefit of animals and outdoor exploration, and these are worthy components of ministry all on their own.

Local farms will often give tours to groups if asked. Larger farms may even have activities for children. Before visiting a farm, make sure you have plenty of volunteers, water to drink, and hand sanitizer. Plan well in advance so you can communicate clearly with families and inform them of appropriate dress for the occasion. Most farms suggest close toed shoes. If children will be outside for a long time, sunscreen and other issues should be considered. Make sure your trip doesn't last too long, especially if you have young children. While they will love the animals, their excitement will only carry them so far. Don't

forget, there are some facts of life and harsh realities on display at a farm. Be prepared for questions about where the animals came from and what happens to them once they grow up.

Surrounding a trip like this with stories from scripture, crafts about sheep, and lessons on creation care will create a memorable experience. This can even become an annual trip for children and families, or something your church does every few years as a learning experience for each group of children who come through.

Children to Youth

8. Care Calendars

Every day is an opportunity to serve others. Acts of service do not have to be huge. Little acts of kindness can make a big difference and help make compassion a habit. A simple tool to practice this is a monthly service calendar. Write in simple and diverse acts of care that can easily be done without much preparation or time commitment. Examples might include, “pick up litter,” or “give a complement.” You can make each monthly calendar a different theme to focus on different causes. If you feel like daily options is too difficult, you can come up with tasks to complete for each week.

Encourage children and youth to put their calendar somewhere visible so they can check it each day, or even mark off the different tasks as they complete them. If you want to add some additional motivation, invite them to add up the number days they complete the task, then bring back their calendar and turn it in at Church. Add up all the combined acts of service of the Church’s children and youth and celebrate total. You can combine this practice with the collection boxes previous described by making “return your collection box” the designated task for each Sunday.

9. Service Days Directory

Family service days can be a congregational project or something families do on their own. These days can highlight the many partners for service that are all around your community. Often, projects families engage in with a group from their Church are a doorway to future volunteering. For many families, the hardest part of setting together is the logistics. Knowing who needs help, how to do it, when to be there, and what to bring are not complicated questions to answer but can be just hard enough to keep families from finding answers. Trying out projects through the Church is a great first step.

Service projects can range from picking up trash or recyclable material on a walk, to serving a meal, to building a house. Animal shelters and cemetery clean-up are always projects that can involve people of all ages. If you are planning a service day for the families of your congregation, make sure you have enough work for everyone and set clear expectations on what to bring and what work will be done. Those same logistical unknowns that keep families from doing the project on their own will also keep them from showing up with a group. Any medical or liability forms should be given out in advance and all expectations should be communicated as early and as often as possible.

As you plan and resource service projects, keep a list of organizations and partners. Record contact information, ages that can serve at that location and what their basic needs are. Make sure to note any

unique issues about that project or partner. This information can be made available to families in the Church to plan their own service day. If parents want to take their children to help homeless people, your service directory can help them find a location or project that is suitable to the age of their children and satisfies any safety concerns of the parents. Such a directory can be kept as a binder in a Church office, or provided on-line so that families can look through options on their own time. Consider having a hashtag for hands on service so that any family finding a project in the directory can tag their pictures and reflections on-line and share the experience with the congregation. This will encourage others to plan their own family service day.

10. Grand-Partners

Sometimes serving others takes us a long way from home. Other times, those in need are right next door. A local congregation can be a great place to allow children and youth to serve older adults in a variety of ways. This is best done in a way that fosters relationships between multiple generations of the Church. Young children can start by making cards for an older member of the Church and as they grow, so can the service. Over the years, a child might find themselves helping older adults with technology, or even picking them up for Church.

The congregation can help create these service opportunities by partnering children with an adult who could use some help, or someone who would just appreciate the attention of a young person. Families should be partner as you begin, knowing that eventually older youth can take ownership for the relationship without much assistance. You can plan a first event to introduce “Grand-Partners” to each other, or equip parents to lead the introduction. Be sure to set some basic expectations, keeping them very small at first so that children and families are not overwhelmed. This should be a joyful opportunity that fits the gifts of the child and touches the life of an adult.

As you get started, consider using regular ministry programs to nurture these relationships. Children can make cards for special occasions while together, then deliver them. Youth might help each other shovel snow or rake leaves for their Grand-Partners. Church dinners are a great opportunity for partners to sit together. You can also incorporate this into other congregational mentoring ministries. The goal is to help young people serve generations before them, and for those generations to discover the gifts of the generations that follow.

11. Micro-Ministry

Since we cannot all go on an over-seas mission trip, we can serve those in developing nations without having to leave home. Micro-loans are an easy way to make a difference in someone’s life. Various organizations, such as Kiva, allow you to loan money to individuals or small groups all across the globe. These loans are paid back, interest free, and you can then loan the same initial amount to someone else. If you have a set amount of money to invest annually, you can increase the amount you loan out each year.

While there is a clear boundary between borrowers and investors, you can still help your community connect with the recipient’s life experience. Many micro-loan organizations will give you a picture and short bio of the person you are investing in, and give you updates on the repayment of funds. This

allows a Church to emotionally connect while keeping an eye on the financial side. With children, you can explore where this person lives and what their life is like. As children get older they can learn about the business the family runs and how the loan will help. Older youth may want to dive deeper into the injustices that often keep poor people in poverty. Posting a picture of your partner, praying for them and their family on special days, or other connective activities can help children and youth be more connected.

Youth might become good overseers of micro-loan funds. They could choose the recipients each year and help communicate the choice to the congregation. Participation in a micro-loan program is a great way to teach older youth about finances, economics, and justice issues while allowing the entire Church community to help a family that needs a hand up.

Children and Youth

12. Bagging and Stuffing

Logistics, safety, and time limits all make service projects with children and youth difficult. One of the easiest ways young people can serve others also answers all of these concerns. Those who serve the homeless, refugees, victims of domestic violence, disaster victims and other displaced persons try to provide resources that can be handed out quickly. Emergency workers, social workers, and volunteers like to have resources that are useful and appropriate. Small bags with hygiene supplies, non-perishable foods, or other useful resources can be a blessing. Church World Service and other organizations offer instructions for putting together bags, kits, or buckets or resources.

There are three basic steps to any of these projects: Gathering, packaging, and delivering. Supplies can be collected, purchased, or donated. Eventually the need to end up in one place. Packing can be done by even the youngest children with an adult or youth helper. Older children can easily learn the routine of packing any of the kids, making sure to include one of every item. Delivery needs to be organized in advance so that the Church doesn't have storage taken up with resources that others really need. Delivery is often something youth can help with, especially loading and unloading vehicles.

The assembly line nature of these projects allows time for visiting, connecting volunteers and making the entire experience a lot of fun. This brings a social component to the service of others. Don't forget to also include some educational time. As you ask for supplies, pack, and deliver, make sure children, youth, and their families know where these resources will be going. Clearly define the cause and who will be receiving the resources. Explain how they will be distributed and who will actually hand them out to those in need. In some cases, older youth may even be able to personally hand out packed resources to those in need.

13. Collecting and Sharing

One of the simplest service projects and community does is the collection of goods. This can range from food to clothing, or even involve soda can tabs or food labels. There are lots of good reasons to put out a box or basket to collect things at Church. By intentionally choosing causes that focus on a specific

generation, and engaging other generations in the collection and delivery, the Church can deepen the impact of the project.

Children and youth don't spend much time thinking about life as a senior adult. Having them help collect items for a nursing home or care center gives young people an opportunity to put themselves in the shoes of a different generation and consider what their life might be like. This will inform their relationships with others of that generation. Letting children and youth ride along for the delivery of a collection just makes the project even more impactful. You might also consider letting them make prayer cards, write letters, draw pictures, or other personal sharing that could go with the collection.

Adults have all been children at some point but often forget what those years are really like. Asking adults to focus on the needs of children is a great way to advocate for the needs of young people. This can also remind the Church that they need to have patience and grace for the children in their midst. Adults who stop to remember the struggles of childhood are less likely to complain about a baby in worship or a tired child melting down at a Church dinner.

Projects that cross generations also bring the added benefit of offering a common experience to the entire congregation. This can help shape the identity and self-understanding of a community. Church being defined by where it meets or who leads it is not nearly as strong as a faith community defined by their common mission. Experiences in shared mission help develop that identity and give members something to talk about when they want to share their faith with others.

14. Sister Churches

Congregations are microcosms of their broader community. They reflect the ethnic and geographic culture of the members. Food, decoration, special events, and worship all reflect the context in which we live. Partnering with a congregation from a different context can be a great way to make God bigger in the eyes of children and youth. We all have a tendency to imagine God in our own context. By building relationships with a worshipping community of a different culture, children and youth get to see life and God through the eyes of that Church. Assumptions are challenged and possibilities are awoken as two communities get to know each other and celebrate each other as people of God.

This relationship can have many manifestations, but it all begins with finding the right partner. Some denominations will have resources to help match congregations around the globe. Others may have to reach out on their own, doing a little research. Finding a sister Church and building a relationship can take time but it is worth the effort. Remember, you are not looking for a Church that needs you to rescue it or fix it. You are not looking for a project, but a partner.

Once you have established communication and the beginning of a partnership, start slow and let communication and the relationship grow. You can start by praying for each other in worship and in small group settings. Prayers should include the specific needs of each congregation and the communities they serve. Another good early step is education. Learn about where each other lives. Through letters, email, video, or old fashion research, explore what each other eats, what each other wears and how each other worships God. Share music, folktales, and liturgical traditions.

Using technology, you might be able to connect the communities for conversation or even worship. Imagine a sister Church in Argentina offering a musical anthem for a congregation in Idaho. Imagine a youth reading scripture in Alabama for a worship service in South Korea. Video conferencing allows so many opportunities if we take the time to set up the technology. This relationship can offer limitless creative opportunities for your congregation and allow the children and youth in both communities to see God at work in an ever-widening world.

Adolescents

15. Under Construction

Tangible, visible achievements are important to young people. Often, matters of faith are abstract and a challenge to keep hold of. Hands on building can be a great way for children and youth to serve while also developing new skills. Younger children may only be able to paint or sand wood. Older children can help assemble kits and learn to hammer nails. As they get older, other skills can be taught. Older youth might graduate from high school with experience roofing, hanging dry-wall, or putting siding on a house. From birdhouses to homes, children and youth can help others and serve God by building with their hands.

Habitat for Humanity and other organizations are powerful partners for building projects. Developing a relationship with a particular organization can be very helpful. While many have age limits, Habitat and others have been working to expand the opportunities for children to serve. Panel builds at a Church, sheds (children's play house), and other models that can be done without power tools allow younger volunteers to get involved. Even the youngest children can help sand and paint a board for a new address sign, bird feeder, or mailbox that will become part of a home.

The amount of confidence gained by youth who learn hands on building skills is amazing, and since the work is volunteer there is lots of supervision and lots of grace for mistakes. Building experiences can be local projects or service trips. Construction projects can involve volunteers for a couple hours or a week. There is great flexibility, and an opportunity to make this type of service a continual presence in the lives of children and youth. Along the way, they will also meet the people they are serving and homelessness and poverty will have a face. Children and youth can build homes and their understanding of poverty and service at the same time.

16. Time and Talent Pledge

Youth have lots of gifts to share. With a simple form, you can help them reflect on their gifts and teach about stewardship. This can be done as part of a study on spiritual gifts or in the context of a congregation's stewardship campaign. The basic concept is the same in any context. Give youth a simple form that asks for their name, a number of hours they want to be in service to others, and a list of personal gifts they are willing to share in those hours. Be sure to have a place for a signature and date. Like the pledge cards that adults often return with a pledged dollar amount to give in the next year, youth can estimate their service and from of service in the days ahead.

This practice has a lot of different benefits for both the youth and the congregation. By reflecting on what they have to give and how they spend their time, youth can see the potential they hold to help others and can define their priorities to match their potential. This also teaches youth the concept of making a pledge or commitment. If they get in the habit of making a commitment as youth, they will already be familiar with practice when asked to make a financial pledge as an adult. You might even consider making “treasure” an option on the form so they can go ahead and get in the habit of making a small financial commitment that fits their ability to give.

You can help youth consider their pledge by reviewing activities they are often involved in. This could even be part of a promo for activities in the next year. Invite youth to think about ways they already serve and time they already spend. This activity isn't designed to make anyone feel guilty about what they are not doing, but rather to affirm the gifts of time and talent they already give or empower them to share in ways they had simply not considered. While you might want to engage a peer group or families in identifying gifts and celebrating ways youth serve, the filling out of a pledge form should be a personal and private manner. You can invite them to trust you with the form as an accountability partner, or have youth seal their form in an envelope with their name on it and return them after 10 - 11 months for reflection.

17. Care Dares

Youth are very aware of the needs around them and are capable of discussing the issues involved. As youth explore social issue, lift up others in prayer, or learn about justice issues, invite them to brainstorm what can be done by people their age. As suggestions are made, write any practical ideas on its own index card. Once you have a number of cards, read them to the group, and ask the group who they know that could really live out one of the suggestions. At this point, group members may “dare” one of their peers to take one of the cards and try to actually live out the idea. The person dared may accept the dare, refuse the dare, or “double” the dare by accepting it on the condition that the person who dared them help. Assign a fair amount of time for the dare to be completed, then set a deadline. Anytime the group meets before that date, ask for an update. This is a social activity that can span weeks or months.

This can be applied to relational issues at school where someone needs a friend, or someone needs to speak up about an injustice. This can be applied to social issues in a community with dares to feed others, listen to a homeless persons' story, or start a recycling program. You can give points for dares, and shared points for doubled dares to encourage participation. You can also apply the “truth or dare” concept by asking anyone dared to be honest about their reason if they choose not to take a dare. For example, someone dared to have lunch with a new person at school could pass on the dare, explaining that they are too shy. This might lead to a better candidate being dared, or help people name and overcome their own limits and insecurities.

Be careful not to push too hard, and watch out for relationship issues among your group that could make this activity unsafe. At this best, this activity invites honest conversation about the needs of those around us and how God might have equipped those gathered to address it issues. Care Dares can be a powerful community building experience and a powerful way to nurture a mindset of service within youth.

18. Family Issues

Justice can be a vague thing until it finds expression in a specific cause. Encourage families to find a cause they can all support. This support can be financial, or through hands on service, but encourage them to have some element of advocacy connected. The first step is for families to engage in discussion on events and issues in the world and choose one where they all share a common concern. Families can write letters to government representatives, commit to a boycott of a store, or get involved in an awareness campaign. This can be cancer walk or an anti-racism march. This can be a boycott based on fair labor or a campaign for equal rights. Whatever the issue, your task is to encourage, equip and empower families to think through the role of their faith in life choices, then put that reflection into action.

You might start with a congregational event where representatives of various advocacy groups talk about their work. You could also start out with a Bible study on “the least of these” or the justice messages of the prophets. Lift up famous faith based advocacy movements or places where God’s people have made a difference. Some basic examples might include the Civil Rights movement in America or Arch Bishop Desmond Tutu’s work in South Africa. This is a great opportunity for parents to share about their experiences with justice over the years, or the ways they have seen voices of justice shape the world.

Another side of this experience may be a family that cannot decide on an issue out of disagreement. While it may be difficult to choose an issue together, the conversation about how they disagree can be powerful. Encourage families to claim their common ground and celebrate the faith of each other, even in disagreement. This can be great practice for respectful conversation beyond the family and help youth understand that those they disagree with (and would even protest) still have humanity and deserve respect as children of God.

19. Civil Rights Interviews

Adults have, by the years they have lived, collected a wealth of information on civil rights. Older members of the Church family will remember the justice issues that were at the heart of World War 2. A larger number lived through the civil rights movement in America and will have experienced it a variety of ways. Others have watched technology shrink the world and raise awareness of injustices all over the world. This wisdom is often untapped, and unshared. By asking youth to do Civil Rights interviews, you can connect generations and share stories of how God has been at work in the world.

Interviews can be done with anyone older than the youth. The longer someone has been alive, the more observations they will have. Help youth prepare by creating questions about how the Civil Rights movement changed the nation, the Church, and specifically that person. Youth can practice interviewing each other, then their parents. After that, connect them with adults across the life of the Church. IT may be best to send youth in pairs so they can help and encourage each other. Make sure to plan a way to collect and share all the interviews. Consider having the youth video, or at least take a picture of the person they are interviewing. Encourage them to take good notes and write out any stories they really want to remember.

These interviews can be shared with larger gatherings of youth and adults in the Church. Some might even be good for a website or to share in worship on special celebrations such as Martin Luther King Jr. Day. Making videos available to the person's family could be a special gift. Remember, however you conduct the interviews and share the stories, you are creating room for the Holy Spirit to connect people and for them to inspire each other.

20. Pen Pals

Engaging the world isn't just about service. Relationships with people who are different from us can be just as valuable as volunteering. Pairing youth with young people from other communities, especially places around the world, can be a great way to explore multiple cultures. If possible, find partners from a variety of nations and cultures, allowing youth from your church to each learn about different people and places. The sharing among youth in your congregation will allow them to hear about the lives of youth all across the globe.

Partners can be found from a variety of places, including ecumenical partners or missionary societies. Pen Pals can exchange actual letters, or use social media if available. Older youth might be able to develop their own pen pals on-line, and possibly already have relationships from gaming or other social media. Still, the best option is to have partners with some Church relationship so that you know the person on the other end is legitimate and shares a common faith.

Encourage youth to ask their Pen Pals about their daily life and where God fits into the schedule and home life. Of course, they should also talk about music, family, and other common experiences. Consider taking time at different youth gatherings to invite sharing about Pen Pal experiences. This will allow them to tell each other about the different cultures they are learning about and faith practices in different communities.