

## **Fostering a Long-Term Commitment to Service: The Role of Campus Religious Leaders in Service Learning**

**By Kent Koth**

For the past 15 years I have worked as an educator and administrator of service learning programs at several institutions of higher education. Through these professional experiences, dozens of students have shared with me how their encounters in the community have given them an increased desire to work for a more just and caring society. My experiences are not unique. Over the past two decades, formal academic and co-curricular service learning programs have blossomed on thousands of college and university campuses throughout the country. As a result of these programs, a generation of college students are discovering their passion for service and justice work.

The awareness that each year, millions of college students attain moments of great clarity through service learning programs gives me tremendous hope that a generation of young people will be able to more fully address the intractable social and environmental challenges of our era. Yet, as much as I would like to believe in this vision, several questions give me great concern. Do young people continue to engage in their communities upon facing new and challenging responsibilities after graduation? Is engagement in service learning and community service just a fad that students pursue during their collegiate experience? How do students maintain their commitment to service and civic engagement after leaving the nurturing environments of schools?

By offering service learning experiences which include thoughtfully designed service activities, critical reflection, and spiritual exploration, colleges and universities can help thousands of additional students develop a lifetime commitment to service and justice work. This process of service, reflection and spiritual exploration can occur through a variety of contexts. Yet, because it is frequently perceived that service learning can only occur in the academic classroom and must be led by faculty, campus religious leaders who could play a key role in this process remain an underutilized resource.

## **Service-Learning, Spiritual Exploration and Long-Term Commitment**

Service-learning practitioners and scholars have frequently cited the important role that critical reflection plays in the service learning process (Eyler, Giles and Schmiede, 1996; Honnet and Poulen, 1989; Jacoby, 1996; Kendall, 1990). Critical reflection activities in service learning provide an opportunity for students to learn how their service experiences fit into the larger context of social and environmental issues and what additional steps they can pursue to address these issues. Without a doubt, critical reflection plays an essential role in giving students the knowledge and skills they will need to stay involved in service after they graduate. Yet, critical reflection activities in many service learning venues only engage students in a process of analytical reasoning. What is frequently missing from critical reflection is an intentional focus on spiritual exploration or the examination of one's deeper sense of purpose and life meaning. For students to make service an essential part of their lives over the long-term, their service learning experiences should become a part of their spirituality.

A great deal of evidence points to the connection between spirituality and service as an important determinant in building individual commitment to social change. Prominent leaders of social movements such as Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Dorothy Day and Cesar Chavez drew strength and power from their spirituality in order to pursue social and political change. Recent sociological studies (Ladd, 2000; Putnam, 2000; Verba, Schlozman & Brady, 1995; Wuthnow, 1991) demonstrate that a deep sense of spirituality is a strong indicator for volunteering, philanthropic giving, caring for those in need, and political involvement. Academic case studies of public service leaders (Parks, Daloz, Keen & Keen, 1996; Colby & Damon, 1992; Stanton, Giles & Cruz, 1996) point to spirituality as a key motivator for public engagement.

The historical and philosophical connection in most religions between faith and service makes the connection between service learning and spiritual exploration a natural fit for campus religious leaders. For example, the Christian adherence to "faith and works" has prompted many Christian campus ministers to sponsor community service projects in addition to offering opportunities for fellowship and worship. The Jewish focus on "tikkun olam" or helping to repair the world has fueled campus Hillel offices and other Jewish campus organizations to coordinate opportunities for community involvement along with providing students with formal religious programs.

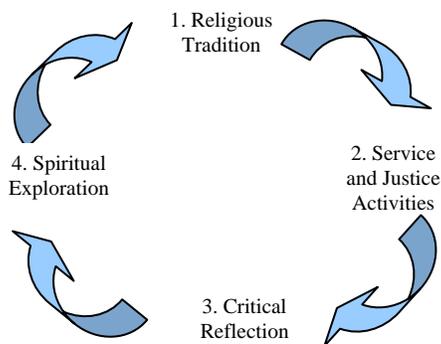
There are two primary approaches for campus religious leaders to develop service learning initiatives that include spiritual exploration. The first approach is to start from the students' sense of religious belonging and move towards service. The second is to start by engaging students in service and then move towards spiritual exploration.

## From Religious Belonging to Service Involvement

For many years, religious leaders within higher education institutions have offered students a chance to engage in thoughtfully designed service learning activities. Drawing upon Dr. Kathleen Maas Weigert's belief that "all the baptized should understand that action on behalf of justice is a significant criterion of the Church's fidelity to its mission" (Galligan-Stierle, 1996, p. 148) campus religious leaders invite students to put their faith into action. For example, during spring break religious leaders from dozens of institutions engage thousands of students in service learning immersion projects that address a variety of social and environmental issues. Through these formative experiences, students unearth the root causes to problems they are seeking to address, while simultaneously reflecting on their spiritual and religious beliefs and values.

By linking service learning and spiritual exploration, these campus religious programs engage students in a common cycle of involvement. Initially drawn to the program because of their desire to participate in religious worship and fellowship, students frequently become engaged in service and justice activities. This involvement prompts students to learn more about social and environmental issues through critical reflection. By virtue of these service and reflection experiences, students begin to reflect more deeply upon their spiritual values and subsequently expand their religious involvement. The cycle begins again as students become more involved in service and justice work. This repeated cycle provides students with an increasingly deeper sense of themselves and an understanding of how they can be agents of social change.

### DIAGRAM 1: From Religious Belonging to Service Involvement



Engaging students in a service learning process that starts with students' sense of religious belonging and moves towards involvement in service is one way for religious leaders to connect service learning and spiritual exploration. However, this model is not for all students. Many campus religious programs focus on the spirituality of their specific religious traditions. Since many contemporary college students consider themselves "spiritual, but not religious" (Cherry, DeBerg, Porterfield, 2001), this focus on a specific spiritual tradition will limit the number

of students who might be drawn to such programs in the first place. For campus religious leaders to engage “spiritual but not religious” students in service learning and spiritual development requires an alternative approach.

### **From Service Involvement to Spiritual Exploration**

Although many campus religious programs follow the pattern of moving students from their sense of religious belonging towards an involvement in service, a growing number of programs have approached this cycle from the opposite direction. In fact, several campus religious programs have entirely transformed their historic ministries to follow this approach. In so doing, these programs welcome the “spiritual, but not religious” students into a cycle that moves from service involvement to spiritual exploration.

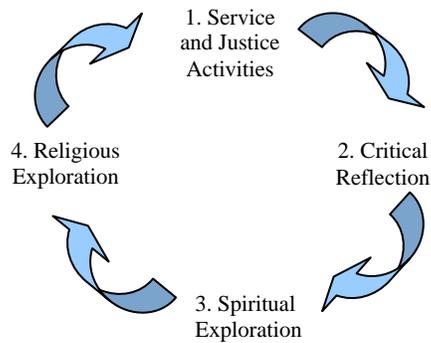
For example, in Kalamazoo, Michigan, Coleen Smith Slosberg transformed her campus ministry from a "confessing community to a community of faith." (Slosberg, 1998, p. 3). For years, Slosberg witnessed the slow decline of student participation in weekly fellowship and religious programming. Over the course of several years, Slosberg shifted the focus of her programming to train a corps of students to lead service activities for other students. Slosberg and her student leaders structured a time of reflection into every service activity. Slosberg observes, "by engaging in service and reflection, we offer to an increasingly secular campus the possibility that their educational task may be connected to some ultimate meaning and purpose" (Slosberg, 1998, p. 3).

In addition to Slosberg's example, in the 1990s, Betsy Alden and Mark Rutledge developed and began disseminating *The Praxis Project: Campus Ministry and Service-Learning* (Alden and Rutledge, 1997). Adopted on over 100 campuses across the nation, the Praxis Project encourages campus religious leaders to develop service learning projects for academic courses. Through the project, religious leaders coordinate service activities that faculty weave into their course curriculum. The religious leaders subsequently facilitate reflection sessions for students in the courses. Although Alden and Rutledge are Christians, campus leaders from other faith traditions could adopt the Praxis Project model as well.

The cycle in both of these examples is similar. Students initially participate in a service or justice project sponsored by a campus religious organization. Subsequently students participate in secular and spiritual reflection activities that enable them to learn more about themselves and the issues that the service projects address. These experiences may prompt students to explore their spiritual and religious identity and subsequently get more involved in service and justice work. Reflecting on this approach, Erin Swezey notes, "those involved in such service yearn for the spiritual belief out of which such service comes naturally and on which, if it is to be lasting, this service must rest" (Delve, Mintz, Stewart, 1990, p. 78). She concludes, "often students who get involved with service, oblivious to any connection between service and faith, discover the

dynamic of faith within their lives from these opportunities to reflect upon their experiences" (Delve, Mintz, Stewart, 1990, p. 78).

## DIAGRAM 2: From Service Involvement to Spiritual Exploration



While these activities offer campus religious leaders a powerful means to involve “spiritual but not religious” students in service learning and spiritual exploration, there is one risk to employing this model. If too much time and energy are devoted to the coordination of service and justice projects, less emphasis may be placed on reflective activities that help students deepen their religious and spiritual values. Alden and Rutledge describe the Praxis Project as a curriculum designed to develop the Christian faith. Yet, there is always an inherent risk that such projects will evolve into purely secular endeavors. The academic objectivity of the college classroom has the potential to weaken, if not totally eliminate, the opportunity for spiritual and faith formation. Faculty who partner with campus religious leaders might accept assistance with the coordination of service projects, but may not want religious or spiritual conversations to occur in their classrooms. If they simply become secular service learning coordinators, campus religious leaders will lose their capacity to present the messages of social change that arise from their particular faith traditions.

### Conclusions: Fostering a Long-Term Commitment to Service

Campus religious leaders can play an important role as service learning practitioners. By weaving together service, critical reflection, and spiritual reflection activities, these leaders can offer students profound opportunities to explore personal meaning and take action in their communities. The two cycles presented above offer a framework by which faculty and administrators can negotiate the spiritual predispositions of individuals and institutions. Regardless of the approach taken, students can develop a deepened and refined commitment to a lifetime of service and justice work. For students engaged in service learning and spiritual exploration through campus religious programming, involvement in the wider community will not be a passing fad; it will become a part of who they are, what they value, and how they live their lives.

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