

“Taking Religious Education Out of the Classroom:
Service Learning as an Effective Contextual Pedagogy”

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During the first class session for a course in Religious Education that I teach, a new student raised his hand and asked the question that most of us are used to hearing at least once a year: “What is religious education anyway? Doesn’t it boil down to making sure that the members of a particular church know what they believe?” Each term that I hear that question, I once again start to think about the questions that I hope the students will ask after they have experienced the course. Questions such as: “How do we find meaning and a sense of sacredness in our changing postmodern world?” “How can particularity and respect for the other exist effectively side by side?” These are the kinds of questions that capture my interest and expresses what contemporary religious education is all about for me.

Why are these two questions of interest to me? They interest me because they reflect the essence of the nature of the changes that we are experiencing as a people, a society, and faith communities. These are also issues that we must help our students address. On the one hand, we witness on a daily basis the technological, economic and personal developments with implications far beyond their immediate application. Dorothee Soelle draws our attention to some implications of these changes in a vivid analogy. The ultimate impact of our constant development is a “busyness” that consumes us to the point where we die spiritually due to starvation because we lost track of those things that feed our spirit and thus nurture our inner life (Dykstra, 1999). She sees it as dying by “bread alone” (Dykstra, 1999). The implications for religious education are that we need to somehow address these issues of meaning, sacramentality and spiritual hunger in life with our students.

The other pronounced change that we are experiencing involves the composition and make-up of our communities religiously, ethnically, and culturally. When I look around the Tarrytown community in which I live, I am amazed at the rapid changes that have taken place. Where once the community could be said to have been a predominantly white, Eurocentric, upper-middle class bedroom community of career-minded professionals, it can no longer be described as such. It is a much more diverse community composed of Latin American, Balkan, Southeast Asian, and African individuals and families representing a much wider economic spectrum. This has also meant a growing diversity of faith practices and beliefs. Change then is the order of the day. This means that again, religious education has a role in encouraging our students to engage “the other” and to affect what Fayette Veverka calls “border crossings and boundary building” (Veverka, 2004, 47).

Either one of these issues merits extended study and reflection. But that is not the purpose of this paper. What I want to tackle is the question of pedagogical methodology. For many religious educators and developers of curricula, one critical concern is creating the means whereby our students begin to grapple with meaning and sacredness while, at the same time, being interdependent and interconnected with others – both those who are like us and those who are

unlike us. But the question comes down to how best to do that. What can we do in religious education to challenge our students to develop a “multidimensional hermeneutics through which both centers and margins can be challenged and transformed?” as Boyoung Lee asks (Moore, et al, 2004, 295). How can we help religious education be more than “transmitting a heritage” and so become “. . . learning, living, and growing within a community which must relate to larger and larger communities until it encompasses the entire world” (Thompson, 1988, 19)? Or, as Paolo Freire saw education, how can we create the environment “by which people deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world” (Brelsford, 2001, 323)? These are the questions that have led me to consider what clues service learning hold for our field. Therefore, the rest of this paper will look at what service learning is and how it can pedagogically address the needs of religious education.

I. What is Service Learning?

Randolph Crump Miller once offered tremendous insight in stating that the “clue” to religious education is theology and theological interpretation so as to enable us to interpret our experiences. But, another clue to effective religious education is that of experience – experiencing one’s own truth in relationship to other lived truths. As Cate Siejk understood it, the changes within today’s society require a new perspective of religious education. For Siejk, “. . . an age characterized by confusion and the devaluing of orthodox Christianity” requires “. . . a pedagogy that enables people to understand for themselves and to commit to the concrete living of Christian meaning and values” (Siejk, 1999, p.166). Certainly religious education has looked more and more to experiential education as an arena of promising methodologies. At the same time, educational theory has informed our work as religious educators through such methodologies as role play, dialogue, discussion, interactive learning, and case studies. But there is one methodology that is not well-utilized, it seems, in our field. This methodology is service learning.

At its heart, service learning is essentially experiential education par excellence. Students engaged in service learning programs are challenged to wrestle with their own perceptions, viewpoints, stereotypes, prejudices and attitudes through continual reflective activities, while working together on a service project that meets a real community need. The lessons learned and the objectives achieved will vary due to the context of the project and the particular issue being addressed through the program and the reflection sessions. Character development, interfaith religious education, ethnic conflict resolution, religious education as a process of liberation, the individual in community, gender roles, and personal growth and development are just a few of the issues for which service learning can be utilized for effective teaching and learning.

When people hear the term “service learning,” they often think of community service projects and volunteer programs. But they are not the same as service learning programs. Nor is the learning in a simple community service project the same as that which is gained in service learning. An act of service, in and of itself, is “good” and can be a powerful learning experience. However, if nothing more is done with the experience, it can, and often does, fade into the backwaters of our memory with the probable result of having learned little or nothing at all. Why? Because there is no anchoring action or component in the project that anchors the experience to a learning task. That is the limitation of straightforward “service projects” or

“community service work.” These programs have no clear anchor or learning component. Consequently, any learning that takes place is contingent on one’s experience of feeling good or feeling satisfied by their act of service. Because that feeling is not easily sustained, it fades into one’s memory as a “nice experience.”

Service learning is different, however, because there are two dynamics at work in a service learning program. First is the service act itself. Through that selfless act, our attitudes, emotions, and feelings are gradually awakened and stimulated. We experience what Thomas Lickona calls “moral feeling” (Lickona, 1991). The service activity triggers moral feeling which in turn opens us up to begin to experience the holy. It also creates a fertile seedbed for a sense of humility that allows us to see and learn those things that we may have been too closed and set in our ways to see beforehand. This then sets the stage for the second dynamic of service learning.

Reflection is the heart of service learning and is the place where learning takes place in a service learning program. Reflection is an intentional and guided activity that takes place before, during and after the service activity. This is where educators have the greatest opportunity to facilitate real growth and learning. As Janet Eyler and Dwight Giles point out, “Learning occurs through a cycle of action and reflection, not simply through being able to recount what has been learned through reading and lecture” (Eyler, 1999,7). It is through the reflection periods that participants are encouraged and challenged to reflect on and evaluate their deepest held beliefs, address their personal perceptions and stereotypes, and generally question what they hold to be true. It is also where they connect theory to a lived experience. But they do this personally, socially in relationship with the other participants in the project, and contextually. As the Vanderbilt Study on National Service indicated: “In practice it is critical reflection, . . . that provides the transformative link between the action of serving and the ideas and understanding of learning” (Winings, 2002,110).

This is why service learning holds so much promise for sound religious education practice in my opinion. The reflections on one’s service experience become filled with the energy and spirit of the project. This is the environment of love, humility and faith that Paolo Freire sees as being so important for true dialogue and understanding (Lee, 2000). Yet, the learning goes way beyond just this environment and feeling. It allows the student to experience what Ronald Cram calls a “mindful transcendence” and to “socially locate” him/herself within a particular community at a particular time and in a particular context (Cram, 2001). In essence, reflection in service learning challenges and supports each person in confronting their own perceptions while trying to hear each other and understand each other’s perspective, maybe for the first time. It allows all participants to be in the kind of relationship that Katherine Turpin described in her analysis of a multicultural future:

...to be in relationship across cultural boundaries requires wrestling with real differences about important issues, addressing differences of power and privilege, and struggling to hear one another when people speak in different languages and metaphors, and express diverse values and ways of being (Moore, et al, 2004, 299).

Service learning also addresses the lack of connectedness that was the focus of Norma C. Everist's article a few years ago. There is no better way to "meet the peoples of God in the many arenas of their daily, public lives, and help each other speak about beliefs in those terms" and to "become a multilingual learning community, meeting God in new ways" than through service learning (Everist, 2001, 309).

I would like to look more deeply at some of the key components of an effective service learning program and how they connect to the areas that I outlined in the beginning of this paper. Then I will offer two active and diverse service learning programs as a way of highlighting the need for religious education to utilize this methodology in our coursework. A few testimonies will be included so that the richness of service learning can be experienced through their eyes.

II. Elements of an Effective Service Learning Program

Project Site and Contexts

A standard service learning program involves creating a project that will meet a real and specific need in the community. Once the type of project is identified, it becomes a question of determining the student participants and then organizing them into smaller groups or teams. In creating the project, it is important to keep in mind that besides filling a felt need within that community, it should be a project in which the different participants can work and contribute. The care we take in selecting the project is important when we consider that the students will be "participating meaningfully and consciously and actively in the ongoing processes that shape their own present context" as Freire would describe it (Brelsford, 2001, 311). The younger the participant, the more important it becomes that they be able to see some level of accomplishment by the time they finish their time on the project.

This may seem like a small point but it is actually quite important. If the students are working on a project that seems like window-dressing or is simply a cosmetic change in the community, their disappointment will affect their experience and limit the overall learning that takes place. For example, on one of the early service learning programs that I developed for mid-range teenagers, the project site was not well-organized and the work assignments seemed trivial to the teens. And to some degree they were trivial. After arriving at the project site, we learned that the equipment and building supplies were not there and probably would not arrive at all. So, instead of preparing a foundation for a new school building, one group had the task of taking boulders out of a fenced off area to prepare it for the crew that would come later to pour concrete for a basketball court. The other group had an equally boring task of literally sifting through 2 large piles of crushed rock so that the fine-grained rock and powder that resulted could become concrete. Of course we had another more exciting job that came a few days later, but in essence, the damage was done. The teens had a difficult time in both feeling that they were doing something of value and in reflecting about their work. So, a bad or ill-prepared project can have a profound impact on the level of reflection of the students and therefore, the level of learning. However, by working together with the different levels of community leadership, it should not be difficult to find a project that meets the requirements of an effective service learning program.

The value of the project site is intimately tied to the issue of contextualization. Though the reflection component is the main learning aspect in service learning, the particular project is the context for learning. One project in the Dominican Republic highlighted the role of context particularly well. The project was the restoration of a 4 room school building in one of the poorest communities just outside of Santa Domingo, Dominican Republic. The project brought together Haitian and Dominican college students. For the Haitians, just entering the country was a challenge, not to mention working side-by-side with the Dominicans.

The Haitian young men and women were stopped at the border of the Dominican Republic and forced to wait more than eight hours until the border authorities decided that their papers were in order. The darker-skinned Haitians were questioned more harshly than were the lighter-skinned Haitians – who could pass for Dominicans. So the stage was set for a tense beginning. Language was the next barrier. The initial reflection sessions were quite challenging due to the language barrier. Communication consequently became a combination of translation and pantomime. For the Haitians, there was an underlying resentment and anger that flavored their communication because of their border incident and contemporary history. The Dominicans, on the other hand, were more accepting and happy in the beginning and seemed eager to start the project. Just a few of the Dominicans were critical or suspicious of the Haitians.

The first day of work was especially difficult because the Haitians waited to see what kind of jobs they were given in comparison to those of the Dominicans. But once they were assured that they were either given equal tasks or that if one of the Haitians was asked to do a particularly dirty job while a Dominican was given a “nice” job, positions were frequently changed, tensions eased up considerably. But what helped set the stage for a real break-through in the reflection periods came after the project was finished and everyone could see the end result. Each Haitian participant was able to witness the tears of joy and gratitude in each of the Dominican children who would be using that school from now on. The hugs, kisses and small gifts of gratitude that they received from grateful Dominican parents transformed them. It was this particular context that set the stage for this learning to take place. The level of contextualization challenged the Haitian participants to reflect anew as to their presuppositions concerning the Dominican people as well as their understanding of themselves. I doubt that a different type of context would have had as powerful an ending as experienced in this project.

If we were to look more deeply at context, then we would have to say that service learning provides religious educators with the most complete range of contexts possible. What do I mean by this? Karen Tye’s succinct text, *The Basics of Christian Education* offers valuable insight into the diversity of context as she reminds us that it is not simply the “place” in which we teach. Context necessarily challenges us to consider the hidden contexts of a place, the inner contexts that our students carry with them, and the theoretical contexts toward which we teach. As Tye expresses it, context “. . . includes attitudes, emotions, relationships, cultural qualities, and many other factors that shape the environment” (Tye, 1999, 30). If we remain in the classroom, we have some limitations as to the types of contexts that we can address and the degree of contextualization that can take place. But, in service learning, those limitations need not be present.

Consider the Dominican project discussed previously. We have the physical context of the poor, rural Dominican villagers. We also have the larger context of Hispaniola and all that this means historically and emotionally to both the Dominicans and the Haitians. There are the inner contexts of the two cultures and nationalities as well as the individual contexts of each participant. For example, several of the Haitians were from poor communities themselves, while one young woman was the daughter of the former President of the legislative body and grew up in Pétitionville, an historically wealthy section of Port-au-Prince. Many of the Haitians were college students but some of them were not and did not hope to be. Denominationally, most of the Haitians were Evangelical Christians but this is not to say that some of them did not grow up in homes that also practiced indigenous expressions of faith and possibly magic. The Dominicans similarly represented diverse contexts as well with an added context of representing Catholic Christianity for the most part. A smaller sub-group that was also present was that of a few Japanese students from the University of Bridgeport. This group often acted as a mediating force in the project, thus adding another dimension of context.

Of course, there was also the context of the living quarters which was a small but nice facility where the men slept in three large rooms and the women slept in 4 rooms all scattered around the property. The main meeting area was a small amphitheater-like structure with a gazebo nearby and that was reached by crossing a small but quaint footbridge over a small pond. There was also a swimming pool and two other small meeting areas – one in the living room of the main house and the other by the pool. The pool brought the participants together in a joyful spirit while the amphitheater was where many of the large group reflection activities took place, including a closing “bridge-of-peace” ceremony. Each area of the property evoked a different feeling in the participants. In fact, the pool meeting area was utilized intentionally for a more serious conflict resolution reflection activity because it evoked certain warm and joyful feelings in the participants. At this point in the project, the program directors wanted to challenge the participants’ stereotypes and self-perceptions more directly. But they felt that it would be more conducive to learning if the sessions were conducted in this “warmer” context.

Consequently, the type of “crossing-over” and “border exchanges” that took place – culturally, ethnically, religiously, emotionally, and personally – represented diverse contexts and diverse contextualization going on. All in all, context played a critical role in the program and was an essential component of the learning and changes that took place.

Participants, Partnerships and Networks

Naturally, the service learning program is about the participants. For religious educators, the primary participants will be our students. But a project does not need to be confined to one class. Depending on what is to be learned from the experience, other participants can be invited to join in the project. Several courses could come together to do a project. Alternatiely, students can work with residents of the community in which the project is situated or with an organized group of participants from the community. Special religious groups can be invited to join in the project if inter-religious understanding or challenging religious misperceptions is part of the lesson. There are no restrictions on who can participate other than the size of the project and budget and the program objectives.

Involvement of the local community is highly encouraged especially as each project should be addressing real needs. This means that the community will need to know what its needs are before engaging a project. But beyond this, local residents can contribute to and complete the learning cycle with the participants. They provide one element of the contextualization that takes place in the project because, more than likely, the students will be interfacing with them at some point. Consider also the issue we may be addressing as religious educators. If we engage in the effort to see our students experience a “lived Christian faith” as Thomas Groome sees it (Groome, 1980), then what better way to do that than in working together in partnership with the local community during the service learning program. The local community, through the project, provides a real context, a context of flesh and blood with which the participants must live and interact during this period of time. A lived faith, then, is no longer a theoretical construct that is discussed in the classroom. It becomes a “shared praxis” in the best sense of the phrase (Groome, 1980).

While it isn't a necessity, involving the local community in the reflection sessions can be quite cathartic and insightful for the students. It is also possible that the community in which the project is conducted is similar to that of the students. So by including the community in the reflection allows the students to gain a greater perspective of both themselves and their own community.

Service learning is particularly valuable in projects that are interfaith in nature. Taking a lesson from the Catholic theologian, Hans Kung, a service learning program involving multiple faith expressions takes participants out of their own faith community and brings them face-to-face with the “other” while living and working in a third community (Kung, 19). It is while working in this third community, or objective context, that each participant can be encouraged and challenged to look at who they are, what they represent, what they believe – in relationship to others – while practicing the ethic of living for the greater good. It is the combination of being a fresh or objective context that is outside of the participating students' faith communities with the opening up of their moral feelings through the act of service that creates a formula for success for interreligious understanding and harmony. One particular project of the Religious Youth Service (RYS) that took place in the countryside of Italy, for example, allowed the Palestinian and Israeli participants to address some of the issues that they faced and the resentments that they harbored because they were out of their own contexts. By the end of the project, the participants from these two faith communities were already tearfully planning similar RYS projects for their region because they felt that this was the most effective way to bring healing and reconciliation to their region.

Why was this project such a success? What was it that motivated the Palestinian participants and the Israeli participants to embrace as brothers and sisters under God, thus shedding years of anger and resentment? It was the combination of situating the service learning project in a totally different, unrelated community who had real needs and the action of service and reflection. The Italian community served to de-center the conversation in effect. As Katherine Turpin expresses it: “Rather than working from a paradigm of inclusion, bringing people from the margins to the center, multicultural efforts need to dismantle the very idea of the center and to engage in collaborative planning and leadership at every turn” (Moore, et al, 2004, 208). That is the potential role that the community in which the project is conducted plays.

Reflection

Once the project and the students are set, the second most important feature, the reflection period, becomes a clear focus of the program. Reflection allows us to question, challenge, and to generally look back on our experiences in the project in order to help “shape our future, actions, goals, and beliefs” (Goldsmith, 1995, 1). In terms of religious education, it can also be seen as “...present action in light of the Christian Story and its Vision toward the end of lived Christian faith” (Groome, 1980, 184). It is through this questioning process that we begin to see what we may not have seen before or that we see more clearly now than we did before. Reflection gives shape and voice to our experiences. At the same time, it isn’t just about what we may have experienced as one person. It is also about what we experienced in relationship with others – both participants and those from the project community.

In addition, participants should know clearly what is expected of them in the reflection sessions as this helps them prepare. The number and frequency of the reflection sessions are often dictated by the length of the project itself. The longer the project, the more opportunities there are for reflection. While the shorter projects do not need a lot of reflection time, the longer projects do if the participants are going to fully explore what it is that they are learning. For these longer projects, this might mean a reflection period before the project begins, during the project and at the conclusion of the project.

Regardless the length of the project, a good standard is to schedule a minimum of two reflection sessions: before the project begins and again after the project is finished. The pre-project reflection time prepares the student for their experience and may even ask some initial questions anticipating possible issues for the student to consider. The post-reflection period brings the different learning points or threads together.

While journal writing and verbal sharing are often used as reflection methods, reflection should not be confined to these forms. Just as we know that diversity of teaching methods is important in the classroom so as to match the diversity of learning styles, so too should the methods of reflection vary so that all the students are challenged to reflect deeply on their experience. Art, music, journals, letters, poetry, small group discussion, and special activities can and should be utilized to encourage deep reflection.

While there are no hard and fast rules for the reflection component of a service learning project, Eyler and Giles do believe that there are four principles to observe for effective reflection sessions. If reflection is to be thorough and effective, it needs to be: continuous, connected, challenging, and contextualized (Eyler/Giles/Schmiede, 1996). Reflection is something that needs to be carried out continuously throughout the project – from beginning to end – if students are to develop a habit of reflecting on their experience. Naturally, reflection must also be connective. Connecting students’ theoretical work from the classroom to their experiences in the project is what unleashes the power and dynamism of service learning. It is a search for that “ah hah!” moment. We can also understand that reflection needs to challenge our students. It needs to stretch their thinking, emotions, attitudes, and beliefs. Reflection sessions should dare to ask those questions that we are afraid to give voice to: “Is violence the only way to deal with our

‘han’?” “Where is this self-righteousness coming from?” “Who am I to say that this should be done this way?” And of course reflection needs to be contextualized. What will help this particular group at this particular time and in this particular setting reflect more deeply and powerfully? When these principles are addressed, the reflection sessions will trigger the learning that needs to take place.

III. Two Examples of Service Learning Programs

There are numerous service learning organizations. I am most familiar with two of these such organizations. One of the organizations, Service For Peace (SFP), is a secularly-based leadership training program that targets adolescents and young adults primarily. Since its creation, SFP has been working with several high schools, colleges and community organizations and will soon be entering its third year of operation.

Religious Youth Service (RYS) is clearly a religiously-based organization. Founded in 1986, RYS seeks to bring older teens and young adults together from among the world’s faiths in order to achieve inter-faith harmony and understanding and non-violent conflict resolution between the diverse faiths through the practice of service to others. Since its founding, RYS has conducted several hundred projects and has been the inspiration for several student clubs around the world.

In this section, both organizations will be discussed briefly. The remaining time will be spent in sharing the insights and reflections of project participants in the Service for Peace Israel project so that we can begin to see the distinct value of service learning for religious education.

Service For Peace

Service For Peace is a fairly new service learning organization. As stated on their website, “Service For Peace prepares conscientious people to take on the role of peacemakers. A Peacemaker is one who can work with the populations to address critical issues and offer real solutions” (www.serviceforpeace.org/aboutus.htm). Organizers feel that this is best done through the vehicle of service learning. SFP was launched in the summer of 2002 with a program called “Summer of Service.” The organization gathered more than 300 teens and young adults in Washington, D.C. for a series of service learning projects conducted in and around the metropolitan D.C. region. Projects included cleaning up public schools, cleaning and planting in public parks, tutoring, working with sports leagues and numerous other projects.

The following summer, SFP expanded its Summer of Service program and attracted over 1,000 teens and young adults. This time the projects were scattered in different cities from Miami to Portland, Maine. The organization partnered with the Points of Light Foundation, the YMCA, Americorps, and various churches and organizations in many project sites. Participants found the program to be dynamic and rewarding.

Throughout the entire program, all participants reflected on their experiences. Some of the participant reflections from these two summers stated:

I was so glad to meet a group of kids who weren't apathetic to the world, and who were willing to work to change things.

I learned that doing just a little thing can mean a lot. Like picking up trash, people were like "I can't believe you're doing this during your summer vacation!" They were really happy and surprised.

I was amazed by the camaraderie of the different cultures and the diversity. Everyone worked together and they got the job done.

Since its beginning, SFP has begun to develop state-wide chapters. The Florida chapter in particular has created what seems to be a wonderful synergistic relationship between the SFP chapter and a large university in Miami-Dade County. This relationship has developed a program within a program, so to speak, devoted to service learning on two levels: the university students are involved in a tutoring program with at-risk teens, while the teens are involved in a service learning program devoted to leadership skills within their communities. Time will tell how effective this will be in addressing some very serious social issues in that city.

By the end of 2003, it became clear that SFP might be beneficial in some of our international hotspots. Therefore, after a great deal of dialogue and investigation, SFP decided to launch a special project in Israel that took place between July and August of 2004. Participants came from the international SFP chapters with a particular focus on SFP-Japan, SFP-USA, and SFP-Europe. Though the focus was not religious education, so to speak, the very nature of the project and the context of the project makes it a good example for us to consider.

There were twenty-one students from eight countries on the project. Among the students, there were also Israeli Jews and Arabs. The purpose of the project was to understand the Arab-Jewish conflict first-hand, and to become leaders capable of helping offer solutions to such conflicts. The projects included working with children in summer camps, aiding young children in an orphanage, working with senior citizens in an elder care facility, and cleaning up an archeological site, beach, and park. As a feature of the program, the participants stayed in Jewish homes – the first time that the community welcomed Palestinian youth into their homes in the extremely conservative Jewish city of Beit Shemesh. During the project, the participants were also able to visit such sites as the Dead Sea, the Negev Desert, Bethlehem, Haifa and Jerusalem.

By the end of the project, the participants had changed in many ways. All of the participants were deeply affected by the project, including the Arab and Jewish students. Each participant faced different issues and had different learning points. While many of the deeper reflective thoughts came during different sessions and were not always conducted in written form, the following comments do give a taste of some of the changes that took place in the hearts and minds of a few of the participants as they wrote down some of the final thoughts after the program was finished.

Zvi Raviv (Israel)

Each and every culture has its own moral system. What Christians regard as moral might not be seen as that by Muslims, and we are well aware of the basic differences between religions. But some values are universal, and shared by all people: we all want the best for our siblings, maintain our way of life and live in a clean environment.

The first day in Beit-Shemesh included work with children. Usually children don't internalize prejudices – while working with them I felt how I left the world of grown-ups, in which I have to constantly care about things as image, and cover myself with cynicism. Working with the children helped me. Later on that day, when we went to the holocaust museum, “Yad Vashem”, I tried to explain to the participants of my group that the Nazis weren't only against Jewish people, but against universal values as civil and religious rights – if we believe in those values, we should act together against prejudice and intolerance.

While working with children I noticed how curious they are about other cultures – they showed great interest in the Japanese culture, and since there is a great influence of the Latin-American culture in Israel, seeing how much the Arab and Jewish children wanted to learn Spanish was fascinating.

During the following days I met very special people: Gil, a local environment teacher in Beit-Shemesh, who works with his students in order to preserve archeological sites around Beit-Shemesh. We can see how the students are committed to the things he teaches them by the fact that even during the summer holiday they came, and helped him to protect the sites, and organize the meal he made for the visiting groups. While we were visiting the desert, a monk called Phrejek joined us – he works for humanitarian causes in Palestine. He showed us what real commitment to a goal is, and explained to us the philosophical meaning of life in the desert. In the desert we had a presentation of the main characteristics of the monotheistic religions which started in the Middle East, and it made me feel great respect towards other religions.

Tareq Ghaith (Palestine)

I will try to express my feelings about this camp because it's important for me to tell my feelings, and what happened to me in 10 days to my friends to and the world. It's very necessary to change the situation in this land – the holy land, and try to find the solution and fix the complications between the Palestinians and Israelis, and try to change the bloody-way, killing-way to a peace-way and love-way. All of this encouraged me to participate and to be [a] peacemaker in this Global Peacemakers Camp, and to help myself and everyone around me to get out from the pains and suffering, which all of us are living in, and to live in freedom, equality and peace like other people.

On the first day of camp, I felt it [was] my responsibility to show this group the Palestinian and Arabic side. This feeling came after a lesson was presented to me when a doctor came to the hotel in Jerusalem and told us about the situation between Israel and Palestine. Then I said to myself, “Where is the Arabic side, where is the Palestinian vision?” He was talking about many things, but I didn’t agree with him and I think many Palestinian people like me feel the same way. Here I’ve said to myself, I must talk and show this group our side, our vision for peace and the future.

Now I want to write [about] just one and special experience, because it’s very difficult to write all my experiences and translate it to English language. In the first night in Beit-Shemesh, when the families were talking about themselves, a mother talked about how her son was a soldier in the army. I said to myself “Please God not with this family, not with this mother.” But I was chosen to stay with this family. In the same night, I talked with this family all night about the occupation in Palestine, the wall, bombs and many things, and then I felt better. Finally, I left Beit-Shemesh with love for this family, and hope to see them again.

Katherine Andrews (United States)

Each of us who came to the camp got to know somebody different from anyone else we had ever met. We each learned about one another’s culture and heritage and returned home with new friends from all parts of the world. This all may seem rather clichéd and trivial compared to the problems plaguing Israel and Palestine. But I can tell you why this kind of cross-cultural exchange matters.

Because the camp included both Arabs and Jews, it brought together people who had had little interaction with one another despite the fact that they are virtually neighbors. Several of the participants attended universities in which both Arabs and Jews studied together, but the level of contact each group had with the other prior to the camp was generally low. Through their shared experiences in touring, performing service, and enduring long bus rides, Arab and Jewish participants had deep conversations, developed friendships, and exchanged email addresses at the end of the camp in order to stay in touch in the future.

I saw the most poignant example of new relationships established between one Arab camp member and the Jewish household in which he home-stayed for four nights in Beit Shemesh. His Jewish “mother” introduced herself to the group the first night and mentioned that she had a son in the Israeli army, a fact that made this young Arab male visibly distressed. He told me how uncomfortable he was to be going to a house where one of its members, under different circumstances, could possibly be pointing a gun in his direction. On our last night in Beit Shemesh, I could see how well the Arab had managed to bond with his Jewish family despite their underlying political differences. I stood next to the Arab in a circle in the community center as we prepared to learn traditional local dances.

As his host mother approached us and motioned for me to let her stand beside him, she pointed toward him and said, “My son,” as the two reached for one another’s hand. This friendship epitomizes how personal attachments among humans can supersede divisions along ideological lines.

The camp also helped to break down common stereotypes regarding Arabs and non-Arabs, particularly Americans. There was frustration from Arab participants about the way Arabs and Middle Easterners are often portrayed in Western media—either as violent terrorists, or as “towel-headed”, camel-herding misogynists. This is unfair to Arabs and demonstrates how irresponsible the media can be in what it promotes as entertainment. The Arab camp members were proud, and possibly relieved, that they could share with the rest of us the depth and multiplicity of their culture.

To complement this cultural diffusion, Arab participants, and other non-American participants for that matter, came to know some individual Americans and could see us as separate entities from the U.S. policies for which they may have disapproval. It was valuable to hear Arabs say, “The Arab world is not against Americans as a people,” and to hear their sympathies expressed over 9/11. I was particularly comforted to hear one Arab participant say that getting to know us had shattered his perception of all Americans as living spoiled, extravagant lives and as being uninterested and unaware of the world outside America.

Being a part of the Global Peacemakers Camp was a lesson in history and international politics that could never be rivaled in any classroom or newspaper article. Most people outside of Israel and Palestine are aware of the ongoing conflict there and may have basic understanding of the facts and events related to that conflict. By hearing firsthand perspectives on the situation from the people whose lives are most affected by it, however, we foreigners had our eyes opened to the complexity and emotional connectedness that underlies this decades-old dispute.

The Israeli-Palestine conflict can never feel as distant to us camp members as it might have before visiting the region and getting to know its people. We have memories of real conversations, real accounts, and real images from which to draw upon in any future discussion of the Middle East struggle for peace. And the increased understanding we gained about this particular conflict is valuable towards grasping other global conflicts. If those of us who have never before been close to such conflict can recognize how political problems in Israel and Palestine impact the lives of real individuals, we may be more likely to remember that problems in seemingly far-away places also have consequences for the real people who live there.

It is also important to keep in mind that some of the more profound changes often come after the project has concluded and the students have returned home. This factor alone should tell us that

regular courses offer a far stronger context for learning and growth through service learning programs compared to that of organizations. Because we interact with our students over a longer period of time, we are there to encourage this long-term reflective process and to anchor any changes more securely within our students.

Religious Youth Service (RYS)

RYS was created to foster inter-religious, intercultural, and interracial understanding and development. The initial projects were chosen to address some key issues and problems within the interfaith world. Participants were recommended by leaders within their faith communities as individuals with the maturity to reflect deeply and the willingness to change their perceptions and stereotypes. The Goals of the RYS program are:

- To encourage, promote and contribute to meaningful dialogue between young people who represent the religions of the world.
- To contribute to a deeper understanding of common values that can serve as a basis for world peace studies.
- To provide a setting within which inter-religious, intercultural, and interracial experiences combine to allow insights from dialogue to be immediately applied and tested in purposeful interaction.
- To serve and work for communities in need, and in so doing, to model a vision of the possibilities for harmony and accomplishment among the world's diverse cultures.
- To develop skills in leadership for peace in religious youth from around the world.
- To provide an experience in which individual youth have the opportunity to develop spiritually and to cultivate a worldwide perspective of the human condition (www.religiousyouthservice.org/about/goals.htm).

The very first project site was the Philippines. There were approximately 60 participants representing many of the world's faiths. They ranged in age from 18 to 32 and represented diverse degree programs from liberal arts to electrical engineering and medicine. They were divided into three project sites, with each site targeting real needs in the Philippines. The one project with which I was most familiar took place in a small town called Cavite. Cavite was an interesting site because it was physically divided by a small river with Christians on one side of the river and Muslims on the other. The Christians were the poorer of the two communities, yet most of the social and civic services were located on the Muslim side of the river.

There was no bridge spanning the river but that was fine, as long as it was the dry season. During each monsoon season, however, the river swelled over its banks and flooded the Christian side of the village. During such times, the Christian children could not attend school and disease often ran rampant throughout the Christian community because medical personnel could not reach them. Therefore, it was decided that the RYS participants would build a simple concrete bridge over the river, thus allowing the families to have access to schools, doctors, hospitals, work, and services in both the rainy and the dry season.

During the day, the participants worked on the bridge, with pre-med students working side-by-side with art history majors and business majors. In the late afternoon, after cleaning up from the

project, participants learned about the local culture or their own faiths or the faiths of other participants. Reflection sessions allowed them to look at several diverse issues and concerns such as: What can I do about such overpowering issues such as poverty? What does my faith mean when we say we are a child of God? Is the Muslim really a believer in violence? Are Buddhists religious people? What should my relationship be to those I consider as “the other?” Powerful questions indeed for these young adults to consider.

By the end of the Cavite project, changes were noticeable – both in the village, among the residents of Cavite, and within the hearts and minds of the participants. And to this day, the “bridge of love” (as they dubbed it) stands as a testimony of that change.

Projects since that initial one, have addressed such issues as: Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, Orthodox/Muslim/Catholic relationships in Croatia and Serbia, Muslim/Ethnic Albanian/Orthodox issues in Albania, Muslim/Tamil/ Hindu in Sri Lanka, Jewish and Muslim relations in the Middle East, Aborigine/Maori/Christian concerns in Oceania, and Dominicans and Haitians in the Dominican Republic to name just a few. Though the participants may change, the focus on learning remains the same.

Utilizing service learning as a methodology, the program challenges participants to examine their own personal and faith perspectives and to re-examine those perspectives in relationship to others – whoever those “others” may be. As one participant reflected at the end of their project in Mongolia in 1999: “I am happy because I found out who I am. The meditation time was so nice. I’m really satisfied. Work was also nice. We could become friends. Through the evening program, we really could develop our talents, our skills and ourselves. It was also good to have a team because we learned to listen to each other and respect their idea” (Anonymous, 1999). Or as a monk experienced in an early project in Sri Lanka:

I have received a lot of experience and [it] opened the door of my heart. Service without expectation; I could accept people of all races, religions, and languages as brothers and sisters. I build good company and friendship with others. It helps me to work and talk heart to heart with other religious people and countries that have different kinds of future ambitions. I can say 100% of this is very useful (Venerable Balangoda Chandra Chandra Keerthi, 2000).

Concluding Remarks

As religious educators, we are learning and developing in terms of what we do. We have come a long way from the more didactic and transmissive heritage of religious education that often did not recognize the multiple communities in which we find our being and in which we live. In our classrooms, we can talk about contextualizing and about finding our essential identity within a religiously plural community. We can also examine our understanding of what our faith calls us to do or be. But at the end of the day, many of the methods that we choose to use will be limited in their ability to situate our students in real life. Hence, I feel that we must consider such pedagogical tools as service learning to complement what we do in religious education.

Toinette Eugene offers some valuable food for thought in her article in the Spring 2002 issue of the *Religious Education Journal*. In her article, she addresses the challenges of living in a culture of disbelief. She further suggests that, as most people “find themselves in multiple worlds of reference,” religious education must “utilize this form of contextualization” and make it a part of our “process and praxis” (Eugene, 1997, 184). Ultimately, Eugene sees this as redefining religious education to mean “...comprehending this kind of religious pedagogy as a configuration of textual, verbal, and visual practices that seek to engage the ways in which they [we] engage their social and cultural environment” (Eugene, 1997, 188).

Service learning is a pedagogy that certainly sees contextualization as central to its effectiveness and allows students to engage the environment fully. Norma Thompson once taught that religious education “...should not devalue the process of growing up in a faith community,” but that one clear goal of our educational program should be to provide the means or the context for individuals of one faith to relate to those of another and to go beyond dialogue and to recognize “the issues and problems which separate human beings” (Thompson, 1988, 21). This is precisely the strength of service learning pedagogically.

Certainly the interplay of the multiple contexts that are at work in a service learning program and the reflection that students are led to do while in a particular context makes this a valuable methodology for our field. Students’ perceptions of who they are, situated in a particular time and in a particular setting and with particular others will be challenged in such a program. The questions that they may raise and the conclusions they may reach could very well change, in a constructive sense, from those that they held before beginning our courses. As a religious educator, I certainly hope so. And hopefully they will be able to reflect as one participant of a SFP project in Miami shared: “Working with a diverse group of people really made me grow as a human being as well. I learned the true meaning of compassion, cooperation and attentiveness. I’ve learned to put the needs of others before my own, and because of this new knowledge the chains of intolerance and selfishness are quickly dissolving all around me” (Grecia Alvarez, Summer of Service, 2004).

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