

<< Back

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## Backyard & beyond

*Samuel Service helps young people discern, discover, serve*

STORY BY  
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"God was using the telephone pole."

This was one teenager's observation when asked how God was at work during a community's bitter argument over the war in Iraq.

The telephone pole had become the neighborhood kiosk, where residents posted their opinions and rebuttals. Authorities saw the pole-posting as a nuisance and posted their own sign—an ordinance that banned posting things to the pole. But the teenager saw the pole differently: a type of cross upon which people could nail their fears, anxieties, anger and hate. The pole and God were both strong enough to bear this weight.

The teenager, Emmanuel Livingstone, was part of the [Samuel Service Project](#), a service-learning partnership of [Luther Seminary](#), St. Paul, Minn.; [Augsburg College](#), Minneapolis; and Lutheran Youth Networking in Christ, a joint ministry of the St. Paul Area and Minneapolis Area synods. It was funded by [Thrivent Financial for Lutherans](#).

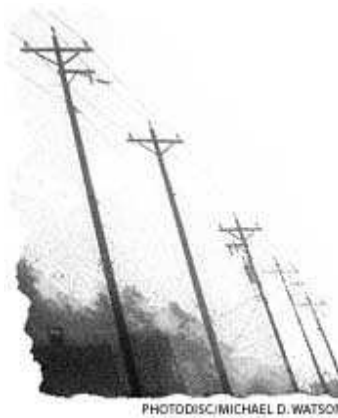


PHOTO: DISC/MICHAEL D. WATSON

Youth and adults from rural, suburban and urban congregations in the two synods gathered under the Samuel Service Project for three years—all on their way to creating their own local service-learning project. Their three years were spent following three steps: discernment, discovery and service.

*"After discernment, it's easier to see the needs in the community and there's more out there than we all see. It's not just in the heart of Minneapolis, it's in our own communities—closer than we think"*—Kevin Gafford, 15, Chanhassen, Minn.

A current model for service ministry is asking young people to pack their bags and travel to a far-off place—often costing them quite a bit of money. This can have three negative results.

First, it can commodify service. Service to our neighbor becomes an experience for which we pay. A youth director told me kids at his church won't sign up for a mission trip unless it costs a lot. That's how they judge whether it's worthwhile.

Second, it can turn vocation, or service to God and neighbor, into a vacation. Serving our neighbor becomes something we do as long as it's connected to a journey or an adventure. I've seen youth and adults opt out of mission trips because the location wasn't appealing or edgy enough.

Third, it removes people from their everyday context. Service to neighbor becomes separated from everyday living. We see service as this incredibly profound thing that requires significant time, money and travel. We miss the daily opportunities to serve.

Samuel Service teams focused on the neighborhood surrounding their congregation. Young people learned about needs in their communities, that God is active there as well, and that service and vocation are as close as our dining room table, our neighbor's house or our community park.

### Discernment

*"For us it was a challenge to slow down enough to say, 'What's happening in our neighborhood? What is God already up to?' and to then respond to that"*—Brenda Froisland, youth director, Minneapolis.

Participants in Samuel Service spent time discerning Christ's mission in their neighborhoods and their role in that mission. They looked for two things in their communities: ways people were experiencing pain and suffering, and ways people were experiencing healing and reconciliation. Since we believe in a God who is present in suffering and who brings healing, those were the places where participants expected God to be at work.

Rarely are young people invited into the discernment process of a mission trip or service project. They might have some say in where the group travels, but the service project is often prearranged. This prevents participants from seeing how God is already at work in a certain place prior to their arrival. And they don't learn to listen to how the residents understand their own suffering and healing. They come in as strangers and take part in a project that may seem imposed upon local residents.

Discernment invites participants to first listen to the voice of those whom we are called to serve. It invites us to humbly recognize that God is already working to mend the universe prior to us, through us and in spite of us.

### Discovery

*"This project was difficult for us because most of us didn't live in the area that we defined as our community. We discovered that we couldn't do it by ourselves so we partnered with the Block Nurse Program. We gained a partner that is closely tied to the community and the project took off from there"—Rachel Steingas, 17, Minneapolis.*

On one mission trip I participated in, a teenage boy met an out-of-work painter from the community. We wondered how our presence made him feel. Was he happy we were helping to improve the appearance of his neighborhood? Or was he angry we were offering something for free—how do you compete with that? Either way, it was obvious we hadn't done the work of discovering the community's gifts.

God's gifts are abundant and present in all situations. We fail to honor the vocations of others when we don't take the time to discover their gifts and possible contribution to community needs. Our job is to discover, honor and work with the gifts that already exist in a community.

I've taken young people on many mission trips—trips that have transformed the participants. I'm not suggesting the mission trip be eliminated from a church's youth ministry. Instead, I hope we can reframe the way we approach service to give voice to the one being served so we see God already at work in specific locations. We need a way to honor the gifts of the community being served and our call to service in daily living.

Discerning God's invitation and discovering gifts aren't administrative steps along the way to an effective mission trip. They're integral components of service. If we isolate them from service, and if we isolate youth from practicing them, then we run the risk of commodifying service, dehumanizing our neighbor and limiting vocation to vacations. If a young person can see God at work in a telephone pole, then where else might they see God at work and how might they partner with God in those places?

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