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The Sweat That Binds

The Good, the Bad, and the 911 of Service Projects

Before the summer of 1996 I would never have said, “Hey, remember when I ran over Kelli with a car, and then got to ride in an ambulance?” From then on, that statement will forever be a part of my verbal repertoire. An inner-city service project in Modesto, California allowed me to experience one of the worst and best moments in my ministry career.

I am a big fan of **Romans 12:1–2**, which states that in light of what God has done in our lives we should joyfully serve God and others. “True worship.” I am such an enthusiast of that Scripture that I have even put “true worship” on T-shirts. But what does that mean to a student who doesn’t know God, let alone have a relationship with Him? More than likely, you could identify many students in your ministry who fall into that category. As a note of encouragement, I have seen service projects become the great equalizer. There are not many leaders who would have a non-believing student lead a Bible study. However, could that same student hold a paintbrush? Use a rake? Brandish a nail gun? Okay, not the last one.

We were cleaning back alleys, doing trash and graffiti abatement. Because of the areas in which we were serving, we needed to move quickly. Some of the people who lived near those alleys had grown very attached to the words we were painting over, but the city had requested that we help them beautify the neighborhood. At every stop we would hop out of the vehicles, throw trash away, paint the wall, and quickly move to the next stop.

At one location the students hopped out of the car and did their jobs. Back in the car I looked in the rear-view mirror and saw the three heads of the students who were sitting in the back seat of the car. What I didn’t know was that the leg of one of those ladies was NOT all the way in the car yet. I proceeded to drive the car over her leg, pulling her out of the car and onto the ground. What happened in the next few moments felt much like a youth pastor’s nightmare. I had damaged a child. I called 911 and the ambulance came very quickly.

As we pulled away in the ambulance, a few things happened that encouraged me. The other leaders stepped up and took charge of the situation. Unprompted by adults, students began circling up and praying for Kelli. Non-believing students stood to the side and watched what having a “peace that passes understanding” in a chaotic situation looks like.

You probably won’t ever run over a student—at least, I hope you won’t! What I can promise you is that your plans will go awry and the wheels will come off during service projects. Yet by creating experiences that allow all students to participate in these kinds of events, they will experience Biblical community, regardless of their beliefs. They’ll see people sharing life together. Not always living perfectly, in fact, these situations are often messy. In spite of that, our attempts are authentic and honoring to God. That will impact the lives of your students far beyond a three-point sermon and a flashy illustration.