Reflections from Volunteers

Called to serve
To me service has always been helping others as I believe Jesus did. I watched one principal, the best I ever worked for, serving children their lunches and helping them remember their manners. She also was not above cleaning up messes and doing janitorial work. She reminded me of Jesus washing his disciples’ feet. That is what we all should be about.

I think of members of my church who do whatever needs to be done, without trying to get any glory. They clean, cook, visit shut-ins, fix things, bring food to people, practice to lead worship or perform music.

As they’ve told me, Bill and I could have found plenty of service to do staying at home. They’re right, but we felt God’s call to join BVS and travel to Montana. We were truly thrilled by the ones who stepped up to fulfill the tasks in the church that we left behind. So the service spread and grew.

We have learned that service is doing whatever needs to be done, regardless of whether it would be our choice of a job or not. We have found we need to be happy with our living circumstances and our work situation. We’ve met such wonderful people who have blessed us in so many ways. One of our service opportunities has been participating in many different church congregations. They have turned around and helped us when we needed assistance. Sometimes we asked for help and sometimes it was just offered to us. We’ve been truly blessed by the service we’ve received while we were offering service to others. Service given in Jesus’ name and with his attitude and Spirit is a distinct blessing and a joy.

Fern and Bill Dews
Volunteers in Havre, Mont.
Unit #288

My problem with service
I tend to have a problem with service. Whenever I decide to serve, I am continually faced with the fact that it’s just not enough.

The overwhelming destruction and heartache facing me in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. An abused and neglected child whose pain and distrust seems impossible to reach past. The seemingly insurmountable injustice and discrimination against a homeless man just trying to get back on his feet. The frustrating feeling that my daily service of answering the telephone and writing e-mails is doing nothing to alleviate suffering in the world.
But here’s the thing: When we are called to serve, we aren’t called to do it all. We are called to do what we can.

And we are called to take something away from that service and let it grow within us.

I learned gratitude from a woman who, having lost everything, cooked us lunch from her FEMA trailer. I learned joy from a child who started to laugh again. I learned humility in the discovery that before I can fight prejudice in the world, I must acknowledge it in myself. And I am learning patience as I remember that God really does have a plan for where I am and what I’m doing.

Maybe I can’t make it the full mile, and maybe I’m not strong enough to bear that load. But I’ll sure do what I can.

*Kendra Johnson
* Volunteering in Hamburg, Germany
* Unit #287

**Walking in deserts**

Before I entered BVS, service was a big part of my life, and I knew I always wanted it to be a big part of my life. So BVS, a commitment of service, made sense. What I’ve learned in my four months of service, though, is that service isn’t always what you think it will be.

I thought service would be both fun and rewarding, that it would give me a sense of purpose and like I belonged to something bigger. But that’s not always true… I often feel exhausted and confused and alone and like I’m drifting around without direction. And that’s hard. But it’s also good, in a weird way. Let me explain…

The theme of this year’s Service Sunday is “walk the mile and bear the load.” When I heard that, I thought of how sometimes we walk with a purpose, and sometimes we just walk. I feel like I just walk a lot. But even if I don’t know the path, God is leading me somewhere, drawing me through something for an actual purpose.

In my confusion, and tiredness, and loneliness and drifting, God is showing me that maybe my time of service isn’t all about, or even primarily about, me serving others. It might be more about me learning to rely on God, to be obedient, to keep walking because he tells me to.

I’m learning a lot on this long walk. I recently read Hosea 2:14-16. It talks about how God teaches us to love and trust him, by leading us through desert places. So what are some of the desert place lessons that God is teaching me? Maybe in my “desert of aloneness” he is teaching me that he is my Best Friend. In my “desert of helplessness,” I am learning that he is in control. While wandering through the “desert of exhaustion,” I am coming to know that he is the Fountain of Living Water. I learn that he is All-
Knowing through my “desert of confusion.” And in the “desert of aimless wandering” I find that he is my Good Shepherd.

So maybe my time in BVS isn’t what I thought it would be. Sometimes it’s heavy; sometimes it’s a lot of walking. But I’m coming to see that all of it, the good and the not-so-good, is part of God’s plan. So I’ll just keep walking, and see where he takes me.

Malea Hetrick
Quetzaltenango, Guatemala
Unit #291

I need you to survive

There’s a gospel hymn called “I Need You to Survive.” The title might make you think it’s a song addressed to God, but it’s actually a message to our sisters and brothers: “I need you, you need me/We're all a part of God’s body…You are important to me/I need you to survive.”

When we think about serving, about “walking the mile and bearing the load,” so often we think about “us” helping “them,” being self-sacrificial and “giving back.” What I experience through BVS and our volunteers is actually something entirely different.

Volunteers often come to their year of service with an attitude of “helping,” giving out of their abundance to those who are “less fortunate.” But a transformation happens somewhere in the middle of the experience, and we often find that service isn’t just a one-way transaction. Instead, we recognize that we actually need those we’re serving just as much as they might need us. We’re ALL a part of God’s body, and we all need each other to survive.

What relief and release: While I’m walking your mile and bearing your load, you are also, at the same time, attempting to do the same for me. Like Simon carrying Jesus’ cross to Golgotha, the burdens we take on while serving others might actually be the very things that end up saving us.

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Unit #277
Quoted

“There is only one God and God is God to all; therefore it is important that everyone is seen as equal before God. I've always said we should help a Hindu become a better Hindu, a Muslim become a better Muslim, a Catholic become a better Catholic.”
—Mother Teresa

“Let no one ever come to you without leaving better and happier. Be the living expression of God's kindness: kindness in your face, kindness in your eyes, kindness in your smile.”
—Mother Teresa

“I can do things you cannot, you can do things I cannot; together we can do great things.”
—Mother Teresa

“If we pray, we will believe. If we believe, we will love. If we love, we will serve.”
—Mother Teresa

“I pray that you will understand the words of Jesus, ‘Love one another as I have loved you.’ Ask yourself ‘How has he loved me? Do I really love others in the same way?’ Unless this love is among us, we can kill ourselves with work and it will only be work, not love. Work without love is slavery.”
—Mother Teresa

“I really only love God as much as I love the person I love the least.”
—Dorothy Day

“Life is a succession of lessons, which must be lived to be understood.”
—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Compiled by Rebecca Marek
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Unit #289

The load you’re still carrying

This year’s theme for Service Sunday is “Walk the mile and bear the load.” It calls us to get up and actually do something, to take on life from someone else’s point of view. Many of us have already gone forth and walked the walk at some level or another. Good for you. Now, what do you do with the load you’re still carrying?

Wait, you thought that you got to leave that burden once you had performed your acts of kindness? Sorry, I’m afraid not. Now there are all these questions running through your head: Could I have done more? Was it enough? Did it make a difference? Is anyone else continuing the work and bearing the load?
Reread the theme for this week. Maybe you walked the mile in another’s shoes. Nowhere does it say that you get to put down the load at the end of the mile, though. The people you’ve helped, the causes you’ve supported, the troubles you’ve seen – it all stays with you. That’s the way it should be. The challenge of serving each other isn’t always taking the first step; sometimes it’s what you do with the load after the last one.

Prayer:
Maker of all that is: Continue to bless us with the discomfort of knowing the burdens that our sisters and brothers bear. Let us grow in our love and compassion for one another as we continue our journeys, seeking ways to better understand our disparities and differences. Give us the strength to bear the load long after we have walked the mile so that we may carry on in a spirit of humility and service. Amen.

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