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## **Christ-Focused Service-Learning: Learning to Receive Ministry in Humility**

*By Stephanie Matthew, Elizabeth Roark, and Eloise Hockett*

**ABSTRACT:** Service-learning is an experiential process of action and reflection that allows students to expand their knowledge through real-world activities that benefit others. Service-learning opportunities for baccalaureate nursing students in Kenya have provided many ongoing examples of learning from our Kenyan collaborators. Receiving ministry from those we came to serve, allows us, in turn, to demonstrate Christ's humility. In this article, we share specific stories of how various community partners ministered in unexpected ways to our teams of students and faculty, as we served in Kenya through healthcare and education.

**KEY WORDS:** *cross-cultural collaboration, cultural humility, education, Kenya, nursing, service-learning*

A common practice among higher education institutions in the United States is to integrate service-learning experiences into curricula to expand on the knowledge and skills students are learning in content areas. Service-learning is an experiential process of action and reflection that allows students to expand their knowledge through real-world activities that benefit others. According to Kohlbray (2016), "Service-learning contributes to a student's development of cultural sensitivity, social justice, collaboration, and problem solving" (p. 303). Service-learning experiences can provide a value-added component for the students' overall learning and often have long-term benefits for the participants and the communities they serve, long after the program has been completed (Davis, Major, Cook, & Bell, 2015; Doll, Mu, Jensen, Hoffman, & Goulet, 2014).

Nursing programs are one example of how service-learning experiences can enhance learning, especially in the areas of cultural competency (American Association of Colleges of

Nursing, 2008), thinking critically (Brown & Schmidt, 2016; Hockett & Matthew, 2018), and self-reflection (Brown & Schmidt; Kohlbray, 2016).

### **Service Learning in a Christian Context**

Service-learning experiences for those in a Christian university have the unique opportunity to go a step further, by incorporating the Christ-centered component of serving others with humility. Philippians 2:3 reads: “When you do things, do not let selfishness or pride be your guide. Instead, be humble and give more honor to others than to yourselves” (NCV). Another example of humility comes from Luke 7:36-50. In this passage, an immoral woman anointed Jesus with expensive perfume as a demonstration of her love for him. In humility, Jesus received this gift of ministry from the woman. His example set the tone for receiving, as well as giving, regardless of social status.

A way to expand on the concept of humility in service-learning opportunities is through the framework of cultural humility, which goes further than cultural competency. When cultural humility is incorporated with service-learning, it assists in building relationships cross-culturally and can strengthen the overall experience for all involved. The main tenets of cultural humility are formulated around these core themes:

- Building relationships first;
- Intentional and focused listening;
- Setting aside predetermined biases and assumptions and critically examining them in light of new information and knowledge;
- Collaboration and co-learning; learning with and from one another (Hockett & Muhanji, 2017; Hockett et al., 2014).

In sum, incorporating the framework of cultural humility in service-learning work helps shift the paradigm of our thinking of those from other cultures, which can lead to more respectful interactions and a better understanding of appropriate ways to meet the needs of those with whom we work (Hockett et al., 2014).

Since 2015, students from the George Fox University's baccalaureate nursing program have been involved with formal service-learning experiences in western Kenya. An association has been formed with the Friends United Meeting Africa Ministries office, which oversees our partnership work. The healthcare emphasis, under the jurisdiction of local medical partners, has continued to develop as students and faculty alike learn valuable life and professional lessons during each trip. Through debriefing sessions in Kenya and discussions with our team leaders and Kenyan partners, we evaluate each experience and consider what we have learned, what went well, what we could have done better, and the ongoing needs of the communities served. Kohlbray (2016) notes that it is often within reflection that students begin to have a deeper understanding of the service-learning experience and make specific life applications. For our students, applications occur when students share their experiences in formal presentations after returning to campus, as well as in writing about their experience to their support teams. As faculty members, we are also involved in applications to practice and presenting our work to campus advisory boards and interested outside groups.

### **Transformative Service-learning**

As educators, we prepare each group of students through the lens of serving others with humility. However, one key learning experience for participants has been through the ministry of our Kenyan community partners to our groups. Although we have planned our service-learning experiences to focus on the healthcare and systemic needs of the Kenyans, we find ourselves on

the receiving end of ministry and service. Accepting ministry from others can help diminish the power differentials often present in international service experiences, where paternalistic voluntourism attitudes may prevail (Clark & Nugent, 2010). A service-learning approach with the objective of learning from each other has the potential to dismantle the power imbalance of the service experience and promote serving *with* a partner group, not *for* them. Serving *with* then becomes the mode of collaboration with the partner group and demonstrates cultural humility in practice.

Sometimes these experiences become a source of cognitive dissonance for participants, students and faculty alike. In his classic discussion of transformative learning in the context of service learning, Kiely (2005) defines this dissonance as the struggle between the participants' prior knowledge and the newfound information that contradicts the prior knowledge. Kiely believes that dissonance and wrestling with power imbalances is what produces long-lasting change. The teams from George Fox University have had to balance this tension with the heartfelt desire to serve God through healthcare and other service in Kenya. However, we've also had to learn to be the receivers of ministry or service to collaborate with partner groups. True humility in practice requires one to become a receiver.

The ministry received from our Kenyan collaborators has included hospitality, small gifts of gratitude, hugs, conversations over meals and tea, and prayers. Learning to accept these gifts often has been an uncomfortable process for students. These acts of service from our Kenyan friends have had profound meaning for our teams, as we continue to realize that ministry within this service-learning context can and should be reciprocal, and ultimately build stronger relationships and collaboration

## **On the Receiving End**

One memorable experience of ministry occurred in a small village near Kisumu, Kenya. John, our Kenyan collaborator, was hosting our team at his home. He had arranged for the health assessment and health education to occur in his family compound. Early on the first day, as we were to begin the health assessments, an older Kenyan lady came to have her blood pressure taken. However, before she allowed the nursing students to begin their assessment, she began to sing and worship. Those present soon joined her. After the songs, she prayed for our team and specific community members. Only after she had finished her prayers did she allow the students to check her blood pressure and vital signs. The students were stunned, as they reflected that they had come to serve, but this woman, a Quaker pastor, had first brought spiritual nourishment to our team. This began a discussion of how ministry can go both ways. This pastor used her gifts of spiritual care to minister to us in an act of service.

One group from George Fox was specially honored, as a local group of women invited them into a member's home. These women came together to encourage one another and to participate in small business ventures to assist their families. The women have collaborated in the healthcare and education work within this village through cooking, translating, and meeting the daily needs of our groups. The women stated how this joint effort with our students and faculty had been a positive influence. They were amazed that we chose to donate our time and resources to care for the people of their village and to demonstrate Christ's love to those served.

During our time together, the Kenyan women showered us with love and gratitude. Initially, it was uncomfortable to be in a position of receiving. However, it was an opportunity to learn life lessons about self-sacrifice in the midst of extreme hardships. This experience also produced a cognitive dissonance for the students and required a change in mindset. Allowing

the women an opportunity to serve our team was a gift for them. They invited us into their culture: we heard their songs of worship and praise and participated in fellowship and prayer. The most heartfelt part came when the women presented us with unexpected gifts of beans and woven baskets. At first, we were unsure about accepting these gifts, knowing these beans were the food needed to nourish their families. It was almost more than we could comprehend. We found ourselves wondering: *How could those who have so little still be so generous to those who already have so much?* However, receiving from others with humility models Christ's example.

The focus of our work in this community has been health assessments for the widows. Through these assessments we determined what kind of health education was needed. Before we began, the sponsoring women's group hosted a meal and a time of worship. The women shared testimonies of God's faithfulness and how their needs were being met. They acknowledged they no longer felt as outcasts within the community. They had many health challenges and limited resources, yet they were grateful to God for his daily provisions.

### **A Generous Host**

On our trips to Mount Elgon in western Kenya, our host is respected and well known in the community. Although he'd not previously met team members, he shared his home, and though the trip participants often did not spend extended time with him, his generosity was elaborate. His home became a sanctuary, where after working long days in the clinic, we could relax and debrief. Our host has demonstrated repeated humility through offering his home to strangers, so that the members of his community could be served through healthcare and education.

When the team is not at the host home, they may stay with members of the local church. These church women not only plan and make each meal, but prepare tea and goodies

for our breaks. They are up before dawn to provide fire-warmed water for morning bucket baths and to have breakfast and tea ready before our morning devotions and transport to the clinic. Next, lunch is made. Sometimes, the food is transported on their laps on a motor- bike! Through this service of providing meals, nursing students have been re- minded of the importance of self-care, including adequate nutrition.

In addition, the ladies would bring afternoon tea and fresh groundnuts (peanuts) to the clinic. The students wrestle with the request to leave the patient care areas for breaks because in their clinical experiences in the United States, such breaks are often missed or nonexistent. Cognitive dissonance occurred once again, as the students did not want to leave the patient area, yet recognized the need to respect our hosts and the food they had prepared. Despite our reluctance to take a break, these ladies constantly reminded our group about the importance of staying hydrated and nourished. The women generously made dinner for us each night. The standard phrases from these hostesses are: “Feel free, Feel free,” encouraging us to take seconds (called rebounds). They embody scriptural hospitality, generosity, and humility through their acts of service to be sure our group was properly cared for according to Kenyan cultural standards. These actions affirm the call to *show hospitality* (Romans 12:13).

A common tradition in Kenya is the washing of hands before taking tea or a meal. This act illustrates humble service toward others and is no simple feat, as most areas do not have running water. The Kenyans pour water over each person’s hands for washing, as they come to the table. Not only is this important for hygiene, it provides a spiritual reminder of Jesus’ example of washing his disciples’ feet (John 13). In Kenyan culture, the act of touching a person who is unclean has tremendous significance. On rare occasion, we could assist in the process for our



Kenyan brothers and sisters.

## **Conclusion**

The service-learning experiences in Kenya have taught George Fox nursing students not only how to improve their ability to work with diverse populations, but how to receive ministry from others, especially from those who are less fortunate. The nursing teams experience collaborative partnership and learning through each service-learning experience. By allowing others to serve us, we can examine power imbalances and learn how to serve others with Christ-like humility. Working through cognitive dissonance is an added benefit of service-learning trips. Christ's example of humility calls us also to be receivers and not just givers—a helpful model of serving others in any context.

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