

Viewpoint: BYU can do more service

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Why BYU Needs a Model of Service

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Ever since joining the BYU faculty in the mid 1970s, I have prayed for a mechanism through which students on our campus could collaborate with faculty in meaningful outreach programs to serve those in need. My question: how could we mobilize the great reservoir of good will in the hearts of the campus community to change the world?

The most successful model for doing this has been, curiously, not at the University bearing Brigham Young's name, but at the University of Utah. For over a decade, the Lowell Bennion Community Service Center has operated to create a vision of a caring community, identifying and "serving the needs of the one."

For many of today's LDS students in Provo, Lowell Bennion's legacy is largely unknown. But for those of us who grew up in the 1950s-60s, he was the Patron Saint of a truly Christian life. In my undergraduate college days, as a BYU and U of U student, he was a terrific role model: not an LDS sports hero or entertainer as are many of today's heroes in the church. Instead, Lowell was a humble, simple disciple of Christ who embodied as many Gospel virtues in his life as any mortal who ever walked the earth.

In 1934, Lowell started the Institute of Religion at the U of U where he was director for 28 years. He then served as Dean of Students at the school and taught sociology for many more years.

Eventually, the Lowell Bennion Community Service Center was established at the U of U to promote the virtues of service and to bless the surrounding community. Since 1987 more than 47,090 volunteers have given over 849,840 service hours building up the poor, counseling and helping abused women and children, fighting for the environment, assisting troubled teens, caring for the elderly and needy in the Salt Lake Valley, and even reaching beyond to impoverished tribal reservations of Native Americans, and even farther, to Africa.

It seems a curious contradiction that in contrast to the U of U, BYU has not developed a similar community impact. Oh, sure, we have a motto at the campus entrance: "Enter to learn; Go forth to serve." But in the vernacular of some business management students, the message becomes rephrased: Enter to learn; Go forth to earn.

This entry sign to campus reflects the view that we will go out in the world upon graduation to begin the process of serving others. It is, in my view, an unfortunate perspective. Why must we assume

that humanitarian service will naturally occur after one's education is completed? Implicit in the logic of the Bennion Center is the assumption that service-in-education is a powerful way to apply educational concepts and methods.

Of course, there are those who seek to serve the Provo community through existing BYU institutions. For example, many contribute their time and talent through their campus ward organizations. In fact, when one inquires, I am often told that our student wards are the very reason we have no equivalent Bennion Service Center.

But the kind and quality of service rendered in student wards is much different than that offered by students at the U of U: rounding up eyeglasses for hundreds of the elderly; rushing out after a snowstorm to shovel snow for thousands of Salt Lake widows' houses in a single morning. As a former BYU campus bishop told me, "Most of our student wards are a cheap substitute for sincere Christian service."

Of course, there are small, but useful BYU service organizations that attempt to channel student energy: BYUSA vice president of community service, student-to-student tutoring services, a United Way office and various other programs such as blood drives and service-to-go. No doubt, there is much that is good and decent about such groups as they mobilize for individual and group service projects.

A third area of BYU outreach occurs in specific university courses. One observes from time to time successful efforts by social science students to round up donated clothing for Deseret Industries, or a Sub-for-Santa drive. I'm aware of some wonderful projects in the College of Education to take books and other goods to needy Tarahumara Indians in Mexico. Or a class of nursing students doing healthcare in Asia. The International Field Studies and Internships (IFSI) office of the Kennedy Center facilitates involvement in grassroots institutions around the globe for numerous students who want to serve abroad.

In the past several years I have enjoyed the wonderful experience of collaborating with BYU students seeking to literally transform some little corner of the world in places like Moscow, Russia and rural Egypt. Last summer some 20 "social entrepreneurs" journeyed around the globe to lift the needy. During this summer of 1999 some 60-70 students are spreading out around the world to do the same, helping victims of Hurricane Mitch in Honduras, building LDS self-reliance in Kenya, strengthening rural Nigerians, laboring on the Navajo reservation, and so forth.

However, such outreach service is not easy to accomplish at BYU. It is difficult to arrange college credit for service learning like the Bennion Center offers. Students who seek to volunteer for such projects are often rebuffed by campus administrators who warn them of liabilities and block attempts to obtain minimal health insurance coverage. Instead of open-mindedness and the creation of a climate of experimentation, some BYU officials worry that such efforts might not always succeed -- the implication being it is better to do nothing to be on the safe side.

Such service ventures are not only arduous to establish, but they are also time consuming and costly in terms of finances. BYU social entrepreneurs are willing to forgo wages for a full summer to serve the poor, but unless they have wealthy parents, they cannot even afford the cost of airfare to travel.

Yet when they attempt to generate donations to support outreach service, some in the BYU bureaucracy clamp down, declaring no fund-raising except theirs can be allowed on campus. Everything is to be correlated and controlled from above.

While BYU itself may offer no institutional monies to such projects, students are also told, according to what I've heard in the past few weeks, that they cannot set up a fund-raising booth by the library, nor can they make announcements at symposia to seek contributions. They are not allowed to solicit funds at baseball games, in classrooms, or to organize a community-wide charity campaign. However, some fund-raising is acceptable for outside institutions such as Operation Smile, the Red Cross, and the Cancer Society. It seems curious that our community allows support for huge, million-dollar charities with massive administrative costs, but disallows small, grassroots fund-raisers to support campus initiatives that have no overhead costs.

Recently, as has been true at various times in the past, there is much talk about creating a U of U-like Bennion Center for service at BYU. Supposedly millions of dollars will be set aside for such an institution at BYU. Some expect that most of the money will go for bricks and mortar, since outward appearance is so all-important here. Other rumors suggest outside people will be hired to administer a service program, the assumption being that no one at BYU understands methods of genuine service. Such aspects of a future BYU service center are simplistic and naive. What is really needed is a focusing of Gospel values that, if implemented effectively, would channel the moral energy of the BYU community in moving beyond the present stance in which we want to be commanded "in all things." Instead, what we need is a genuine theology of stewardship that becomes emblazoned in our hearts and minds.

As BYU students, faculty and staff our whole purpose in this life is to build Zion. While rhetoric about this university becoming Zion-like is easy to assert, making it so is not easy. According to Brigham Young himself, it takes real, hard labor. We at BYU can make a difference in the world.

Whether or not we eventually have a Bennion-like service center at BYU maybe isn't the point. What we really need is not random acts of kindness, but strategic actions to effect change for good.

In today's campus vernacular, perhaps what will be required is to make service the moral equivalent of BYU football. If even a tenth of the time and dollars spent on athletics were channeled to creating a successful service program, we would make a giant leap toward becoming a Zion community. The Prophet Joseph's insight on such a matter is clear: "A man filled with the love of God is not content with blessing his family alone, but ranges through the whole world, anxious to bless the whole human race."