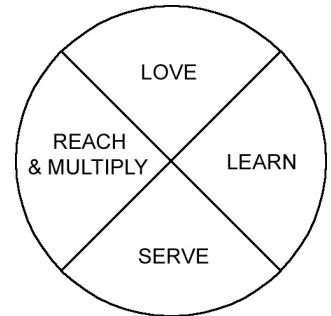


SERVE

1. How serve fits into Shac Community small group goals

- Serve is intertwined with all other goals
- James says, “Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead” (James 2:17). Service and good works are an essential part of any vibrant and maturing Christian life and small group life. Your group must be a place where members are taught to serve, enabled to serve, and supported in their service in the world and in the body of Christ.



2 Corinthians 8

¹And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. ²Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. ³For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, ⁴they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints. ⁵And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God's will. ⁶So we urged Titus, since he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part. ⁷But just as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us—see that you also excel in this grace of giving.

⁸I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. ⁹For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

2. GET THINKING

a. Hypothetical: If your small group leader sat everyone down and told you that for the next six months you were going to look at the Bible's teaching on the powerless and the poor, how would you feel? Intrigued? Anxious? Enthusiastic? Apathetic?

b. Group Activity

Think of a situation where you have felt powerless. Share it with the group.

- How did you feel?
- Did it affect your relationship with God?

c. Give yourself a power rating on these issues. 1 = totally powerless, 5 = totally powerful.

The government's decision making processes	
The use of your money	
The use of your time	
Waiting in a doctor's or dentist surgery	
A meeting with someone in authority (e.g. Lecturer or police)	

Discuss with your group ways you could increase or decrease the power in those areas.

d. Exploitation and Injustice

- What is your reaction to stories of great injustice (e.g. Sweatshop workers)?

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- What would you want to say to the people doing the exploiting?
- How would you pray if you were on the receiving end of such exploitation

e. Read Job 24

- ¹ "Why does the Almighty not set times for judgment?
Why must those who know him look in vain for such days?"
- ² Men move boundary stones;
they pasture flocks they have stolen.
- ³ They drive away the orphan's donkey
and take the widow's ox in pledge.
- ⁴ They thrust the needy from the path
and force all the poor of the land into hiding.
- ⁵ Like wild donkeys in the desert,
the poor go about their labor of foraging food;
the wasteland provides food for their children.
- ⁶ They gather fodder in the fields
and glean in the vineyards of the wicked.
- ⁷ Lacking clothes, they spend the night naked;
they have nothing to cover themselves in the cold.
- ⁸ They are drenched by mountain rains
and hug the rocks for lack of shelter.
- ⁹ The fatherless child is snatched from the breast;
the infant of the poor is seized for a debt.
- ¹⁰ Lacking clothes, they go about naked;
they carry the sheaves, but still go hungry.
- ¹¹ They crush olives among the terraces;
they tread the winepresses, yet suffer thirst.
- ¹² The groans of the dying rise from the city,
and the souls of the wounded cry out for help.
But God charges no one with wrongdoing.*

Which incident described do you feel is the worst?
How does Job's conclusion fit with your understanding of God?
(* NRSV translation: "yet God pays no attention to their prayer.")

f. Prayer

Ask God to show you how your small group can be an influence for good in the community and around the world.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

When we are considering going to church, or a small group, we commonly ask ourselves "*what I will get out of it?*" This is the result of a consumerist mentality, whereby a church service or a small group gathering is seen as something that is put on for the consumer, and the consumer critiques it by what he or she gets out of it. When this is our criteria we can become critical and feel our needs haven't been met.

The Bible presents a very different picture of church and community. It provides a picture of participation, and of mutual love and service. You participate in church and small groups so that you can show love to others. We are called to imitate Christ, to love one another and to

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serve each other. This is based on the attitude of Christ (Philippians 2:1-11; John 13:1-20), who came to serve, even to the point of being put to death on a cross. Our Lord modeled what it was to serve others. Throughout the New Testament we see many examples of this, and service is a crucial expression of our faith in Jesus.

What does this mean for small groups? We are there to serve the others in the group and we need to facilitate an approach of mutual service, whereby each member uses their gifts for the group. This can also mean helping each other in practical ways, through the sharing of possessions and resources.

Some questions:

- Is your small group a place where the members are serving one another?
- What are some ways you can grow in serving each other?

Service and justice?

But as well as our care for one another, the Bible calls us to be a people that look outwards. We are to be a people who share the message, and extend Christ's love in practical acts of service.

The prophets in the Old Testament demonstrate that worship and justice go hand in hand (See Amos 5:18-27). God is fed up with people being outwardly religious, but not caring for the poor and needy. God could be saying to us: *"Guys! - enough of your songs, your worship services, your groups and your discussion times... But let justice roll down like rivers, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream"*.

Our response to issues of poverty, and justice is to be a vital expression of worship. Therefore it seems fitting that we must think through what it means for us to encourage justice to be a part of our small groups. The New Testament speaks not only of an individual's response to the poor, but also of a communal response. Churches are urged to care for those in their midst who have needs. The church is also encouraged to show generosity to poorer churches. There is a great passage demonstrating this at the front of this handout (cf.2 Corinthians 8 and 9).

Commands or character?

There are no rules as to what we need to give. We are free to give as we choose. However, generosity demonstrates the genuineness of our love (2 Cor. 8:8-9). In a relationship- we can say "I love you"- but if we don't demonstrate our love people will doubt that our words are true. Paul has not commanded generosity, but he challenges the Corinthian church as to their character. Is the character of our church one of generosity? Are our small groups demonstrating a generous character to one another, and to people in need? The basis of this generosity is the generous act of Jesus Christ,

"that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich" (2 Cor 8:10)

Paul continues;

¹³Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. ¹⁴At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality, ¹⁵as it is written: "He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little."

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Some questions

- How can our church give out of our abundance?
- What are ways in which your small group can be generous to the poor?
- Explore ideas to encourage your group to respond to issues of justice.

Opposition

When the Serve element of your group becomes very real and in people's faces you should be prepared for some people to not be happy and try and avoid the consequences. You may also feel this way yourself. It's understandable because it can be very challenging. This may manifest itself in direct opposition or sneak under the radar a bit with a lack of commitment and enthusiasm. Do not be too judgmental of these people. Instead present them with the reality of the world (i.e. It is stuffed) and the reality of scripture (Christians are called to serve). Many people have become social justice advocates simply by reading the bible and obeying it's commands.

A really challenging question:

Would you be prepared to swap places with a person in the third world if it meant your relationship with God would improve?

You may be faced with theological arguments that are actually reality arguments. We've all done it. We talk about a hypothetical or theoretical situation, which is in fact directly about us except that we are perhaps too ashamed to acknowledge it.

THE OBSTACLES

Two reasons for a lack of church growth in Australia:

1. Our prosperity – who needs to trust God?

Unlike most of the world's population we do not have to spend a lot of time worrying about where our next meal will come from. Shelter from the weather is available to virtually everyone who seeks it and our health and welfare systems are amongst the best in the world. Our police force and government remain relatively free from corruption and we have no borders with other countries that might make war with us.

All these facts are probably not new to you. We shouldn't feel guilty about something we have no control over – we didn't choose to be born here – however as Christians the bible tells us that all we have for the short time we are on this earth, is God's and so should be used for his good purposes. The big question is why are we still so selfish when – materially at least - we have everything we could ever need?

2. Scientific Rationalism – it's hard to believe in God.

This might explain why we are so selfish. Because we are able to rely on ourselves for just about everything, there is very little reason to believe in God from a survival point of view. We label Christianity as a "crutch" that weak people lean on to feel better about their sad lives. If you are strong in character and a "go-getter" then you won't need to lean on that superstitious drivel and as a proud atheist you will be able to reach your full potential in the world... and eventually die happy. Unless God comes down and smacks us over the head with proof of his existence, we're going to stick to our own game-plan thanks very much.

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It is not bad to be a scientific rationalist. Thinking is not an anti-Christian pastime. A key thing to remember though is that *Christianity does not at any time pretend that it is not a "crutch for the weak"*. God is the champion of the poor and of the oppressed. Jesus spent most of his life with the excluded members of society and you only have to read a few Psalms to see how God is truly the "helper" of mankind. To serve others with the gifts and possessions we have been born with is to partner in God's great work.

AN ASSESSMENT

Group Activity

Do an assessment of your small group's service dimension. Freedom and honesty are important in a discussion such as this so make sure people know they are able to voice their opinions and feelings without fear of persecution. Ask these questions:

- How much time do you put into making your church and small group experience satisfactory?
- How much do you address the issue of service? Do you see it as a priority?

Group Activity

Ask each person to fill in this simple table and explain your answers to the group. You might like to make a larger version and get people to write down what they actually do in each section as well (e.g. Half an hour prayer session before breakfast each day).

Love and Service				
How much time and energy?		Prayer	Action	Lifestyle
	A Lot			
	Some			
	A little			

Pain

The bible teaches that we should serve joyfully but doesn't pretend it's going to be a pain free exercise. When you serve people in need you risk feeling the pain that others feel everyday. The destruction of drug addictions, the ramifications of domestic abuse, the cold reality of the selfishness of the human race. Things won't always work out how you imagined and you may never be thanked for your efforts. Expect to feel the full spectrum of emotions as you serve.

There is an incorrect idea in some churches that you are not really serving someone if you enjoy what you're doing. That somehow we need to do things we don't want to – almost resenting it - before it will mean anything. Rubbish! It is not the hardship that you go through that makes an act of service worthy. On the whole we should take great joy in our service and be using our gifts and skills as much as possible. If you love gardening, use your gardening skills to serve others (e.g. Look after an elderly persons front yard). If you love sport, try and incorporate it into your service life (e.g. Running a footy clinic for juvenile offenders). If you're rich, give away your money.

ACTUALLY DOING IT

3 Ways to Serve:

- Advocacy - letting people know about an issue.

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- Practical hands on service.
- Fundraising.

ADVOCACY

Many missionaries in the Middle East would rather you spend your money on a short-term mission trip to visit them instead of giving them a cash donation. The reason for this is that they would much rather you acted as an advocate for the middle east amongst a large number of rich Australians than simply blindly giving them money. They feel that most people in the West don't know what their part of the world is truly like and put our education ahead of our finances. Sometimes the best way we can serve people in tough situations is to let a whole lot of other people know what's happening and what they can do. This is a particularly great way to serve if you are on a low income. Back up your advocacy with prayer and action. Ask God what he wants your group to do.

Obviously you would need to pick the issue you are passionate about and then work out the best way to inform people about it. Here are some pointers:

Don't be judgmental

We can be very quick to be critical of a corrupt third world government or seemingly discriminative laws in the middle east but what about us? Ask about our country, our church, our small group. Don't be full of yourself and think we've got it all together. We haven't, not by a long shot. An attitude that we are a 'good' community and *they* are a 'bad' community is not helpful to anyone.

Don't be shy

Our faith is not to be a private thing. Apply your faith to politics and world issues. Don't be intimidated, if you care, do something.

Good news: Our government does respond to advocacy. E.g. If your small group was able to mobilize 100 people each to write letters to politicians and ten other small groups can too, then that is over 1000 letters sitting on someone's desk.

Politics

Try and un-politicise issues and make them justice issues. A lot of people will not go near aboriginal reconciliation or refugees because it is seen to be in the political realm. We should be appealing to people's sense of justice and human decency. Using the "love your neighbour" commandment if you are appealing to Christians.

By taking a stand for justice you are not automatically siding with a certain political party. Eg. If you care about the environment then you are not automatically a Green. If you speak out against mandatory detention you are not necessarily against the liberal party. You are simply sticking up for what you believe is right – a far nobler purpose. Justice does not have to be political.

PRACTICAL HANDS ON SERVICE

Find an issue and serve it in an ongoing capacity. This requires humility and guts. Going to an info session or one off events are okay but they are no substitute for a week-by-week contribution. Think about how long term Jesus was. He died so that all who had faith could be saved (not just those who were around at the time). Always examine the context of what

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you are doing and try and be as smart as possible. Consult with people who already have a clear understanding and take on their advice.

Be Smart

Practical service needs a long-term commitment. We do not recommend starting anything without first thinking it through to the end. What is your ultimate goal? Are you likely to get there? Is it sustainable? When it comes to serve in small groups we need to be focused. Ask your small group what it is they want to do. Assess the worth of their suggestions.

E.g. There was a Christmas appeal where people were asked to fill shoeboxes with goodies for children in the third world. The great thing this appeal did was it got people thinking about overseas aid and generosity in general. However the benefit to the children was negligible at best. The food was mostly very bad for them and they had no use for western toys. It was a nice gesture but to really serve the people who were being targeted, we needed to be a bit smarter.

Tokenism

Really serving people can be time consuming and confronting. Token “serve” acts are different. They are quick and usually pain free. They are not necessarily bad but a Saturday working bee or 40 hour famine donation does not reach the heart of Christian service unless they are matched with a continuing commitment to the people you are serving. We like programs where everyone can celebrate a job well done but there are plenty of important jobs that may never have an end point that can be celebrated.

If you pull out of your service you are affecting other people and may cause more damage with a short-term stint than you would have if you had done nothing. Don't just feel happy about doing something good (although definitely don't feel bad about feeling good). Make sure your service makes an impact.

Think practical

Being an effective Serve small group does not mean doing a bunch of activities together (although it can). Each person should find an area where they have been best equipped by God to go and serve and then do it with the support of the group:

E.g. One person may find they are called to work with street kids but to do so effectively they would have to work less hours which would put them in financial trouble. The small group might be able to support them financially or by supplying them breakfast for the week or things like that to support their service.

E.g. Some people in your group may visit the detainees in Melbourne's detention centers. Perhaps not everyone has the skills or the timetable to come along so the rest of the group could commit to praying regularly for the ministry and raising the profile through advocacy (this could be done in letters to politicians, newspapers etc...).

It is easy to get carried away when you first approach the topic of serve. Most people will acknowledge that something must be done and sometimes we can jump up and want to get started straight away. At this point we suggest you: **Stop, Pray, Think and Share**

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Tip

Try making a covenant which people sign subscribing to the group's philosophy on service. It can be very simple or detailed (possibly including activities that the group has committed to). Here is an example of a simple covenant:

I believe that serving the poor and oppressed is an integral part of following our Lord Jesus and before God I will commit my time, resources and money to serving the church and those less fortunate than me.

These words won't do anything magical but there is a higher level of accountability if the whole group signs something.

FUNDRAISING

This form of service is incredibly easy. Give away your money and encourage others to do the same. You might like to run a dinner and give away the profits you make. Maybe your small group could make a monthly gift of money to charity.

Idea: Zacchaeus fund

This would be a fund financed by new money that is created by a group of people living differently. You may all decide to stop drinking alcohol and put the money you used to spend on it into the fund, which would then be donated to victims of alcohol abuse.

SUMMARY

Here's some key stuff to remember from this training

- Serving as a small group does not have to be done as a group activity, this is often impractical.
- Each group should spend time analyzing their service commitments, comparing it to the teaching of scripture and deciding on a course of action.
- No service can be entered into lightly, make a long-term plan that is well thought through and agreed upon by the group.

RESOURCES

The Oaktree Foundation

www.theoaktree.org

The Oaktree are keen to hear from small groups who are interested in taking on a service task over a decent period of time. They are happy to work out what sort of tasks would be best suited for your group. Because the Oaktree targets youth and young adults they would mostly likely ask older groups to contribute in the role of mentors.

TEAR Australia

www.tear.org.au

Steve Bradbury has written some excellent small group books designed to get groups thinking about issues of service and justice. They are part of the 'Change Maker' series and are available for purchase from TEAR.

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Local issues of interest:

- Refugee reform
- Indigenous Australians

Global issues of interest:

- Millennium development goals