

## Tales from Two Cities: Service-Learning as a Christian Educational Practice

by Todd Ream

### Abstract

As an educational practice, service-learning offers an important means by which to work toward the integration of the curricular and co-curricular efforts on our respective campuses. However, the larger conceptual framework through which service-learning is defined and exercised is driven by what Augustine defines as the city of the world in a way that neglects the significance of what he referred to as the City of God. In this article, I identify the roots of this problem and offer an alternative conceptual framework for service-learning as a Christian educational practice. This conceptual framework challenges Christian educators to not just engage in the practice of service-learning out of contractual obligation and exchange but out of a sense that our essence or identity is inextricably tied to the identity of others.

### Introduction

The tales I seek to re-tell are not the tales of the two cities of Charles Dickens. By contrast, the tales I seek to re-tell are the tales of the two cities of Augustine. No one would doubt that in many ways our age is one of paradox. Our age is indeed comprised of the best of times and the worst of times. However, in contrast to the work of Dickens, our age is perhaps more acutely described as being an age trapped between what Augustine identified as the aspirations of the City of God and the aspirations of the city of the world. As Christian educators, we are simultaneously present in the best of times and in the worst of times as defined by these two cities. The advent of what many scholars refer to as a post-Christian society brings with it the tension of a marginalized, yet all the more desperately needed, presence of the City of God within the city of the world (Carter, 1994).

When it comes to the practice of service-learning, those of us who serve as Christian educators find ourselves trapped between these two cities. While this important practice offers us an important avenue to work toward the integration of the curricular and co-curricular efforts on our respective campuses, the larger conceptual framework through which service-learning is defined and exercised is driven by the city of the world in a way that neglects the significance of the City of God. In this article, I identify the roots of this problem as part of a larger effort to reconstitute a conceptual framework for service-learning as a Christian educational practice. This conceptual framework will challenge us to serve what Augustine called the city of the world by first and foremost seeking to serve what he called the City of God.

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### Defining Augustine's Two Cities

Before proceeding with a discussion of a conceptual framework for service-learning as a Christian educational practice, I will look more closely at the characteristics that define Augustine's two cities. Augustine (354-430), the great doctor of the Latin Church and the Bishop of Hippo in North Africa, offered the Christian Church some of its most profound theological insights. His work includes over 113 books and treatises, over 200 letters, and over 500 sermons. However, Augustine's *City of God* (426/1984) proves to be a vision for the political life of the Christian Church. At its essence, this text stands as a treatise defining not only the nature of the cities of God and the world as distinct political realities but also the nature of the relationship they share (Milbank, 1993). Roughly speaking, the City of God for Augustine consists of what we know as the Church while the city of the world consists of what we know as the state.

Augustine's identification of the state as a political reality may not trouble too many individuals. However, Augustine's identification of the Church as a political reality may prove to be more problematic. In terms of these two cities, Augustine (426/1984) writes, "One of these is the City of God, the other is the city of this world; and God's City lives in this world's city, as far as the human element is concerned; but it lives there as an alien sojourner" (p. 761). This alien sojourner, the Church, is a political reality from which we Christians first and foremost find our identity. However, we, as part of the political reality of the Church, also find ourselves as part of the political reality of the state. The Gospel, or the Church's story, makes demands upon Christians to lead lives of societal reconciliation and transformation. However, reservations about the Church as a political reality are justified when the Church's story is interpreted by the politics of the city of the world. By contrast, in a manner similar to that of Augustine, Stanley Hauerwas (1995) claims "a theological politics makes the church's story the "counter story" that interprets the world's politics" (p. 6).

While members of the Church or citizens of the City of God may find their identity in the practices they encounter within this political reality, they also invariably will find themselves within the state or as citizens of the city of the world. Augustine (426/1984) writes, "And yet this City (the City of God) did not proceed on its own course in this world in isolation; in fact, as we all well know, just as both the cities started together, as they exist together amongst mankind, so in human history they have experienced in their progress the vicissitudes of time" (p. 761). For Augustine, the city of the world is a city in which we as the citizens of the City of God also find ourselves. Christians provide a counter story which seeks to interpret the world's politics. As a result, the question we find ourselves facing is not whether to share this story but how to share this story (Milbank, 1993).

As Augustine stated, citizens of the City of God are "sojourners" in the city of the world who share their story. Although a sojourner is one who passes through one region on his or her way onto another, one takes time to pause and engage in the life of his or her given locale. One makes an investment in that place even though he or she is

tent on journeying elsewhere in the future at some point. This sense of investment is defined by the story they tell. Part of one's story is often identified as one's conceptual framework. Such a notion is necessary in order for the functions of life to have direction or even a basic sense of organization. Augustine saw one's presence in the city of God as the source of one's story or conceptual framework he or she would draw upon during his or her sojourn through the city of the world. In a similar manner, Graham Ward (2000) argues, "The heavenly city must itself make possible the earthly city" (p. 230). However, as a movement, the conceptual framework that defines service-learning has its roots in the perceived need to connect the lessons learned in the classroom with the needs of the larger society—the larger society of the city of the world.

### The University and the City of the World

Service-learning emerged during an era in time when various educators perceived a need existed to connect the lessons of the classroom with the needs of the larger society. At one level, the history of higher education as it progressed from the dawn of the twentieth century to the dawn of the twenty-first century reveals an increased emphasis on relevance. Derek Bok, president emeritus of Harvard University, echoed such sentiments in his *Beyond the Ivory Tower: Social Responsibilities of the Modern University*. One rationale Bok (1982) employs in terms of his support for the aspiration of relevance is that "Because of this massive public support, universities have reason to acknowledge a reciprocal duty to make their services available to address important social problems" (p. 65). The state, or the city of the world, provides large scale support for education. As a result, the university has a contractual responsibility to develop programs that are relevant to the challenges faced by the state.

However, Bok was not the first individual to argue that colleges and universities possess a contractual obligation to develop programs with the aspiration of societal change in mind. Such a rationale finds its origins in the earlier part of the twentieth century and the inevitable influence of pragmatism on educational theory. As a movement, pragmatism finds truth in outcomes that are linked to particular forms of action. While John Dewey was not the first to advance the spirit of pragmatism, he is arguably the most well-known of its advocates. For example, Henry Steele Commager (1950) argues, "So faithfully did Dewey live up to his own philosophical creed that he became the guide, the mentor, and the conscience of the American people: it is scarcely an exaggeration to say that for a generation no major issue was clarified until Dewey had spoken" (p. 100). In his highly influential *Democracy and Education*, Dewey fuses together the aspirations of pragmatism with the process of education. The result of such an endeavor is the need for education to serve needs relevant to the larger society. Such an intention is seen in passages where Dewey (1916/1944) argues even in a democratic society, "Beings are born not only unaware of, but quite indifferent to, the aims and habits of a social group [and] have to be rendered cognizant of them and actively interested. Education, and education alone, spans the gap" (p. 3).

In terms of an early example in higher education of an individual who embodied Dewey's aspirations, one need to look no further than to the influential educational leader and president of Columbia University during the early twentieth century,

Nicholas Murray Butler. As a philosopher, Butler draws upon the spirit of pragmatism advanced by Dewey and applies it specifically to the context of higher education. Butler (1921/1971) shares, "The primary purpose of the university is to provide the companionship of scholars for scholars at a time when sufficient maturity has been reached to make the joy of the intellectual life intense and productive" (p. 60). While Butler (1921/1971) contends spiritual insight, depth, and beauty are all part of the sense of service such a university offers, he also argues that "the university relates itself in closest fashion to the needs and aspirations of the state, the civic order, the community" (p. 63). From the perspective set forth by Augustine in the *City of God*, the problem was not so much that education is designed to serve aspirations that meet an end. The problem which emerges is the manner in which the ends are dictated first and foremost by the state, or the city of the world, instead of the Church, or the City of God.

### A Conceptual Framework for Service-Learning as an Educational Practice

As many of us are aware, the conversations, as prompted partly by the spirit of pragmatism, which surfaced during the early decades of the twentieth century reached a fevered pitch by the late-1960s and early-1970s. While this era was one of tumultuous social upheaval, this era was also one in which higher education was faced with the pointed question of identifying the relevance of its offerings as evident in matters of practice. Students, as well as a host of external constituents, wanted to see concrete expressions of how collegiate curricular and co-curricular efforts were targeted at helping alleviate various social problems. First, some colleges and universities responded by allowing students to have more discretion in terms of course selection. As a result, many within the academy decreased the number of general education or liberal arts requirements while adding more elective hours (Rudolph, 1977). Second, some colleges and universities added academic programs more intentionally designed to meet specific societal needs. Consequently, some educators increased the numbers of various professional programs on their campuses (Rudolph, 1977). Hence, representatives at some colleges and universities searched for new ways to make the theoretical lessons of course sequences in areas such as general education or the liberal arts more relevant to not only the students but also to various external constituents. As a result, service-learning type endeavors began to emerge during the 1960s and 1970s as one strategy designed with such aspirations in mind (Bennett, 1997).

A programmatic history of service-learning would detail the origin of entities such as Project Pericles and Campus Compact. By contrast, our effort will need to bypass such discussions in order to maintain our initial trajectory of exploring the history of service-learning's conceptual framework. In their work *Service-Learning: A Movement Pioneers Reflect on Its Origins, Practice, and Future* (1999), Timothy K. Stanton, Dwight E. Giles, Jr., and Nadinne I. Cruz argue that the conceptual framework employed on particular college or university campus differs, at some level, from one to the next (See Figure One on the next page). For example, educators at community colleges, liberal arts colleges, or research universities will all approach the practice of service-learning in a unique manner dependent upon the organizational nature of their institution. Regardless, Stanton, Giles, and Cruz (1999) contend that a conceptual framework for

Service-learning practice exists that also applies to educators in such disparate contexts. In order to accomplish such a feat, the definition posed by these authors rests in the middle of a constructive tension which exists along the axes forming the sides of a triangulated conceptual framework (Stanton, Giles, & Cruz, 1999).

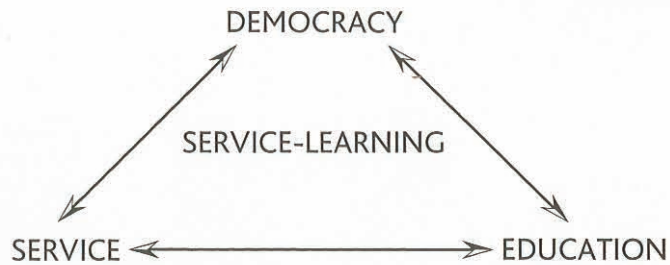


Figure One – Conceptual Framework for Service Learning (Stanton, Giles, & Cruz, 1999, p.19)

First, the tension between education and service is characterized by impressions of how education serves a society. Second, the tension between service and democracy is defined by impressions of how service is understood in relation to social change. Third, the tension between education and democracy is defined by impressions concerning the purpose of education in a democracy (Stanton, Giles, & Cruz, 1999). In order to understand the significance of these axes, we need to briefly explore the inherent commitments as well as the origins of each axis. First, Stanton, Giles, and Cruz (1999) argue that the majority of individuals who made early contributions to the service-learning literature began by seeking to answer the question of how education could fulfill its obligation to serve society. An individual with such aspirations is John Dewey, the author of works such as *Implementing Field Experience Education* (1974) and *Illegally Sponsored Experiential Learning* (1977). One of the common themes defining the work of these individuals is the belief that education should serve as a means of preparing students to meet the needs of society. However, the experiential component inherent in the work of most of these individuals proves to be the best way to get students to make the necessary connections. Second, while some theorists emphasized the need to establish connections in the minds of students between their education and various social needs, other theorists focused upon service as a means of working toward justice in a democratic society. According to Stanton, Giles, and Cruz (1999), one of the essential components to the thought of these individuals is their belief in “the relationship between service and social justice in a democratic society” (p. 27). While the previous group put their ideas into not only writing but also action, this group primarily saw social action as being the key to their efforts. In addition, while the previous group saw the relationship between education and society as being one shared by an inevitable outcome of instrumental efforts, this group saw their efforts in light of an ethical aspiration. As a result, social action, along with its ethical aspirations, became an inextricable component of the conceptual framework that defined service-learning.

Finally, the relationship shared by democracy and education forms the last axis that establishes this triangulated conceptual framework for service-learning. Individuals sympathetic to such an understanding are “driven by fundamental questions of democratic participation and the role of education in fostering a more engaged, effective citizenry” (Stanton, Giles, & Cruz, 1999, p. 30). Although all three of the axes that come together to comprise the conceptual framework for service-learning find their origins in the pragmatism of philosophers such as John Dewey, this axis may come the closest to representing Dewey’s own views. As previously stated, Dewey emphasized that education could span the gap between the needs of a democratic society and the aims and habits needed to sustain it. The individuals who sought to advance the perspective of this third axis see education as being a means of cultivating these habits. Stanton, Giles, and Cruz (1999) cite Rob Shumer as being amongst those who advanced the ideas behind this particular axis. As the director of the National Research Center and Clearinghouse on Service-Learning at the University of Minnesota, Shumer is committed to providing opportunities to students to help them learn to become an active presence in their respective communities.

The triangulated conceptual framework for service-learning as defined by Giles, Cruz, and Stanton (1999) obviously possesses significant merit as an educational practice for Christians and non-Christians alike. However, while the logic of Augustine’s *City of God* may not diminish the significance of service-learning as an educational practice for Christians, it may prompt Christians to evaluate their motivation for participating in such a practice. In the end, such an analysis will lead us to re-frame the axes of the conceptual framework for service-learning as offered by Giles, Cruz, and Stanton (1999). As a result, the essence of my argument is that in order for service-learning to be a Christian educational practice, we will need to think about the validity of such a conceptual framework in light of the challenge posed by Augustine in the *City of God*.

### A Conceptual Framework for Service-Learning as a Christian Educational Practice

While the conceptual framework Stanton, Giles, and Cruz (1999) identify may not initially appear problematic, we must recognize the underlying dependence that each axis has upon pragmatism. For Christians seeking to incorporate service-learning as an educational practice, the question is not whether one should serve but why one should serve. Although such an understanding is embedded in the very origins of democracy as detailed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in *The Social Contract* (1762/1968), pragmatism propels one to see that education has a contractual responsibility to serve the needs of a democratic society (Gutmann, 1987/1999). The terms of such a contract are defined by the basic premise that we all reap great benefits from the various societies in which we live. As a result, we also have a responsibility to offer an exchange in return. The essence of such a contractual perspective as advanced by pragmatism and thus also by service-learning is the notion of an exchange (Gutmann, 1987/1999).

As an educational practice, service-learning experientially enlarges the perspective of the individual student to help them see their place within this larger society, and thus the role they play in this process of exchange. “Morris Keeton, founder in 1974

of the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), viewed this critical reflection approach to service-learning as a direct expression of John Dewey's theories of education" (Giles, Stanton, and Cruz, 1999, p. 4). However, a Christian conceptual framework for service-learning is bound by a rationale that transcends one's contractual obligation to society. A Christian conceptual framework must take seriously the Augustinian conviction that one's existence in the city of the world is one of a sojourner—a sojourner that "makes the church's story the 'counter story' that interprets the world's politics" (Hauerwas, 1995, p. 6).

The counter story employed by Christians interprets the world's politics through the practices of the Church. As a result, these practices refocus not only the way we see our relationship to democracy, service, and education, but also our relationship as educators to a practice such as service-learning. "Christians worship the one true God who originates all finite reality in an act of peaceful donation, willing a new fellowship with himself and amongst the beings he has created" (Milbank, 1990/1993, p. 391). The reference to a peaceful donation echoes the truth of the creation narrative. God is understood to be the one who not only initiates our very existence but also initiates our relationship with God and with fellow members of the human community. Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1937/1997) claims in his study of the creation narrative that one can only understand the original intent of his or her identity as a being created in the image of God "with the other and dependent upon the other" (p.41). As a result, the sense of autonomy people need to perceive about themselves in order to enter into a relationship with others becomes a mere illusion. Through common worship Christians find a sense of identity as people tied not only to God but also to other members of the created order. As a result, the underlying rationale driving the redevelopment of a conceptual framework for service-learning as Christian educational practice is not one of contractual obligation and exchange but one of inextricable union with others.

While the notion of participation for Christians is understood through the practice of common worship, such a notion is extended to all other members of the created order. According to Augustine, Christians find themselves first and foremost in the midst of the Church, or the City of God. Whereas pragmatism teaches us that we are bound together by contractual relationships we establish with others, common worship teaches us that our sense of identity is inextricably tied to God and subsequently to others. Two particular practices form this sense of identity. First, the process which initiates such a change is the Church's practice of baptism. While such an act signifies the death of our former identity, it also signifies our new identity. Rodney Clapp (1996) argues through baptism Christians find "Their new name or most functional identity is 'Christians'—those who know Jesus as Lord and determiner of their existence. Their new inheritance is freedom and the bountiful resources of the community. Their new culture, or comprehensive way of life, is the church" (p. 100). Through baptism, we cease to see ourselves as individuals and begin the process of seeing ourselves as members of the body of Christ who are inextricably tied to the identity and well-being of others.

Second, whereas baptism is the practice that initiates Christians as members of the body of Christ, communion is the practice that sustains members of the body of Christ. Such a practice inevitably begins with a reflection on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Regardless of our tradition, we gather together as a way of remembering

what Christ sacrificed on our behalf. However, such an action is not just about the past, nor even about the present moment in which we participate. Such a practice is also about the future. Returning to the work of Rodney Clapp (1996), we read his admonition that "we practice eating as Jesus ate, so that we might become and indeed be his people" (pp. 108-109). Our identity is no longer separated from our fellow member of Christ's body or even from members of the larger society. We find that our identity is inextricably tied to their identity and their well-being. "Thus we must call to our table people of all races, all sexes, all social classes, all physical conditions." (Clapp, 1996, p. 109).

By participating in the practices of baptism and communion, John Howard Yoder (1992/2001) argues "the pattern we shall discover is that the will of God for human socialness as a whole is prefigured by the shape to which the body of Christ is called" (p. ix). However, Augustine (426/1984) also reminds us that while Christians may find their existence in the City of God they are also sojourners who must also live in the city of the world. "And yet this City [the City of God] did not proceed on its own course in this world in isolation; in fact as we well know, just as both the cities started together, as they exist together among mankind, so in human history they have together experienced in their progresses the vicissitudes of time" (p. 761). As Christian educators, democracy, education, and service are arenas in which we as sojourners must not only pass but also fully identify. Our investment in these arenas, and thus in service-learning, possesses a different motivation as a result of the transformation we undergo in the City of God. As a result, Christian educators do not engage in the practice of service-learning out of contractual obligation and exchange but out of a sense that our essence or identity is inextricably tied to the identity of others.

Second, as a Christian educational practice, while a conceptual framework for service-learning includes the same set of axes Stanton, Giles, and Cruz (1999) identify, it also includes the Church as a means of giving definition as to how we understand the relationship shared by democracy, education, and service. Our participation in service-learning not only begins with the Church but ends with it as well—See Figure Two.

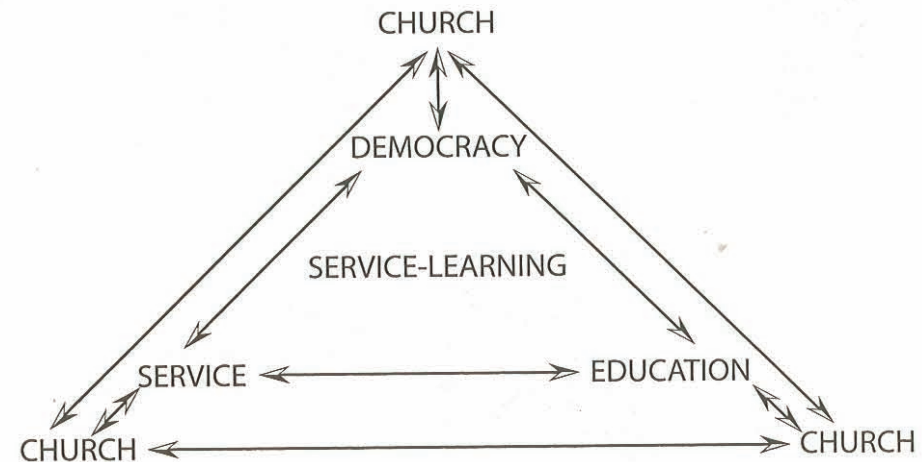


Figure Two – Christian Conceptual Framework for Service Learning

By beginning with the Church, service-learning becomes an educational practice in which we engage not only out of contractual obligation and exchange but more importantly because our identity is inextricably tied to the identity of others within the city of the world. However, beginning with the Church in terms of a conceptual framework inevitably also ends with the Church.

Remember that Augustine referred to members of the City of God as sojourners—sojourners who are on a pilgrimage. While we are called to serve the needs of those with whom we interact within the city of the world, we serve their needs by practicing the politics of the City of God. When facilitated through a conceptual framework that takes the Church's story as its first premise, service-learning becomes a means of Christian educational practice by which the deepest needs of the city of the world become our own.

### Conclusion

While these are the best of times, they are also the worst of times. The post-Christian society in which we find ourselves is one which comes with great challenges yet also great opportunities for transformation. When it comes to the educational practice of service-learning, a conceptual framework that begins and ends with the City of God, or the Church, is one which allows us to put the politics of the Church's story into practice. By virtue of our participation in practices such as baptism and communion, such an understanding transcends contractual obligation and exchange. Our identity becomes indivisible from the identity of others. Only when we are able to articulate a conceptual framework for service-learning as a Christian educational practice we will find ourselves ready to make it available to our students and to help them learn to also see the deepest needs of the city of the world.

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