

## **SESSION 1: CHAT WITH DEL HERSHBERGER** **by Carol Duerksen**

Welcome to Car Talk! This discussion on youth and service is with Del Hershberger, Director of Christian Service for Mennonite Church USA. He offers some wonderful, thoughtful insights into the philosophy behind and opportunities for service. Come, take a trip with us and enjoy the Car Talk!  
—Carol Duerksen

**As a youth leader who wants to encourage students to do some service, I don't know where to start. What's available? How do I find out about the options? Is there a list somewhere of everything available through Mennonite organizations?**

To begin with, the best place to get basic information on a broad range of opportunities is at the Mennonite Mission Network web site: [www.service.MennoniteMission.net](http://www.service.MennoniteMission.net). You will find opportunities from a weeklong service/learning experience to a two-year voluntary service assignment; programs for young and old; and domestic and international options.

Other Mennonite service opportunities can be found by visiting these web sites:

Eastern Mennonite Missions - [www.needsalt.org/about-emm.html](http://www.needsalt.org/about-emm.html)

Virginia Mennonite Board of Missions - [www.vmbm.org/pim](http://www.vmbm.org/pim)

Mennonite Central Committee - [www.mcc.org/servicetree/index.html](http://www.mcc.org/servicetree/index.html)

Mennonite Urban Corps - [www.mennocorps.org](http://www.mennocorps.org)

**I hear youth who were at Charlotte saying that their service experience was powerful—especially those who heard stories of “faith at work” in the ministries in the city. How can we help youth into more of those experiences—both “across the street and around the world”?**

Service starts with listening – listening directly for God, listening to others who are serving in God's name, and listening to those whose lives are being touched by the hand of God. We sometimes act as though we are the center of the universe and that God is confined to our church or denomination, but God is at work everywhere. The exciting thing is to discover how God is already at work in unexpected ways in our neighborhood and in the city or country far away.

**I'm intrigued with the idea of having youth and adults in a congregation do service together. Is that happening in other congregations? If so, how'd it go? What are your thoughts about this idea?**

Intergenerational service has been tried by quite a few churches and has met with mixed results. Most groups find it very meaningful – as youth and adults share their

energy, experience and perspectives working side-by-side. Sometimes the impatience for predetermined results by the adults thwarts an opportunity to learn something new about God and people of another culture or worldview, or their cynicism rubs off on the youth. At other times the youth fail to appreciate the experience and depth that the adults bring.

One key to making intergenerational service experiences work is to have opportunities for each generation to listen to the stories of the other. We often assume that another generation won't appreciate our stories or won't find them relevant, but if we can listen to each other and how God is leading us we can learn and grow as we serve together.

**I am also a big fan of cultural exchange being a part of a service experience. How can that be part of a youth group's experience?**

Many churches have developed sister church relationships that provide a natural way of connecting cross-culturally – serving in one community and then the other. If those relationships are not yet established, you may be able to get suggestions from church conference staff about a congregation you could create that exchange with.

This is a bigger commitment, because it generally requires more planning, more sensitivity and a longer time to complete this exchange. The benefits are also generally much greater too, as groups learn how to be good servants in another culture, good hosts to others and to look at Jesus' words and actions through the eyes of another.

**I know that some youth struggle with if they should go into a service assignment before or after college. What are the pros and cons of the different time frames?**

In addition to the benefit service is for others, it often helps bring clarity to a vocational call and it can also provide work experience that develops leadership and prepares them for a career. There is no "right" time to go into service.

Many young adults right out of high school gain insight about an area of training they want to pursue in college when they serve and live in a household of other persons asking similar questions.

Other young adults find it helpful to go directly into college to get the training they need before serving to both give of themselves and to gain valuable experience.

Another option that many young volunteers choose is to complete several years of college and then gain experience through service that compliments their further education.

One of the sad ironies is that often young adults are discouraged from serving before college because "you will be behind your classmates"; and then they are discouraged from serving after completing college because "you need to work on paying off your college loan and get on with your career". Even older adults whose lives were transformed by their service experience often pressure their adult children not to serve because they will lag behind their peers in reaching the American Dream.

**All of us—adults and youth alike—get too wrapped up in making money and that gets in the way of our interest in giving time to a service experience. Your thoughts on how to deal with that and help us get motivated more toward Kingdom values?**

I have written elsewhere about how the service gene or service DNA of North American Mennonites is being replaced with a materialism gene. That sounds harsh in some ways, but many Christians are guilty of resting on our reputation for service without actually living it out. And although I don't want to pick on adults too much, in my experience young people are very interested in service. It is often the young people who so deeply want to serve, but they defer to their parents' wishes not to sign-up (sometimes out of respect, and other times because there is a big price tag associated with following the parent's wishes).

So I return to the intergenerational equalizer – stories. Ask the parents to tell stories about their service. "What did you do?" "How did it change who you became?" "Where would you be now in your faith and vocation if it hadn't been for the time you spent in voluntary service?" Then the young person can tell where they sense their faith journey taking them and what they hope will spring to life in them or what clarity they will have about their calling or what they will learn or what difference they will make in the world through their service.

**In the past, the idea has been for a youth group to get into a van, go someplace to "do service," come home and report on it, and life goes on.**

**Is that changing? If so, in what ways?**

For many people, service still ends up being something that you check off the list of things you need to do to fulfill your commitment to your church or to get into National Honor Society. For some that is all it ever ends up being. For others, what started out as a fulfillment to duty ends up transforming them by expanding their worldview and providing an opportunity to make a difference in the life of another. We could always hope that service begins as a response to God's love and becomes a permanent lifestyle, but even if we start with the wrong motives God can transform the experience when we are engaged in service and can change our hearts to correspond to Kingdom values.

Many groups are taking steps to make sure their service trips begin with a commitment to learning and becoming new creatures in Christ. Pre-trip orientations play a huge role in determining the outcomes of service trips, just as finding the right program that emphasizes learning and discovering God already at work where you are going to serve.

**What other thoughts would you like to share about service, Del?**

I'd like to include these five pearls that form our philosophy.

Mission Network Philosophy of Christian Service:

- We believe that Christian Service programs can help volunteers discover how God is

at work in them. We will encourage them through prayer and reflection to see how their interests and gifts point to a “calling” from God in their lives.

- We believe in holistic ministry, where our volunteers work for God’s shalom in caring for social, physical and spiritual wholeness in their own lives, in their community and with those they serve.
- We believe in developing partnerships with churches and ministries that have a long-term commitment and relationship in the communities where we serve.
- Our volunteers are expected to offer a gift of service and to receive the gift of insight and perspective that the local community offers as a mutual benefit. As servants and learners, we work to build bridges between people from different socio-economic, ethnic, faith and other backgrounds.
- We seek to find ways to integrate the experiences of our volunteers into their lives as lifelong disciples of Christ.