

# Staying for Tea

FIVE PRINCIPLES FOR THE COMMUNITY SERVICE VOLUNTEER

*Aaron Ausland*

Many Krista Colleagues have spent time as service volunteers in communities that are not their own. I've spoken with many about their experiences, comparing their stories with my own. A few recognizable gems of value turn up with remarkable consistency. Many of us have made the same unnecessary blunders and learned the same lessons. Each year hundreds of young men and women enter into community-service volunteer work. If you are one of these, this article is for you. The lessons learned may provide you with a discreet set of principles to help you avoid our mistakes. Although these are not universally applicable or complete, having a set of principles to guide your service is critical. So, if you have not yet developed your own, let these be a starting point.

## 1. Stay for Tea

In 1998, I was living with my late wife in Bañado de la Cruz as a volunteer with the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC). Our mission in this isolated Bolivian village was something MCC called "accompaniment." Although I had an intuitive sense of what this word meant, I wasn't really sure how to do it, how to translate the mission into items on my to-do list. MCC didn't let us generate plans and launch projects; we were supposed to simply accompany the community in their endogenous process of development. But I had been invited into Bañado by the community, so clearly they expected something from me. I was

supposed to know something and do something that would contribute to the welfare of this community. But many days I awoke not knowing what this something was.

On those days, when no clear task was before me, I would often just walk out the front door and proceed down the one dusty road that passed through town. As I walked I would meet folks and we'd call out greetings to one another. Some would invite me over to sit for awhile with them. Often we'd share a hot cup of tea. Sometimes we would talk about one of the projects we were working on – honey bees, dry latrines, or accounting at the farmers' co-op – but usually we would just talk about life, about the places we were from and had been, about our families, and about how Krista and I were adjusting to life in Bañado. I had to confess that we were struggling; we weren't used to living in a one-room home of mud and stucco with no electricity or running water. I didn't understand the language or customs very well. I kept getting sick and suffering minor injuries. I didn't even know how to irrigate my own experimental corn plot.

After some time, I realized that something else was happening over tea. My title and position were being eroded; I was becoming real to them. At the same time, my simplistic stereotypes of them were melting away; they were becoming real to me. I ceased to be a community-development volunteer; I was just a new neighbor, an outsider in over my head trying to fit in and make friends. I was socially awkward and often not very useful. They ceased to be the poor, helpless people in

need of outside assistance. Instead, I saw them as strong, resourceful people whose resilience in a tough place demanded my deepest respect. My eyes were opened up to just how much Krista and I depended on their generosity and friendship. They gave us food from their lands, taught us how to wash in the river and use local plants to heal our bodies, invited us into their homes and shared both their wisdom and folly. I even learned how to irrigate

STAYING FOR TEA  
HELPED US TO BECOME  
MUTUALLY INDEBTED. I  
CALL THIS OPERATING  
AT EYE-LEVEL WITH  
THE COMMUNITY,  
AND THIS MADE ALL  
THE DIFFERENCE IN  
THE QUALITY AND  
IMPACT OF OUR TIME  
TOGETHER.

properly.

Over tea we built trust and became vulnerable together. Slowly, I was given access to insider knowledge of the community and the complex social rules and history that governed it. For instance, I learned who threw the rock that widowed my neighbor, who had 12 children. I was told about the abusive behavior of another neighbor, whose wife's father had to move in to his house to protect her, and how the community was split along two clan lines that jostled for power. Mysterious behavior began to make sense, hidden problems were brought to light, bigger dreams and deeper fears were disclosed. I was shown the social topography that I needed to navigate to become relevant and useful to

the community. My work gained traction and moved forward in ways that gave the community reason to be grateful for my presence there. Staying for tea helped us to become mutually indebted. I call this operating at eye-level with the community, and this made all the difference in the quality and impact of our time together.

It is not healthy or productive to allow yourself to be falsely perceived as a hero, or to perceive yourself as such. You can actually disempower the members of the community by cultivating an image of having it all together and having all the answers. It is actually easy and tempting to abuse the power differential with which you may have come into the community. People with false expectation of who you are will submit their own good ideas to your bad ones and rely on your weakness rather than their own strength. They may even count your failures as their own.



PHOTO: Aaron Ausland, San Julian, Bolivia

So it is critical to be honest about your own needs and vulnerabilities, to generate opportunities to receive in the places where you serve, to become mutually indebted and to develop real relationships that help you operate at eye-level with the community.

## 2. Process Matters

The world is littered with community development projects gone wrong. More often than not the source of failure was an overemphasis on output and underemphasize on process. Take, for example, the ubiquitous latrine project. When project success is measured by output, most latrine projects are successful. After all, most such projects do, indeed, get latrines built. But if you go back in a few years and look for the outcomes that these latrines were supposed to generate – fewer diseases, cleaner water, etc. – there seem to be far more failures. In fact, most latrines that I've seen in the developing world aren't even used, at least not as latrines!

Part of the problem is that planners don't map out logic models that take people and their incentives into account. Logic models are maps of interventions. They are intended to show a complete, coherent causal chain from inputs through activities to outputs, and then to short-, medium- and long-term outcomes. But often there are unexamined, yet critical, assumptions made about how people are going to behave – assumptions that create weak or broken links in the chain. For example, just because you estimate that 300 families need latrines doesn't mean that 300 families will use them in the ways you intend them to if you build them. You have to ask, "What would motivate this behavior?"

It's important to understand that simply getting buy-in for the project often isn't enough. There are many reasons other than your outcome intentions that could result in superficial buy-in leading to successful outputs with failed outcomes. The community may have supported the project because having you operate one in their community brings it

or its leaders status, perhaps they liked the social component of working together on something – on anything, perhaps they really wanted a place to store potato seeds, but you weren't offering to build silos, and as soon as you blow out of town they'll convert the latrine into a storage shed. When logic models forget to examine the behavioral assumptions in the links between intervention and outcome, it amounts to forgetting that people are at the center of the development process.

But how can we as outsiders know what a community is thinking? Well, we can't, which is why many people have begun to rethink the whole process of planning and implementing projects. Increasingly, practitioners are focusing on empowering communities to manage their own development processes, from identifying their own objectives to creating their own plan to managing the activities that realize the plan. The community, after all, is far better positioned to assess its own needs, strengths, resources, intentions, and incentives than any outsider. Too often, projects have been an outsider's solution to problems only the outsider can see. A problem may be real, but unless the community both prioritizes the problem and has ownership and a stake in its solution, the members' incentives will not be aligned with your logic model. Latrines are a classic example. An outsider can come into a community, test the water, assess the need, build the solution, and move on without ever acknowledging the community of people living there. An outsider can totally miss the fact that the community has a unique set of cultural lenses, economic incentives, and social structures that may run orthogonal to one's neat logic model.

There are also other benefits to community members having a stake in naming and solving their problems. When a community walks through this

process of identifying objectives, creating a plan and managing the activities, its members are building capacity that can be applied to other development issues as well. Communities face multiple

AN OUTSIDER CAN  
TOTALLY MISS THE FACT  
THAT THE COMMUNITY  
HAS A UNIQUE SET  
OF CULTURAL LENSES,  
ECONOMIC INCENTIVES,  
AND SOCIAL  
STRUCTURES THAT MAY  
RUN ORTHOGONAL  
TO ONE'S NEAT LOGIC  
MODEL.

development issues that no single project can address: But a community that knows how to self-organize, prioritize objectives, think critically, calculate costs, mobilize resources, leverage assets, manage conflict, and self-evaluate is going to be far better equipped for the development challenge than a community that simply agrees to allow outsiders to haphazardly bring projects to town.

As a volunteer, you will generally be bounded by the institutional culture and norms of the church or organization that sent you. Radically altering the way they work simply is not possible unless you are in a position of authority. Nevertheless, try where you can to move away from a project-centered approach to community development. Don't volunteer for work where you are set up to "educate" the community about its problems, work in which you generate plans and then get "buy-in" from the community, in which your performance is measured by deliverables and timetables,

in which the priority is the development product (latrines, health center, church building) rather than the people, in which you bring in the capacity rather than help build it. If you are already inside such an organization, do what you can to help colleagues realize that development is an ongoing, endogenous process. It doesn't simply lurch along dependent on outsiders arriving with solutions and resources. In fact, this kind of "help" is likely to stunt development because it tends to create dependency, conflict and feelings of helplessness.

### 3. Focus on Values

So now that you are helping build capacity in the community to manage its own development process, how do help community members define their situation and shape their plans? The standard formula tends to begin with a needs assessment. You might ask questions such as, "What are the problems facing your community?" in order to identify the most important needs. More sophisticated types might precede this with the development of a community vision. This has the added value that the community can compare the vision with the reality and see where it falls short (where the needs are). This is a logical approach, but there may be a drawback to defining the situation in terms of needs, because it automatically frames the whole development issue in terms of the community having something wrong with it that needs fixing. It lacks something, and therefore the solution is to get this needed thing; this can lead the community to seek an interventionist solution. Let me illustrate:

Q. What's the problem?

A. We have no school.

Q. What do you need?

A. We need a school.

Q. Shall I build you school?

A. Yes please.

As a side note, communities can be strategic about their answers. If a truck shows up in town with engineers from an NGO that does water projects, how do you suppose the people are going answer the needs assessment questions? Is it likely to be different if the NGO does microcredit or health education? You'd better believe it. It's not surprising that beginning your work in a new community with a needs-assessment tends to lead to the types of projects I talked about in the previous section. The poor community is seen both by itself and by you as incapable of supplying its needs, but you've got solutions and resources – cash, materials, technical solutions, a dozen volunteers with hammers, whatever – and you're going to save the day. Sometimes this stuff works, I admit, but I think as often as not it produces solutions that are not sustainable, not empowering, sometimes

values-based planning. In 1999, I attended the First International Conference on Values-Based Planning, in Bolivia, with Heifer Project International and World Concern. Values-based planning was a relatively new idea to almost everybody there, but it's actually been around for a while. The basic idea is to start with values instead of needs and to allow these to shape the dialogue on planning, monitoring, and evaluation. According to the World Bank website, "Empowering poor communities and groups, so that they exert agency over their own development, requires deference to their values and aspirations... [and] helping these groups to develop decision-making skills that lead to practical actions based on their values, that can evolve into methods of sustainable self-governance and strategies to influence others." It's been pointed out to me that volunteers working in urban community development here in the States use something similar; they call it "asset-based community development."

PHOTO: Aaron Avuland, El Chorro, Guatemala



not even realistic (We need a million dollars 'cause we're poor and helpless), and are often based on principles of redistribution rather than those of development.

So what's the alternative? One is

Instead of mapping problems through needs to external solutions, you help the community identify its values and then map these through local resources to develop a vision and action plan. Intervention may

still be called for and appropriate, but it will be of an entirely different flavor. It will be the kind of help that gets them over a bump in the road, or maybe builds a bridge along the way, not the kind that builds the road, provides the car, gas and driver, buckles the seatbelts and pays the tolls.

I applied this values-based model with the women's groups my microfinance program worked with. This led one group to realize that they had been formulating annual plans based on the services we could offer them, not on what their hearts desired for their community. They decided that, while working with us for microcredit and training was good, what they really wanted was to organize more activities for their children. Since then, they have organized events, including an annual Christmas celebration for nearly 1000 children from their own and surrounding villages.<sup>1</sup> My program's role in these is minimal. Had we started with a different set of questions, we would have never gotten further than "The problem is we have no access to capital; our need is microcredit; the solution is that you lend us money."

#### 4. Check your Filter

One of the things that can happen as you go into a community to serve is a subtle dehumanization of the people there. It's not intentional, but it happens sometimes, especially when you roll into town with projects already formulated. There is a difference between being invited into town to live and learn where you can help with the endogenous development process already underway and arriving in town with ready-made solutions to problems you haven't even encountered yet, but assume (or hope) exist. In that scenario, it's like you've got a hammer and are looking for nails. This

approach shifts the people in your new community from the subject to the object of development. If you haven't been given the trust of the people and shown the social topography of the community, the people may even seem like obstacles! "If it weren't for these darn people and their baffling behavior, I'd have had these women's health exams finished long ago!" Many community service volunteers have encountered this attitude creeping into their minds at one time or another. It happens when we lose sight of the second principle (Process Matters) and begin focusing again on our projects and not on the people. I developed a metaphorical framework to remind myself to check my thinking when I began to feel frustrated in Bañado about the pace or "success" of the different projects we worked on with the community. I call it "Checking my Filter".

The fact is that our perception of the world is altered by the conceptual filters through which we view it. Each of us makes ontological and epistemological assumptions about the world and how it works, and these ought to be made explicit. But what I want to get at here is a more specific model of conceptual filtering and it has to do with how we see people in relationship to us. Specifically, checking the filter is about how we, as community-service volunteers, conceptualize the people in our communities. It is possible that there are appropriate times for each of these filters, but my hope is that this simple mental model will help you to be more self-conscious about checking your filters as you live and work in a community

---

<sup>1</sup> There is reason to believe that celebrations, rather than being a waste of scarce resources, are actually part of the development process, cementing community bonds and building social capital. For an example of the literature on this, see Vijayendra Rao's "Celebrations as Social Investments" in the *Journal of Development Studies*, Vol. 38 (1).

of people.

• *First Filter: People As Function*

It is very common to treat people (unconsciously) as functions in the activities of our lives and not as our fellow kind. We fail to see people for who they are apart from us; we may see them only for the functions they perform in relation to us. This man-function is my waiter. This woman-function is my bank teller. And if the person malfunctions, we can hurl abuse because functions exist in an emotional and historical vacuum. If you've ever worked in the service industry here in the States, you will know how shockingly inhuman people can treat you when they filter out your humanity and see you as nothing more than a malfunction in their transaction rather than as a person with history, sensibilities, soul, and a piece of the Creator within. If we want to botch our time in a community, we can treat people as receptacles of our service; we can serve them because it's our job and they happen to be there in the necessary role of the poor and needy. To get it right, we must be willing to see Christ in all humanity, to see the spark of the divine in the creation that was made in God's image.

• *Second Filter: People as Backdrop*

It can be difficult to engage people at eye-level. It's easier to set our mind's eye on wide angle at 10,000 feet and just take it all in from a safe distance, treating people as the background scenery to our life. On life's stage we don't engage the shifting backdrops painted with the scenes of other people's lives. Miserable, idyllic or mundane, none of them directly involve or touch us; they merely frame the stage, which is populated by actors of our choosing. If we do pay attention to the

backdrop, it is to admire at arm's length. We can enjoy the world like a cultural zoo. We travel through it and take pictures of colorful, exotic and fascinating people, limiting our understanding of them to what we read in a Lonely Planet guide. This filter blurs individual people into a medley of abstract smudges. Taken to an extreme, it dehumanizes, stripping from view the essential elements of individuality and personal consciousness.

• *The Polarizing Lens*

Photographers use the polarizing lens to gain clarity. It filters out glare and penetrates water and sky. It orders light to reveal an object without obscuring or distorting. As a rule we should seek clarity to see people for who they are: unique expressions of God's creative proficiency, fellow human beings with a full range of emotive faculties and wholly enabled desires to belong, to have enough, to overcome, to create, to give, to enjoy life, to survive, and most of all, to have meaning.

The "Check your Filter" principle means to avoid dehumanizing those we serve. We dehumanize by showing up in their communities and telling them about their problems and the solutions we've brought for them. When we meet the poor, the oppressed or the abused with our giving agenda in hand, we relegate them to the role of either receptacle-function or silent backdrop of our good deeds. How do we check our filter? If we are the source of all the ideas and plans, if we fear that nothing will get done or improve without us, if we are the motor of initiative, if we are stressed-out that we might fail in our efforts, if we have trouble recognizing the names and faces and stories of those whom we serve, then it's likely our filter needs replacing.

## 5. Cultivate a Servant's Heart

Cultivating a servant's heart has three pieces. First, since you don't have the power to steer a community, don't pretend you're at the helm. Second, since people with self-respect resist arrogant generosity, make sure to operate at eye-level. Third, since, unlike us, God does have the power to transform a community, we should be interceding passionately on its behalf.

### • *It Doesn't Depend on You*

It's easy to take ourselves more seriously than we should. We like to think that a whole lot depends on us when it doesn't. It is healthy to remember that we are not the parent, savior or master of the people we serve. Rarely are we their last hope. They got along without us before; they will continue to after we've gone. We may play a critical role in the positive transformation of a few, but on the whole, the trajectory of the community we serve depends little on us. In fact, it is more likely that they will have a greater impact on the course of our lives than we on theirs.

Since the welfare of the community doesn't depend solely on you, it's okay to watch some of your efforts fail. By all means do your best work, serve generously and wisely, employ the best theory and techniques, invest your emotions, time and money, plan carefully and attend to details, but after all this, don't be broken when the results you sought elude you. Let it go and try again, taking consolation that it didn't entirely depend on you to begin with.

### • *Operate at Eye-Level*

Consider how easy it is to pick up on a person's humility when you interact

with him or her. I know that I personally resist the humiliation of receiving from someone who refuses to be at eye-level with me, who lords my need over me and self-righteously pats himself on his own arrogant back, wearing his charity like a merit badge. So, as a principle we should be careful to "keep it real" and hold our pride in check. Remember that people are people; some are more resource poor than you, but take care not to diminish the person for this. Don't ever look down on the people you serve.

WHEN WE MEET THE  
POOR, THE OPPRESSED  
OR THE ABUSED WITH  
OUR GIVING AGENDA  
IN HAND, WE RELEGATE  
THEM TO THE ROLE OF  
EITHER RECEPTACLE-  
FUNCTION OR SILENT  
BACKDROP OF OUR  
GOOD DEEDS.

### • *Be an Intercessor*

It may be that our best service is done with folded hands and doubled knees. Many of us serve out of a conviction that God has called us to it, that service is a Kingdom value. If you are a person of faith, then prayer should be part of your service. Prayer recognizes our limitations and asks for help beyond what we can provide, which is to say a lot. In addition to giving a poor woman a microloan, plead before God for economic justice and prosperity on her behalf. I have put so much effort into designing projects and interventions, into writing grants and writing checks, into sharing time and love and money, but I am dismayed to



PHOTO: James Hamt, *Boticado de la Cruz*



reflect on how little I have asked of God. Perhaps I have been too arrogant or had too little faith. Or perhaps I have just not been mindful that I can ask a stronger, higher power for help.

Before we begin to do anything in a community, we should have already begun to intercede in prayer, asking God to act on behalf of those we serve. We should pray for ourselves as well, for purification of motives, for the cleaning up and shipping out of pride, for the strength, wisdom and humility required in service. We should thank God that we have a wealth of resources to give and share, and we should thank God that that we also have needs, that others may serve us. If we serve with faith, we must serve with prayer.

### 6. Conclusion

Although these principles may seem somewhat obvious, I'd like to demonstrate with a real example how easy it is to forget the principles and serve poorly. There are so many opportunities to serve that we

often get over-anxious to say yes. It's easy to get excited and forget to ask some critical questions about what we're doing. This is especially true when the service is connected with a church activity or Christian organization. We seem to forget that Christians have a history of making terrible mistakes just like everyone else. Good intentions do not guarantee good outcomes and joy in service cannot replace the thoughtful application of principles to our service.

I have a friend who worked in Central America helping to organize visits from church youth groups. She had one that took to throwing American footballs and coins out the windows of their van while driving through small communities. They took joy in watching the flocks of children clamoring after the van and crying out with delight at the money and strange misshapen balls. My friend, who had quite a bit of experience serving these communities, first asked, then pleaded, then admonished them to stop. The accompanying pastor reproached her for attempting to limit the youths' expression of love. He chastised her for stifling their

well-intentioned generosity and curbing their fun. As far as he was concerned, it was a beautiful thing to see young Americans eager to share their blessings with the poor children of Guatemala and having a good time doing it together. It should be reinforced and encouraged, he said, not tempered.

If you're not sure whether to

THERE ARE SO MANY  
OPPORTUNITIES TO  
SERVE THAT WE OFTEN  
GET OVER-ANXIOUS  
TO SAY YES. IT'S EASY  
TO GET EXCITED AND  
FORGET TO ASK SOME  
CRITICAL QUESTIONS  
ABOUT WHAT WE'RE  
DOING.

cringe or side with the pastor, that's okay; that's why I chose this example. It is neither extreme nor rhetorical. It wasn't a disaster, and the pastor had a point – it is beautiful to see young Americans eager to share – but it demonstrates the dangers of not bounding our service by a few principles.

This is why I think this is a bad example of service. Its not that footballs and money are bad or unnecessary, but the way they were given was a dehumanizing treatment of the children. Rather than bridging the power differential between the wealthy and poor youth, the passing interaction only reinforced it. The need to have fun, take pictures and bring home amazing stories from an exotic place defined the agenda more than the values, resources and contextual reality of those being served, to which little interest was shown. Rather than stopping and

taking an interest in these communities, the speeding vanload reinforced their isolation and unimportance. They didn't even warrant a real visit; instead, they had stuff tossed at them in passing. The youth group didn't see the division, jealousy and strife among the children left in their wake, some of whom were lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time, some who weren't. They didn't reflect on the possibility that the attitude conveyed in their actions might have debilitating effects on the children's views of themselves and of North Americans.

We should not be paralyzed by the fear of committing errors, but we should be self-conscious and think critically about how we go about serving others. Taking the time to submit our community service to a few principles should help us to avoid doing harm and, with God's good grace, may help us be part of a positive process of transformation.

---

*Aaron Ausland* is a member of the 1999 Charter Class of Krista Colleagues and founding editor of this journal. He has worked for a number of development organizations in Latin America, including MCC, World Concern, Agros International, and Trickle Up. He spent five years in Bolivia, where he met his wife, Gabriela. He recently co-authored a paper on decentralization, corruption, and good governance in Peru. In June, 2005, he received his master's degree in public administration in international development from Harvard's Kennedy School of Government.