



Expanding Your Impact

Building Bridges Across Differences

The idea: People naturally cluster with others like themselves, and end up not really knowing anyone different. Service is one of the few things that puts very different people shoulder to shoulder, working toward the same good goal, and that's where walls quietly come down.

"Coming together is a beginning, keeping together is progress, working together is success." — Henry Ford

"I do not like that man. I must get to know him better." — Abraham Lincoln

"If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other." — Mother Teresa

FACILITATOR NOTES

Time. about 60–90 minutes total. Works in a classroom, youth group, or club. No materials or cost required.

Service today. Pick one option in Serve below and set it up before you begin.

Warm-up (10 minutes)

FACILITATOR NOTES

Keep this quick, short answers are great. Read the questions together.

- Think of a group of people you don't know much about. Where did your impressions of them come from?
- Have you ever changed your mind about someone after actually working with them? What happened?
- Why is it easier to misjudge people you've never spent real time with?
- What's something everyone wants, no matter how different they are?

Learn (10–20 minutes)

We're wired to stick with the familiar, people our age, our background, our crowd. It's comfortable, but it means we rarely get to know anyone really different from us, and it's easy to misjudge people you've never spent time with. Here's where service comes in. When people work side by side toward the same goal, building, cleaning, cooking, serving, the usual labels start to matter less. You stop seeing "one of them" and start seeing the person next to you who's good with a hammer, or funny, or kind. You don't have to agree on everything, or even have anything obvious in common. You just have to share the work. Doing good together is one of the most reliable ways people discover how much they actually share.

Service builds bridges because it:

- Puts different people on the same team, working toward one goal.
- Focuses on what people do together, not on how they differ.

- Lets people get to know each other as individuals, not as labels.

A closer look. At a Saturday build for a family that needed home repairs, a mix of people showed up who'd never normally cross paths. Retirees, high schoolers, folks from different parts of town. On paper, they didn't have much in common. For the first hour, everyone stuck with the people they came with. Then someone needed help carrying lumber, someone else knew how to fix the thing that had everyone stumped, and by lunch the little groups had dissolved into one crew swapping stories over sandwiches. Nobody set out to bridge anything. The work did it for them.

Why this matters. Communities get weaker when people split into groups that don't know or trust each other, and stronger when they don't. The trouble is that you can't talk someone out of a misjudgment; people usually have to experience each other to get past it. Service creates exactly that experience. It gives people a reason to be in the same place, a shared goal to focus on, and something to do with their hands while the awkwardness wears off. You don't have to erase differences or pretend to agree about everything, that's not the point. The point is discovering that someone you assumed you had nothing in common with is, up close, just a person, often a pretty good one. That discovery is how division loses its grip.

How to build bridges. You build bridges mostly by showing up and working alongside people unlike you. You can:

- Serve with people outside your usual circle: different ages, backgrounds, or groups.
- Focus on the shared goal: the work gives everyone something in common right away.
- Get curious about people: ask about their lives and really listen, instead of assuming.
- Look for what you share: common ground is almost always bigger than it first appears.

Keep these in mind.

- **The work comes first.** A shared task breaks the ice faster than any conversation about differences could.
- **Curiosity over assumptions.** Ask and listen. Most of what divides people is simply not knowing each other.
- **You don't have to agree.** Bridging isn't about agreeing on everything; it's about respecting and working with people anyway.
- **Common ground is bigger than it looks.** Almost everyone wants to be useful, respected, and part of something good.

Serve (30–60 minutes)

Today you'll put this into practice in a real service activity. Here are ways to do it:

Option A — Work beside someone new *(no cost, works in any setting)*

At your next service activity of any kind, deliberately team up with someone outside your usual circle: a different age, a different background, someone you don't know. Share the task, ask about their life, and actually listen. You don't need a special project; you just need to cross the room and work alongside

someone you normally wouldn't. No project and no cost, just a choice to sit somewhere new, and it's how bridges start.

Option B — Bring two groups together *(low cost, a bit more effort)*

Plan a service project that pairs your group with a different one, another club, a different school, an older or younger group, a different part of the community, and do the work together. Mix the teams so people aren't just with their own crowd. One shared project does more to connect two groups than any number of speeches about getting along.

Option C — Build a lasting partnership *(more effort; ongoing service)*

Team up with a group quite different from yours, an intergenerational pairing, a different community or cultural group, a club unlike your own, for ongoing service you do together over time. Serve side by side again and again, and let real friendships form. A standing partnership across a difference is rare, and it does more to knit a community together than almost anything else.

Before you go (all options): Serve in public, supervised settings with your group and your mentor, and treat everyone with respect, no comments about people's background, beliefs, or differences. If a conversation turns tense or personal, steer back to the work, and let your mentor handle anything uncomfortable.

Reflect (10 minutes)

FACILITATOR NOTES

After serving, talk through a few of these together, then give everyone quiet time to write.

Who did you work with that you wouldn't normally have? What did you learn about them?

Did the work change how you saw anyone, or how they saw you?

Why do you think doing something together breaks down walls faster than just talking?

What did you turn out to have in common that you didn't expect?

Then finish one or both sentences:

A person or group I'd like to get to know through serving together is...

One assumption I want to test by actually working with people different from me is...
