**Reading**

Samuel Wells, “Rethinking Service,” from *Cresset* 76, no.4 (Easter 2013): 6-14. Included, with permission, in Mark R. Schwehn and Dorothy C. Bass (eds.), *Leading Lives That Matter: What We Should Do and Who We Should Be,* second edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 374-87.

**About the author**

Samuel Wells(1965–), a priest in the Church of England and an influential ethicist and theologian, is currently vicar of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, a parish in central London.

After attending Oxford University and the University of Edinburgh, Wells was ordained in 1991. For fourteen years he worked in parish ministry, where he wrestled in a practical way with questions much like those he addresses in this essay. He also acquired a doctorate in theology and ethics from the University of Durham. In 2005 he became dean of Duke University Chapel, as well as a Research Professor in the Duke Divinity School, becoming well known as a thinker in Christian ethics on both sides of the Atlantic. Wells is the author of many books, including works on Christian ethics, mission, ministry, scripture, liturgy, and preaching.

**Commentary**

Wells wrote this essay on service during his term as dean of the chapel at Duke University and first delivered it as a lecture at a conference for college teachers. Many students are highly aware of the needs of others and quite eager to serve, Wells observed, and colleges and universities strive to provide opportunities for them to do so. And eagerness to serve is also widespread in the larger society, where volunteers welcome the homeless, deliver meals to those who are housebound, and more, and where some professions are understood as forms of service to others. Many congregations also place high value on the service members perform for those in need.

Many of us desire to serve others, and we spend many hours doing so. Wells suggests, however that those who go out to serve are often asking the wrong question. We tend to ask: “What can I do for those in need?” By contrast, Wells argues, the most important word we can use as we think about service is “with.”

“With” and “for.” In this essay, Wells invites us to think deeply about the assumptions that are embedded in those two short words—assumptions about who people are and what people most need. To be *with* someone carries a sense of communion and solidarity between persons, while to be *for* someone imagines one person as an agent who provides help to less fortunate others.

**Discussion questions**

Think of something that members of your congregation do together that they define as “service.” Working with Wells’s notions of “with” and “for,” explore how you have thought about the purpose of service as you engaged in this activity. Then ask, does Well’s argument challenge your way of thinking? What changes might it encourage in the service you do?

Wells grounds his critique of dominant notions of service in big theological and philosophical questions. How we think about service, he argues, is deeply related to underlying assumptions about who human beings are and what they most strongly need. He lays out two major positions on this matter.

(1) Modern culture claims that humankind’s essential problem is mortality; our need, then, is to overcome limitations, to fix things.

(2) The Christian alternative claims that isolation is our essential problem; our need, then, is to be in communion with others.

Where do you see examples of each of these approaches to others and their needs in the life of your family, community, and society? Is it more life-giving and true to human capacities and needs to think of our service to others as something we do *for* them or as something defined by our willingness to be *with* them?

Ponder together which problem—mortality or isolation—seems to you closest to the heart of human existence. Do you agree that each understanding of what the basic human need is suggests a distinct approach to service? Do you appreciate his effort to nudge you toward “with,” or do you see greater value in “for” than he does? What would be lost if “for” got less emphasis?

Wells offers three examples from everyday life about the difference between “with” and “for” (pp. 378-79). Choose one of these to read aloud in the group, and ask whether you have encountered similar tensions in your effort to do things “for” others. How would Wells advise us to rethink these scenes? As he notes (p. 381), “with” is often more difficult than “for.” Have you found this to be so?

Near the end of the piece, Wells cites the Apostle Paul and advocates the following definition of mission and service: *“recognizing those from whom one is alienated and antagonized and seeking and finding ways to be present to them.”* What would change if your congregation tried to live out this understanding of mission and service?