

Serving in our communities

When Dr Besant formed the TOS, her intention was that it would provide an avenue through which TS members could apply their theosophical principles within their own communities. She wrote in the March 1908 edition of *The Theosophist*:

The T.S. Order of Service aims at making Theosophy practical in order that the sum of human misery within and around the areas of every branch of our Society may be visibly diminished. It will seek to model the conceptions arrived at by theosophical study, for their adaptation into useful forms of daily life ... and it offers a common work to all who are willing to act on these principles.

Many of us in western countries put considerable effort into raising funds for educational and social welfare projects run by TOS groups in Asia and Africa. We do this because we see the vast needs in these countries and want to help alleviate suffering. Our donations definitely help these TOS groups extend the services they provide in their countries, so this is service work that we need to continue. At the same time, Annie Besant's words challenge us to look more closely at our own communities and to identify opportunities on our own doorsteps for putting Theosophy into action.

So how might we go about doing this?

- One possible starting point is for your TOS group to talk about the various areas in which theosophical principles can be readily applied – education, social welfare and justice, healing, peace, animal concerns and the environment. Choose an area about which you are collectively interested. Feeling that you really want to make a difference in an area is vital to gaining commitment and to people's willingness to set aside time for action.
If you have two areas in which different people want to work, then form two action groups. They are not competing with each other so it will often work well to discuss plans for the two areas as an entire group, since this expands the range of ideas generated.
- When you have decided on a focus area, brainstorm issues in your community that are related to that area.
- Identify one or two of these issues about which your group could do something to help. List all your ideas about ways of helping. Now look at your list and underline the ideas that you could realistically put into action given the number of people available and willing to work on this project, the time members can reasonably give to the project, and the amount of funding that you would need to raise. Don't delete ideas from your list, because over time you may find that ideas that were not practicable in the beginning can become achievable.
- Identify potential partnerships with other organisations working on similar focus areas.
- Now comes the exciting part of your planning. Decide which idea/s you are going to begin with. Talk about the things you need to do to put that idea into action. Write down these smaller activities, preferably in the order in which they will need to be done. Ask for volunteers to do each smaller activity and write their names beside it.
- It is a good idea to ask for a volunteer to coordinate the project. Provide members with a record of what is being done and who is responsible.
- Include your community project on the agenda of each meeting, review progress, discuss ideas to get around problems, promote your project amongst other TS members and plan further developments. Remember to celebrate your achievements!

Serving in our communities by partnering with other groups

Partnering with established community organisations makes good sense for small groups like ours, provided that their aims and ways of working are consistent with the values that underpin the TOS. We need to be confident that their funding comes from ethical sources, that they act in ways that are respectful of other people's rights and that the services they offer are not conditional upon taking up a particular set of beliefs.

Frequently, established groups have already created networks to identify current areas of need and sources of funding and to coordinate action. They have developed communication

strategies at a political level and they have often formed coalitions with other groups with similar aims and are open to further partnerships. At the local level of social welfare, their size has usually enabled them to set up refuges, kitchens, etc.

When you partner with other organisations make sure to let them know that you are working with them as a group of TOS volunteers.

So let's look at some possible partnerships related to areas of service that resonate with the aims of the TOS.



United Nations related activities

The United Nations was built on spiritual principles and universal values such as peace, human rights, human dignity and worth, justice, respect, good neighbourliness, freedom, respect for nature and shared responsibility. TOS groups will therefore find that many UN designated International Days provide opportunities for promoting the theosophical principles underpinning TOS work as well as networking with similar community groups in supporting relevant UN activities.

The following are a few of the UN designated days that might be relevant to your group.

January 2: World March for Peace and Non-violence

February 20: World Day of Social Justice

March 8: International Women's Day

March 21: International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination

June 5: World Environment Day

June 12: World Day against Child Labour

June 20: World Refugee Day

June 26: International Day Against Drug Abuse

August 9: International Day of the World's Indigenous People

August 17-23: World Water Week

September 8: International Literacy Day

September 10: World Suicide Prevention Day

September 21: International Day of Peace

September 28: World Heart Day

October 1: International Day of Older Persons

October 2: International Day of Non-Violence (Gandhi's birthday)

October 9: World Sight Day

October 10: World Mental Health Day

October 17: International Day for the Eradication of Poverty

October 24: United Nations Day

November 20: Universal Children's Day

November 25: International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women

December 1: World AIDS Day

December 3: International Day of Disabled Persons

December 10: Human Rights Day



Animal welfare

Many organisations work in this area at national or international level and are an excellent source of information on current campaigns and projects to educate the community. Sadly, there are many issues that require attention such as factory farming, animal testing, live animal export, the fur trade, slaughtering practices, poaching and the use of animal parts in traditional medicines.

Some organisations such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (www.peta.org) and Animals Australia (www.animalsaustralia.org), not only have campaign information on their websites but also offer information on vegetarianism and living a cruelty free lifestyle.

We also, of course, have our local animal refuges that are always looking for supporters and hands-on volunteers.



Environment

Major environmental organisations like World Wildlife Fund (www.wwf.org) have news, scientific information, updates on government policies and information about campaigns and email petitions. They also have interactive tools that enable you, for instance, to calculate your environmental footprint.

Each year, hundreds of millions of people, businesses and governments around the world unite to support the largest environmental event in history – **Earth Hour**. Encourage your friends to join you in switching off the lights at 8:30 p.m. on the last Saturday of March each year and show your support for a more sustainable planet.

Don't forget partnership possibilities with your local Council and community environmental groups with an interest in such things as tree-planting and caring for waterway and coastal areas.



Healing and well-being

In this handbook you'll find a healing meditation designed to restore the harmonious flow of Divine Life through one's whole nature. It was designed by Geoffrey Hodson and can be used by groups or individuals.

Have you ever considered promoting the benefits for children of relaxed mindfulness or offering workshops for members' families on this topic?

Experts at Duke University, in Durham, NC, USA, recommend mindfulness, which is a technique borrowed from meditation, to help children deal with the many academic and social pressures in their lives. You'll find some of their suggestions in the *For Members* section of our website.



Peace ideas

You'll find a range of ideas for promoting peace or celebrating the International Day of Peace on our website in the *For Members* section. These include beautiful peace prayers for the world, suggestions about personal action to promote peace, a guide to starting a Peace Club, information about participating in the Pinwheels for Peace Project and ideas for planning your own Peace Day event.

For ideas on activities that you could organise, check out associated websites such as:

- *Pinwheels for Peace* at <http://www.pinwheelsforpeace.com>
- *UN Peace Day* at <http://peaceoneday.org/> and <http://www.internationaldayofpeace.org/>



Peace Day, on 21 September each year, is not just about stopping wars. It is also an opportunity to promote harmony and peace within our families and communities. Look out for peace events that you and your TOS group can support within your community.



Social welfare and justice

Many partnership possibilities connected with social welfare and justice will involve us in volunteer activities. Volunteers are regarded as playing a crucial role in the well-being of most communities. Indeed, in some countries, statistics show that volunteers contribute over 800 million hours annually. But it's not just

the time we contribute that is valuable. Frequently, the human contact, our interest and friendship are even more important.

Many organisations working in the community and social services sector have websites that provide information about volunteer opportunities. You may also know of local groups that provide support to people with disabilities or health issues, run soup kitchens and shelters for the homeless and victims of domestic violence, mentor students from disadvantaged backgrounds, conduct parenting programs or provide support to refugees, etc. Groups like these welcome volunteers and often provide training.

If you are interested in joining campaigns about social welfare and justice issues, websites such as Avaaz (www.avaaz.org) and Amnesty International (www.amnesty.org) will enable you to keep in touch with current issues.

When you volunteer to clean the kitchen or scrub the pots, if you practise as a bodhisattva, you will have great joy and happiness while doing so. But if you have the feeling, "I am doing a lot, and others are not contributing their fair share," you will suffer, because your practice is based on form.

Thich Nhat Hanh, *Cultivating the Mind of Love*

The photographs below are of related TOS activities: a healing circle in the USA, tree planting in Kenya, educating needy children in Pakistan and providing veterinary care in India.

