

Preparing Adults for Mission Trip Leadership

Every church has a different structure for youth ministry processes and procedures, and therefore how they prepare for and engage in youth missions will vary. Some of these thoughts may not resonate with all church groups, but it is our hope that there will be some helpful nuggets for everyone. To start with, notice that we used the words “missions”. This is highly intentional, as we believe every trip a church group takes ought to be bathed in prayer, and come out of our lifestyle as followers of Jesus. These trips are not vacations, although many of you will take vacation time from your work to be involved. Good for you and please know that God will bless you for doing so.

A youth mission trip is a journey. It is a *geographical* journey as you most often leave home and go to some other place, whether across town or across the world. It is also a *cultural* journey exposing team members to a culture different than their own. Additionally, a youth mission trip is a *relational* journey, since traveling, working, eating and serving together builds bonds in special ways among team members as well as those we serve. Most of all, it is a *spiritual* journey when you will be stretched, challenged, impacted, thrilled, chilled and awed as you watch and experience God at work in you and the students you serve with.

A journey can imply that not everything is known until you get there, and that is certainly true with youth mission trips. However, there are several things that can be done to plan and prepare to have the best journey possible for all involved.

Some of the outcomes of planning and executing short-term mission trips are:

- Building meaningful relationships among students and sponsors as well as with Mission Indy staff and interns you serve with.
- Exposure to people of different cultural and/or socio-economic backgrounds.
- Developing attitudes and skills for service to others.
- Depending upon God for strength and wisdom, as we move out of our comfort zones and allow the Spirit to give us life-changing experiences.

Basics of a Youth Mission Team

- Trip Leaders (whether one person or a married couple) tend to execute the following responsibilities:
 - Prayerfully select adult sponsors and college-age sponsors.
 - Coordinate with Mission Indy staff to set up trip requirements, dates, living arrangements, food, supplies, etc.
 - Communicate with the parents of youth to ensure they are well-informed of the details, the purpose of the trip, how they can encourage and assist their youth, and what they might be able to do to assist the trip leaders and sponsors.
 - Guide the team preparation and execution of the mission trip.
 - Be a mature Christian example for the youth.
 - Help disciple the youth in their spiritual growth.

Spiritual Preparation

- Prayer is one of the most important ways you can personally prepare and help your team prepare for your “journey” ahead. Here are some of the things you can pray about:
 - Pray that you will be teachable – first by God and then by His chosen instruments – the Mission Indy staff, other team leaders, etc.
 - Pray that you will model a servant’s heart and be eager to put the needs of others ahead of your own.
 - Pray that you will demonstrate the love of Christ to everyone you meet and interact with.
 - Pray for the people in the city / country where you will be serving.
Pray for the host missionary or host mission group.
 - Pray for wisdom and guidance for all the decisions that will have to be made.
- Memorizing Scripture. If the Word of God is our “sword” and if we believe that the enemy does not want us to serve others with the love of Jesus, then we need to be prepared with regular and specific reading of the Scriptures – even to the point of memorizing some that are particularly meaningful.
- Have the church “Commission” or “Send Off” the team during a Sunday service near the departure date.

Regional Domestic Service-Oriented Trips

- If your church is planning one or more mission trips for the next summer, consider holding a weekend Mission Retreat in late winter or very early spring. The retreat can be used to create interest in the trip(s) as well as to start the planning process. Mostly this is a time for intense spiritual preparation for students and adults alike. Plan multiple worship and prayer experiences for the weekend, as well as possibly some team building activities. The retreat can vary from one day to a weekend. The best experiences in the field happen when the team can emulate the body of Christ as they serve and with each other.
- You may want to consider a few Team Meetings to help facilitate relationships and to share information. Things like travel plans, activities on the mission site, food considerations and packing lists are examples of the kind of information that is good to share with the whole team in the months leading up to the trip.
- The financial process starts with the basic trip cost, but also may include adding on the transportation costs, and food costs for the trip going and coming. Depending on how your church wants to do things, you may need to be involved in planning and implementing some fund-raising activities for the trip. Sometimes letters to friends and family are used as part or all of the fundraising. Sometimes, groups will offer service to members of the church in exchange for a donation to the trip(s). Some churches may also plan a church-wide fund raiser that includes food and fun for the whole family. At times individual participants are asked to contribute some of their own money towards the cost of their trip.
- There are likely some food allergies or medical situations that you need to be aware of well before the trip begins. These things need to be shared with the missions group you are going to serve with so that they can be prepared.
- Adult sponsors are a key help to the Youth Pastor and sometimes are even asked to lead all the things related to planning and scheduling the trip.

On the Field Tips:

- Flexibility and adaptability are key in maintaining the right attitude. Mission work is filled with frustrations to one degree or another. Notice that we did not say “can be” but that it is. Remember that our enemy is the Lord’s enemy and he does not want our trip to be successful in helping the team serve and love well. Of course, things like weather and other groups who may be present or HVAC systems that decide to fail right in the middle of a hot week, are out of our control, so determining to be flexible and adaptable goes a long way towards good relationships and peace.

- Those of us unwilling to “go with the flow” are more likely to be broken than bent. You must expect the unexpected. Plan for it! Your blood pressure will stay lower, and your joy factor will be higher when you remain flexible.
- Staying flexible and adaptable comes from a desire to learn and understand. Be willing to watch and listen.
- We need to accept people and cultures for who and what they are. Remember 1 Corinthians 9:22 where Paul said “I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.”
- A sense of humor can be essential in remaining flexible. Can we laugh at ourselves? Can we let things roll off our backs without getting worked up?

- **Listening Skills** are some of the most important skills you can bring to your trip. Missions, by nature, are an intensely personal undertaking. Relationships are with people, and so we have to work at getting to know one another by listening well to what the other person is saying. Questions we might ask ourselves include:
 - How can I show interest in and respect for _____?
 - How can I learn what another person is thinking or feeling?
- **Teamwork Skills**
 - There are many basic truths about humans. But one is that **people will not blend together as a team unless we plan for it and build towards it**. We are by nature, selfish, cliquish and isolationists because of our brokenness caused by sin. Some experts assert that the greatest problems for missionaries on the field stem from relational breakdown. That ought to tell us that teamwork does not come easy or naturally. Trying to put a group of very different people together for a week or more, and pulling together as one, does not come without conflict. And yet, teamwork decreases conflict.
 - Since there are likely more than one adult leader or sponsor on the trip, the team needs to consider gathering those adults together to build teamwork among themselves before the rest of the team starts to be involved. Help them understand their interdependence and how much unity is needed for the rest of the team.
 - This is a good foundation but will not guarantee teamwork. One thing that is essential (beyond prayer of course) is for leaders to lead. Leaders or sponsors need to understand that it is far more important to lead than to be liked. Leadership requires determination to act out of love, even if it means an uncomfortable confrontation or an unpopular decision.

- **After You Return Home**

Learning from and growing from your experiences on the field is a huge part of the success of your trip.

- Consider using a journal on the trip, that you can refer to when returning home.
- You may also want to consider an evaluation form which asks for honest opinions about all the pieces of the trip.
- Another thing that has proven very helpful is the trip **debrief**. A couple of weeks after the trip, an adult leader (who was not on your trip) can lead a discussion, trying to encourage each participant to express what learned about the Lord and about themselves.
- Consider a group presentation to the congregation, sharing slides and testimonies to thank them for their support.
- One of the best ways to continue growing from your experiences in the field is to pray and then engage in some local ways to express the love of Jesus to neighbors in your area. The connections could come from church leadership who often hear about people in need. Those you serve could be such people as single moms, or elderly folks. It doesn't have to be complicated or involve a lot of skill, tools or supplies. Often just showing up and doing things they cannot easily do for themselves is a great witness and service.