

State-Side Mission Trips: Keys for Maximum Impact

In the past few years, youth mission trips have become an important part of regular youth group programming, and rightly so. According to a survey done of 4,000 youth, summer mission trips were listed first among important events that helped them grow spiritually.¹ There are many long-term benefits to young people when a mission trip is properly led and executed. Benefits include personal responsibility, self-esteem, relationships with those of different cultures, and servitude. In a study of churchgoing 7th through 12th graders by Search Institute, involvement in service and outreach activities significantly impacted students' future involvement and attachment to the church.² In the study, young people indicated significant gains from their experiences: concern for fellow human beings, realistic attitudes toward other people, and a sense of usefulness in relation to the church and world.

In the Bible, teaching and carrying out of the Great Commission go hand-in-hand. Jesus gave the charge to all those who come after him to “go make disciples” (Matthew 28:19), and He modeled that charge throughout his life. Matthew writes concerning the ministry of Jesus: “Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness.” Jesus then gave this charge: “Ask the Lord of harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field” (Matt. 9:35,38). It is not enough merely to teach about mission work; young people must experience it first hand. Of all the benefits of youth missions, probably the most important one is the training of future missionaries. For the most part, today's young adults who are preparing to be missionaries have had some exposure to mission work as teenagers. Youth mission trips give teenagers an introduction to different cultures, help them see first hand the pressing needs of Christians in difficult places, and impress upon their hearts the world's need to know Jesus as Savior. If it is the goal of every Christian to “seek and save the lost,” then young people must be taught and trained to “take the light” in the formative stages of life.

Leading a mission trip is a noble calling, but it is not one for the unprepared. Taking a group of young people across state and country lines carries with it many responsibilities. There are travel arrangements, group training sessions, funds to be raised, and long distance relationships to cultivate. The better prepared the youth worker is to meet these demands, the greater the result will be for all people involved. Without proper training and preparation, good intentions can end with discouraging results. In fact, great damage can be done to a young person's vision for missions because of poor planning and lack of preparation. Furthermore, churches on mission fields have been known to get their fill of disorganized and ill-prepared groups of young people.

A trip rightly planned, however, can be a great blessing. The target congregation can experience many long-term benefits: involvement, enthusiasm, the establishment of ongoing programs and ministries, and the salvation of many souls. Often times children are brought to Vacation Bible School and evangelistic campaigns because of a group's commitment to travel away from home, teach classes and invite community members to visit.

What kind of trip will you take?

Youth leaders need to determine the most effective and reasonable trip for the group. Short-term mission trips may be all-day trips or last a weekend. Long-term mission experiences may last from one to two weeks, depending on the location. For trips overseas, it is generally best to connect with a missionary who can give direction in matters of travel and culture preparedness. It is wisest to visit a site where there is an established mission work.

This article will look primarily at the long-term state side mission trip. This is the type of trip most often taken by youth groups, although the principles of preparation and training can be used with overseas trips as well. Such trips usually have an evangelistic focus, primarily done through Vacation Bible School and door knocking. When preparing to do mission work with young people, remember that it is best to begin small, then work up over time to a trip of longer distance and great sacrifice of time and money. Trips rightly planned and executed must involve the following keys to victory.

KEY #1: Spiritual Preparation

It is best to begin the process of team selection by having interested students fill out an application. An application communicates to a young person the seriousness of the trip, as well as lets the leader know which young people are willing to make the proper sacrifice. A good rule of thumb is this: if a student is not willing to complete an application, he is most likely not ready for such a trip. An application will, right from the beginning, indicate who is ready for such a challenge. It is the first step in indicating who likely team members will be.

The application can include information such as mission trip date, location, schedule, requirements, and cost. Additional questions may also prove beneficial:

1. Describe your reasons for wanting to be a part of the mission team.
2. Describe your involvement in outreach and service activities over the last year.
3. In your own words, what do you think it means to be a Christian?
4. What qualities or abilities do you feel you have that will contribute to a successful mission campaign?
5. Describe your attitude and feelings about the following:
 - a. Teaching children
 - b. Staying a week in the home of someone you've never met
 - c. Church attendance
 - d. Hard work
 - e. Your contribution to unity and peace on the trip
6. If you have a summer job, have you checked to see if you will be able to participate?

Have the student's parents sign the form indicating their support.

It may also be helpful to have students turn in one or two references. This is one of the preliminary tasks that will help narrow down those who are ready for the challenge. An adult volunteer, church leader, or Bible class teacher can complete reference forms. A form may include the following questions:

1. What would you say are the person's strengths?

2. In what ways does the student need to grow?
3. On a scale of 1 to 5, with five being the highest, how would you rate the student in the following areas?
 - ability to get along with others
 - dependability
 - leadership ability
 - disposition
 - emotional stability
4. Do you recommend him or her
 - with enthusiasm
 - with few reservations
 - not sure if they are ready for this type of challenge

Have those filling out reference sheets put them in a sealed envelope and return to you, the youth leader.

Once the team is selected, you may want to meet with each student for a one-on-one interview. This is often helpful in communicating the goal of the trip, answering questions, and dealing with any specific problem you foresee with the young person. You may find that one young person needs a special challenge to work on discipline and behavior, while another may have fears related to the trip and needs special encouragement. The interview is a good time to get young people focused in the right direction where needs are present.

There are a number of training options that can be used to prepare young people for the task ahead.

Bible Study

Various methods of Bible study are helpful to students, especially if they conduct a Vacation Bible School or are involved in an evangelistic campaign and need to become more familiar with the plan of salvation.

1. Memorize passages of Scripture such as Romans 10:17, Hebrews 11:6, Romans 10:10 or Acts 2:38. Other passages may help young people focus on team essentials, such as 1 Corinthians 13:4-7.
2. Word studies can also be helpful. Have students write half a page on words such as unity, fellowship, friendship, teamwork, great commission, sacrifice, and encouragement. Ask that at least one passage of Scripture be quoted in association with each word study.
3. A Scripture Knowledge Test can be given to help young people better learn the specific passages of scripture they will teach. Hand out a study sheet at one of the first meetings; in a later meeting give a test over the facts which need to be known. This is especially helpful to students if they are doing a Vacation Bible School on a book of the Bible or teaching about particular Bible characters.

Other Training Options

1. It is often helpful to research the area that will be visited. This can be accomplished in a number of ways, such as having students write a short paper on the city/country they will visit, or do some research on the culture. Information can be gathered from encyclopedias or by giving students a list of websites to scan for information.
2. Role plays help the group as a whole focus on specific challenges and tasks of the mission trip. Young people can be divided into groups to role play the following kinds of situations:

- a. You have just met someone on the street on the Saturday morning we are handing out fliers to local residents. You want to tell the person about VBS, and so you begin talking about it. What will you say?
 - b. The host church members have prepared an evening meal. It appears to be some kind of soup, something you have never eaten before in your hometown. You're not sure about the taste — or the smell, but the server has just filled up a bowl and handed it to you. What will you do?
 - c. The 23rd door you have knocked today is opened by a father who appears to have been drinking; there are children crying in the background. How will you respond?
 - d. Role play the following situations:
 - How to act in someone's home
 - How not to act in someone's home
3. If you are doing a mission VBS, it is a good idea to have students work in your hometown VBS before going on the road. One suggestion is to have Vacation Bible School at your home congregation first, then scale it down and take it on the road. For training purposes, have young people work during Bible School and also the week before during set-up. Have time sheets initialed by adults signifying that each student has participated in the necessary amount of service. Five hours of work during set-up is an appropriate amount of work. If a student is employed during the day, have her put service hours in at night. Service work can involve tasks such as cutting out materials, helping build sets, and making bulletin boards.
 4. Prayer is a vital part of any mission trip. To focus on prayer, each student may be asked to enlist five primary prayer supporters. Young people should let supporters know where the team is going, the challenges they will face, and any personal prayer needs. It is a positive gesture for a student to send a postcard to his or her supporter while away expressing thanks, giving an update on the trip and notifying their supporter of special prayer needs.

How Much Work is Necessary?

While all of the above mentioned ideas are helpful, a trip leader will certainly not want to require all of them for one trip. It is best to choose three tasks for students complete. Attempts to require too much work can make participation impossible and promote discouragement rather than training. It is also best to have young people attend a percentage of meetings, since attending all meetings may prove impossible (for example, four out of six). The trip leader also needs to be aware of special situations which may arise in a young person's life (sickness, family problems and others) that may make the completion of some tasks difficult. Remember: the goal is not to discourage, but to encourage in mission work. The proper balance must be sought.

A typical training schedule is as follows:

- APPLICATIONS DUE (May 7)
- MEETING 1 - orientation, parents and youth (Sun., May 21)
- MEETING 2 - VBS work assignments, distribute notebooks that include Bible study sheets, scripture knowledge test, Scripture memorization and service work (Wed., May 31)
- VBS WORK WEEK - work in preparation for VBS, six hours required (May 30-June 3)
- VBS PARTICIPATION WEEK - work in VBS learning center (June 5-8)
- GROUP BUILDING RETREAT (June 23-24)
- MEETING 3 - Bible study sheets due, develop skits (Wed., June 21)

- MEETING 4 - deposit due, scripture memorization due, work on VBS skits (Wed., July 5)
- MEETING 5 - scripture knowledge test, work on team covenant (Wed., July 12)
- MEETING 6 – sign covenant, load vans after evening services (Wed., July 19)
- DEPART - 8:00 A.M. (Thur., July 20)

KEY #2: Group Unity

Taking a trip with a disconnected group of young people is a disaster waiting to happen. Many youth leaders with good intentions have set off to do mission work with a group of teens, only to have the group consumed with infighting and strife. Building a sense of unity and camaraderie is essential if the maximum results are to be achieved. This can be accomplished through a number of avenues.

1. Group building activities are a must in forming a unified team. These are activities designed to help young people get to know one another better, develop a team mentality, and learn problem-solving skills. It is a myth to believe that a group of teenagers will naturally come together in unified purpose just because they are around each other in meetings or at youth activities. Diligent care must be given to develop strong “give and take” relationships among team members if fusses are to be avoided during long and stressful days of van rides and hard work.
2. A team retreat is a good way to begin the development of the team. In fact, a team retreat should be a “must” in any mission training process. Early on young people need to begin learning to work together and focusing on their goal of seeking the lost. A retreat provides a get-away experience for students to learn more about each other through group building activities and personal evaluation of weakness and strengths.
3. Work and service are also important elements in building group unity. The writing of class material, developing learning centers for Vacation Bible School, or creating puppet skits can be an effective tool to help young people focus on their mission. When attitudes are present within the group that hinder your mission, you should put young people to work. One youth leader dispelled attitudes of self-centeredness within the group by making team members scrape up old floor tiles from an abandoned warehouse that was to be renovated into a new church building. Through a day of hard work and sweat, the group realized what team service was all about, and attitudes began to change. Another youth leader choose to take his group to a ropes course to help his teens see the importance of teamwork. Whatever path unity development takes, a leader cannot pass over this important element of preparation.
4. You will also find the creation of a Team Covenant an essential part of any mission trip. In creating a covenant, students brainstorm the goals and vision they have for their mission effort. These are recorded on a blackboard and then written down for later review. A covenant should include the answer to at least three questions:
 - a. What do we hope to accomplish?
 - b. What qualities and characteristics do we want to be evident in our mission team when others observe us in action?
 - c. How will we hold each other accountable to fulfill our goals? (a question focused on expected behavior).

In a previous trip covenant, our youth group listed the following as goals: to spread the Gospel, to stay and

talk after services to teens and adults at the host congregation, to set a good example and honor the Lord and His church by our actions, to have fun being together, to remember that we represent the name on the side of our bus, and to serve and not be served. Expected behaviors included: be respectful to one another, first come first serve on van seats, respect one another's "stuff," no one stops working until the entire VBS is set up, no quitters or whiners, remember who you are and why you are there, and respect quiet time on the bus.

Once the covenant is developed, it should be typed and given to each student and later reviewed by the team leader. Then, before leaving, all group members sign the covenant to demonstrate agreement with the team's vision and expectations. Since the covenant is team created and "owned" by the group, young people are more likely to honor it. In fact, you will often find that students will require more of themselves than the youth leader would had he created the team's vision and rules.

KEY #3: Fundraising

The key to mission trip fundraising is church involvement. Since it is impossible for every member to physically "go" to a mission site, there is a way that everyone can help "send the light." In fact, there is no greater way to generate church-wide enthusiasm for a youth mission trip than to specifically ask church members to be involved financially.

Probably the best way to involve the congregation is through sponsorship. By attaining sponsors, young people receive the necessary help they need to make their participation possible. To accomplish this, a mission team meeting is planned for young people to work through the church directory and select possible sponsors. Having students select specific individuals keeps the same people from being asked repeatedly.

Each team member should choose five to ten potential sponsors, depending on the size of the congregation and the amount of money needed. Then, through a hand-written letter, members are asked to give a set amount of money in support of the teenager. In the letter, each potential sponsor is invited to a banquet following the trip. The banquet is designed to say "thank you" to sponsors with a meal, a report on the trip, and a slide show or video presentation of the work done. A congregational report should also be considered for a Sunday evening in which young men conduct the services and speak about their experiences and how the trip shaped their lives. Young ladies may speak to ladies Bible classes about their experiences as well.

How much support should young people ask for?

Amounts will vary based on the nature of the trip, but a good rule of thumb is to have students personally pay 1/3 third of the expense from money earned and saved. The church can then contribute 1/3 of the money to the trip, along with sponsors who also contribute 1/3. This approach insures three things: 1) each young person has to make a personal sacrifice in order to participate, 2) the church will not have to assume the total cost, and 3) congregational involvement in the project will be assured.

KEY #4: Planning

Choosing the right location is a real key to mission trip effectiveness. Youth workers who have chosen their destinations hastily, at the last minute, or who have given the target site very little thought in the planning stage can tell of less-than-desirable experiences.

Good selection of a mission site should involve well-formed criteria, such as traveling to a destinations were:

- there is a definite need;
- there is enthusiasm for the group's coming;
- the congregation can adequately handle the size demands of the group.

Failing to give attention to these areas can be a recipe for disaster, especially if local members really do not want a campaign, or if there is inadequate housing to meet group needs. To avoid the destination trap, the youth worker should begin looking for a target site a year in advance; it is never too soon to begin searching. By talking to Christian friends, missionaries, family members, or Christian college teachers, destinations can surface which were previously unknown. Since many local congregations support stateside mission works, these may also be considered as potential targets. By choosing an existing church-supported site, the youth mission team can be naturally joined with the work their home congregation is supporting.

Once the right location is secured, the youth worker should take a survey trip to the target area. There are multiple benefits of surveying the destination city and surrounding area: 1) the youth worker will get a first-hand glimpse of area needs, 2) an evangelistic plan of action for the community can be developed for the team, and 3) other items such as group housing can be arranged, 4) if VBS is to be conducted, first-hand knowledge of the church building will be most helpful, and 5) face-to-face contact with church members and leaders will generate enthusiasm for the trip.

Upon returning home, a bulletin board can be established containing pictures of the church building and its members, and any interesting features from the area itself. Area maps and brochures are available through the Chamber of Commerce.

KEY #5: Secure Adult Volunteers

Adult volunteers are an essential part of any teen mission trip. Chosen wisely, they can add a great wealth of knowledge and support to the team. Chosen unwisely, they can disrupt your overall effort to train young people for service. How do you know who is right for the task? Some guidelines are:

1. Look for men and women who are flexible and optimistic. Adult team members should be encouragers, full of patience.
2. A volunteer should have a servant's heart. Look for adults who have been involved with young people throughout the year, who have already developed a positive relationship with group members before the trip actually begins.
3. A volunteer should be even-tempered and self-controlled. The ability to remain calm in all situations is a key, and should be emphasized to adults in training and personal discussions. One adult who displays anger, selfishness, sarcasm, or inflexibility can negatively impact the whole team.

Adult involvement in training sessions and group meetings is imperative. Attendance and completion of group projects should apply to everyone. And remember: the primary job of an adult is not to do all the work, but to guide young people to be greater servants.

KEY #6: Do the Work

There are a variety of evangelistic methods that prove helpful for church and community impact. Door knocking, singing at nursing homes, and conducting Vacation Bible School are all effective training methods. Sidewalk Sunday School has also grown in popularity among mission groups. Sidewalk Sunday School is literally taking the Gospel “to the streets” as the group goes to housing communities or city parks to conduct Bible School on site. Games, puppets, and Bible stories all make up a well-planned Sidewalk Sunday School. Through contacts made, church vans can return to target areas to pick children up for evening VBS at the local congregation. A portable puppet stage can be made out of an attractively painted refrigerator box. Popsicles are also a big hit after games and Bible lessons.

After a day’s work, each evening should include a time to debrief the day’s experiences. As students process each new day’s events, it is important to give them the opportunity to talk about feelings and lessons learned. An evening meeting also provides the opportunity to address problems or resolve any problem within the group. In dealing with conflict, remember to admonish and encourage, keeping your overall goals in mind. Don’t get sidetracked by negativity and minor issues that can sap the life out of a healthy team experience. Deal with problems in a positive tone, and move on to a new day. Do not let the sun go down on any issues that has the potential to destroy team unity.

High Commitment, High Reward

There is truly no greater experience for young people than to be involved in a mission trip that is well planned and prayerfully considered, and where harmony abounds. Participation in a mission trip carries with it great work and sacrifice--meetings, fundraising, and serious Bible study. But along with the hard work there should be a time for fun: a trip to the mountains, to an amusement park, or a Major League ballgame, to name a few. Such experiences cap off a hard-working week with joy!

With great service there is truly great reward, but none so great as the joy of serving with our brothers and sisters, and seeing those without Christ come to know Him more fully!

References

¹Lewis, David K., Carley H. Dodd and Darryl L. Tippens. *The Gospel According to Generation X* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 1995), 89.

²Benson, Peter and Eugene Roehlkepartain. *Beyond Leaf Raking: Learning to Serve, Serving to Learn* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 26-28.