

## Mission Trips How to Get Organized

A mission trip can be one of the most transformative experiences for a teenager's faith development. A mission trip can provide much-needed help to a family or community in need. In theological terms, a mission trip is meant to bring about the kingdom of God here on Earth. This is an awesome calling, but it also requires a lot of work and planning.

A poorly planned trip can be a disaster leading to frustration, stunted faith development, and even injury. Youth workers occasionally lose their job because something went wrong on a mission trip. On the other hand, a well-planned trip can become the foundation of your youth group and an experience people talk about decades later.

Often youth workers are great with the youth one-on-one but struggle with the administrative and organizational tasks. This Quicksheet is meant to help you plan and implement a successful trip. My advice is this: read through this document with a highlighter and red pen. Cross out items you know you will not have to worry about, and highlight anything you think you might forget. Use this document as a guide to assist as you make your own plans.

### **Time Management**

Managing how and when you get things done can be just as much work as actually doing all the tasks. Some things may only take ten minutes, but because you have to wait for parents, vendors, or coworkers to reply, a quick task will drag on for days. When part of the task requires others' input, give yourself plenty of extra time to complete it. Your procrastination should not become someone else's urgent matter.

Another tip is to spend thirty to sixty minutes each week, beginning eight months in advance, working and planning for the trip. Spreading out all the tasks will help it all feel more manageable and reduce the chance of something being forgotten. This will also prevent you from feeling stressed out and overworked the last few weeks before the trip.

Lastly, as a part of your normal life and job you have lots of responsibilities, meetings, and things to do. Spend some time about four months prior to the trip organizing your calendar and even canceling some of those events that are supposed to happen during the month before your trip. Cancel the dentist appointment and skip that committee meeting right before the trip to give yourself a few extra hours to get things ready.

### **Paperwork Packets**

Much of the paperwork for a trip will never be used unless in an emergency. You hope and pray that you will not need it, but you should prepare for the worst. A problem could become a crisis without the proper paperwork.

An expanding file folder with labeled sections will be very helpful in keeping all the paperwork organized and separate. A plastic water resistant folder is best. You can also use 8.5" x 11" envelopes for things you need only in an emergency, but be sure to label your envelopes clearly.

If paperwork, medical forms, and liability release statements are something that overwhelm you, get some help. It also is also helpful to have a lawyer review your forms.

Here are some suggested packets:

- **Trip leader's packet:** one copy of everything, even the stuff you have already submitted, in case your mission partner never received it.
- **Secondary packet:** a second copy of most documents: medical forms, passport copies (if needed), insurance documents, list of participants, room assignments, vehicle assignments, schedules, etc. This packet is in case something happens to you.
- **Office manager's packet:** a copy of the really important documents to answer parents' questions while you are gone and to deal with any emergencies. If something terrible happened, what information would be needed to track down your group and solve the problem?
- **Driver's packets:** a third copy of important forms for the leader of each travel group or vehicle, such as medical forms, passports (if needed), participant list, etc. These are given to the driver of each vehicle with only the information for the people in that vehicle. If your group is not splitting up, these packets are not necessary.
- **Adult leader packets:** additional copies of various forms, lists, schedules, contact information, etc. for your chaperones, depending on the size of your group, so that they are empowered to solve a problem without always running to you.

## Packing for the Trip

At least once on a trip, you will wish you had that certain item you forgot to pack. Likewise, there will be those items you lug around but never use. If you are traveling by plane, there will be a lot of things for which you simply will not have the space to bring. You will also want to check with your mission partner about what items they suggest and what items might be inappropriate based on the cultural context. A good mission trip plan will include four packing lists (*see samples*):

1. **Youth participant list.** It is OK to put things on this list that seem super obvious. For some youth, this might be the first time they have been away from home.
2. **Chaperone list.** Adults are giving up a week of their life to hang out with teenagers. Allowing them some extra comfort is encouraged, and it is OK for them to bring some things that you would not have room for if everyone packed them.
3. **Leader list.** You may want to bring some items to share with the whole group. These can be intentionally divided up among multiple leaders.
4. **Do NOT pack list.** Depending on your location, age group, and the mood you want to set, these items will vary a lot. This is also a helpful reminder to the adults; sometime they are the first ones to break the rules.

You may need to develop a fifth (and maybe even sixth) list that pertains to your trip only. If you have to bring and cook your own food, you will want a list for that. If you have a significant work project, you will need specialized tools and building supplies and a corresponding list. Perhaps the faith development components of your trip will require their own list.

## Time Line and Tasks

This is a suggested time line of tasks to help you plan. Your time line will look different. A good rule of thumb is to add a month to all these dates for an international trip, and add a month if your group size is more than forty people.

### A year (or more) ahead of time

- Pick the dates, location, and mission partner for your trip.
  - Double-check the dates and put them on all the calendars.
  - Look up school district calendars to avoid any conflicts.
- Articulate the goals and outcomes of your trip.
  - Is the primary purpose to build a house?
  - Or is the primary purpose to build faith?
  - Either way, articulate your goals, and let those goals drive your planning, not the other way around.

- Begin working on the trip budget.
  - What are costs for transportation, lodging, and food?
  - What will you have to pay to your partner organization?
  - What about all the hidden costs? Gas? Luggage fees? Flat tire repair?

## 12 to 9 months ahead of time

- Set the fee that each person will have to pay.
  - Do chaperones also have to pay? If not, where does the money to cover chaperone costs come from?
  - Will the fees be enough to cover all the costs?
  - Will you offer scholarships or discounts?
- Set a registration and payment schedule.
  - When will sign-ups begin and end?
  - When is the absolute last day you will accept new sign-ups?  
*(Don't publicize this date.)*
  - When is the paperwork due?
  - When is the absolute last day you will accept late paperwork?  
*(Don't publicize this date either.)*
  - How and when will participants receive the blank paperwork?
  - When is the money due?
  - When is the last day someone can get a refund if they drop out?
- Develop a communications schedule.
  - When will you begin publicizing registration for the trip?
  - What communications will you have with the rest of the congregation to support the trip?
  - When will emails or letters go out to participants before the trip?
    - Prepare trip letter and blank paperwork (12-8 weeks before departure)
    - Send reminder to turn in paperwork (1-2 weeks before it is due)
    - Write a text or email to get participants excited and thinking about their upcoming experience (2 or 3 weeks before trip)
    - Send last-minute reminders to participants (1 week before departure)
  - What communications will there be during the trip?
  - What kind of follow-up will there be after the trip?
  - Will your letters or emails be pure business, or will you include some Scripture and theological language?
    - Add a reminder to your calendar for when those emails or letters need to be sent.
    - Write all your communications at the same time. This will help you in crafting the language, ensuring consistency, and making it easier to send everything on time. Be sure to save all your letters so that they can be reused next year.

- Plan the trip size.
  - What is the maximum (and minimum) number of people you can take?
  - If trip size is a function of the number of vehicles you take, when you reach the maximum number of people, do others go on the waiting list or do you bump up to a second vehicle?
- Develop a fund-raising plan.
  - When will payments to your partner organization and/or transportation company come due?
  - How much money do you need to raise to cover those costs?
  - How should you communicate with your treasurer about what money is earmarked for the trip?
- Work on the budget.
  - This will be your spending plan. You should have enough information to make an estimate for all your expense categories.
  - Over the next 12 months, you will be filling in the actual amounts and seeing how they compare to your estimates.
  - Every church has someone who is good with budgets and money. If this is not your strength, enlist their help.

### **9 to 6 months before hand**

- Plan your logistics.
  - Travel there and home
  - Travel around during the trip
  - Food while on the trip and while traveling
  - Lodging and sleeping arrangements
  - Bathrooms and showers
- Build your team.
  - You do not have to do all of this by yourself! Every trip should have more than one adult leader.
  - Identify all the roles and tasks required. Which ones can be delegated to volunteers or chaperones?
  - Brainstorm ways for parents and members of the congregation—who are not going on the trip—to support you and the participants. Include as many people as possible.
  - Set a date for your pre-trip meetings.
    - How many planning meetings will there be?
    - Will you have a whole group team-building meeting or just an orientation for first timers?
    - Will you have a chaperones' meeting?
    - Do you need to schedule a conference or video call with your mission partner?

- Check your goals.
  - Is your planning incorporating all the aspects of your goals?
  - Are there any goals you have overlooked or have not yet worked on?
  - Have you communicated your goals with your team?
- Check your policies.
  - Does your church have a child-protection policy? If so, familiarize yourself with it and what it will require during the trip.
  - Do these policies affect the number of chaperones you will need?
  - Are there any other types of policies that may affect you, such as financial oversight policies, travel policies, contractor bidding policies, staff supervision policies, and overtime policies. Your church may not have all (or any) of these policies, but you want to make sure you do not violate the ones you do have.

## **6 to 3 months before**

- Talk to your insurance company.
  - Most policies do not cover you outside of the United States, but there are several companies that will sell you additional policies for your trip.
  - Depending on your mode of travel, you may need additional insurance, particularly if you are renting a vehicle and driving yourself.
  - If your group is spending the night at another church, you may need an additional rider for that location.
- Double-check your communications plan.
  - Are you still on schedule?
  - Is there something you have overlooked?
- Organize and plan your time for the week before the trip.
  - Add events to your calendar like “Pack for trip” or “Compile paperwork.” This will ensure you have plenty of time the week before.
  - Delegate some of your non-trip responsibilities to volunteers or staff to give you more free time to get ready. Make sure everything that is scheduled to happen while you are gone is covered.
  - Postpone or cancel some appointments that are supposed to happen the week before the trip.
- Create your checklists.
  - Create a day-before-departure checklist of all the things you will need to have done and packed.
  - Write and publish your various packing lists (*see samples*).

- Make your back-up plans and chain of command.
  - Who is in charge if something goes wrong?
  - Where is the nearest hospital?
  - If there is an emergency, what is your communication plan?
  - If someone needs to go home early, how will that be handled?
  - What is the threshold for cancelling the whole trip, and who makes that decision?
  - Have you communicated these plans with leaders?

## **10 to 6 weeks before**

- Plan the devotions or worship.
  - Will you have evening or morning devotion time?
  - Will your devotions be silent reflection or group discussion?
  - Will there be a common theme or Scripture for the trip?
  - Will there be music? Will you need songbooks?
- Plan any activities, icebreakers, or games.
  - Will you need any supplies for your games?
  - Are the games you have planned appropriate for the trip setting? (This task could be delegated to a volunteer.)
- Write your rules and behavior guidelines.
  - Living together in community for a weeklong mission trip is wonderful and stressful. Having some clear guidelines for behavior will help everyone live together better.
  - Include rules and dress code to be followed for the worksite.
- Organize your paperwork.
  - Have all the participants turned in their forms and payment?
  - Have you followed up with anyone who has yet to turn in their forms?
- Double-check your budget and fundraising.
  - Update all the numbers you can at this point.
  - Use the current gas price to estimate fuel costs.
- Check the State Department Travel Advisories (international trips only).
  - You can find these advisories at [www.travel.state.gov/traveladvisories](http://www.travel.state.gov/traveladvisories).

## **2 to 3 weeks before the trip**

- Finalize your sleeping arrangements and print multiple copies.
- Finalize travel groups or vehicle assignments.
  - If traveling in multiple vehicles, it is best to assign each person to one vehicle and reduce the amount of switching around. This will prevent a youth from being left at a gas station.
  - If traveling by plane, it is a good idea to break the whole group into smaller groups and have an adult be responsible for four to six youth in the airport.

- Print some maps.
  - Yes, GPS is wonderful, but what if it doesn't work?
  - Do you need a physical map of where you are going?
- Get cash!
  - Depending on the size of the group and destination, it is a good idea to have \$200 to \$500 in cash for emergencies and unexpected expenses.
  - If traveling internationally, this amount could be more, and you may need multiple currencies.
  - If you have more than \$1,000 on hand, it is wise to split that amount between two or three adults.
  - Never cross an international border with more than \$10,000 in your possession—it is illegal. Divide money among multiple people.
- Have a group dynamics or team-building meeting.
  - Give your youth a chance to get to know one another before the trip.
  - Allow your chaperones to get to know the youth as well.
- Go shopping.
  - Set aside a half day to go to the grocery store, hardware store, and/or wholesale store to stock up on snacks, tools, and supplies.
  - Delegate a volunteer to pick up things for the trip.
- Review your medical forms.
  - Make special note of any allergies or significant medical conditions.
  - Communicate this information, privately, to other chaperones as needed.
- Compile your paperwork packets

### **3-2 days before the trip**

- Double-check all your lists, time line, budget, and paperwork packets.
- Check your goals.
  - Are you on track to meet them?
  - Are there elements of the trip planned specifically to accomplish your goals?
- Have a phone call or meeting with your other leaders to check in, go over logistics, and answer their questions.
- Charge or change your batteries in walkie-talkies, cordless tools, flashlights, etc.
- Pack your personal stuff.
- Pack all the stuff you will need as the trip leader.
  - Determine when/how soon you will need each item, and pack accordingly.
  - If traveling by plane, pack important items in multiple suitcases, even getting chaperones to pack an item or two. You do not want one lost suitcase to ruin your trip.
  - If spending the night at a halfway point, pack everything you will need for day 2 right on top of your bag or in a smaller duffel. Encourage participants to do the same.
- Check the weather forecast for your destination.

### **One day before you leave**

- Do nothing.
  - Spend time with friends or family. Go on a date with your significant other. You are about to go out of town for a while, so spend some time with the people who will miss you.
  - If you have followed your plan perfectly, everything should have been done yesterday. The day before the trip is reserved for the things you forgot and for the things that can be done only at the last minute.
  - Go to bed early.
- Purchase fuel and ice. These are some of the only items that cannot be purchased far in advance.

### **Day of departure**

- If flying, have participants arrive three hours early at the airport and meet at the check-in counter.
- If traveling internationally, have a volunteer designated to visually inspect everyone's passport and give instructions about not packing the passport in their suitcase.
- Take an opportunity to breath and get in the moment.
  - You have done lots of work to get to this point, and you have lots of work left to do. Make sure you take time to enjoy the trip and be with your youth.
  - Be willing to adapt the plan. Every trip is different, and no plan is perfect. Be flexible and willing to make adjustments.

### **During the trip**

- Make notes during the trip about things you could have done differently or better. Save those notes and set a reminder to read them in eight months.
- Have a conversation with your chaperones about what they wished they had packed or what they wished they had been told.
- Identify youth who might make good leaders in the future.
- Plan your post-trip communications.
  - What stories from the trip will you want to share with the congregation?
  - Who on the trip is a good speaker or writer and can help tell others?
  - What pictures do you need to take to tell your story?

### **The week after**

- Say thank-you!
  - Remember this might be the most important step in the process.
  - Say thanks to your chaperones, mission partners, donors, volunteers, and congregation for their prayers and support.
- Finalize your financials by adding in all the exact amounts.

- Share the stories of your trip on the website, in your church's newsletter, and from the pulpit.
- Save documents, maps, signs, lists, etc. for next year. Some of your paperwork, rules, plans, and ideas will be useful for the next mission trip.

### Sample Packing Lists

#### Youth participant list

- Bible
- Cash for expenses (*best to specify the amount*)
- Worksite clothes (long pants or long sleeves)
- Clothes (it is helpful to specify shorts or pants based on weather)
- Clean underwear
- Swimsuit
- Work gloves
- Hat and sunscreen
- Journal or notebook
- Medicine (for international trips there may be specific recommendations)
- Mess kit (plate, utensils, cup)
- Passport (for international trips)
- Rain jacket and other rain gear
- Closed-toe shoes (for mission project site)
- Hiking shoes (if needed)
- Shoes you can get wet (for river, beach, or lakeside)
- Shower shoes
- Sleeping bag and pillow
- Sleeping pad, air mattress, or hammock
- Small backpack or purse
- Toiletries (soap, shampoo, deodorant, toothbrush, toothpaste, etc.)
- Towel or quick-dry travel towel
- Refillable water bottle or hydration backpack

#### Chaperone list

*In addition to all the items on the previous list, you may invite your adult leaders to bring other items, as extra comforts may make their experience more pleasurable.*

- Audio/paperback book
- Box fans
- Bug bite and anti-itch cream
- Bug prevention (personal insect repellent and insecticide spray)
- Fold-up chair, camp chair, or director's chair
- Hand sanitizer
- Flashlight, headlamp, or lantern
- Playing cards or board games

- Sunscreen and aloe
- Air mattresses and air pump
- Ear plugs, sleep aid, or white noise maker
- Snacks to share
- Extra socks
- Extra towel
- Ziplock baggies or trash bags

### **Leader list**

*Someone will inevitably forget something, thus having extras will save you a trip to the store and show how much you care about them.*

- Extra batteries
- Cleaning items (Lysol spray, Clorox wipes, air freshener, etc.)
- Clothesline or long cord for drying towels
- Coffee and coffee maker
- Duct tape and painters tape
- First-aid kits (if you have more than one, put them in separate vehicles)
- Frisbee, Koosh ball, or small item to toss around
- Extra gloves (work gloves, first-aid gloves, rubber gloves)
- Pens, pencils, highlighters, etc.
- Permanent markers
- Legal pad, printer paper, graphing paper
- Ruler/straight edge for drawing construction plans
- Scissors or knives
- Binder clips (these have many uses)
- Extension cord, surge protector, or a three-prong/two-prong adapter
- Extra phone charging cables
- Extra rain ponchos
- Folding table for serving food at the work site
- Small toolbox (even if you aren't doing a building project)
- Multi-tool (Leatherman, Gerber, etc.)
- Jumper cables, flares, and other roadside emergency items
- Walkie-talkies for each vehicle and an extra just in case
- Water bottle and extras for kids who forgot one
- Drinking water (for roadside emergency)
- Candle, cross, or other items for worship times
- Songbooks and musical instruments
- Speakers, auxiliary cord, boom box, or CD player
- Communion elements (plate, cup, bread, juice, and prayer)

## **Do NOT pack list**

*Some of these items may seem obvious, but it never hurts to remind people.*

- Alcohol, tobacco, and illegal drugs
- Anything inappropriate for youth and children
- Expensive jewelry that might be lost or damaged
- Fireworks, firearms, or explosives
- Peanuts (if you have someone in your group with a peanut allergy)
- Water guns or squirt guns
- Water balloons or water balloon launcher