

Planning Your First Mission Trip

Welcome to *Planning Your First Mission Trip!* I am so excited for you, your group, and the transformational experience you will have! There is a very clear call in the Gospels to feed the hungry, provide shelter to the homeless, and serve the least, the last, and the lost. As you embark on your first mission trip, you will be serving God by being the hands and feet of Jesus Christ out in the world.

A mission trip can be one of the most transformative and lasting 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.

Maybe this is the first trip for your group, or just the first trip for you, or the first for both. Regardless, this Quicksheet will provide tips to help you thoughtfully plan. It may leave you with more questions than answers, which is appropriate, as there is not a perfect mission trip for everyone. Your trip should be YOUR trip and should be what is best for you and your context.

Picking Your Mission Partner

The first question is, "Where are you going?" The second is, "What are you going to do?" Both of these, and many more, can be answered by selecting a trusted mission partner. There are numerous nonprofit (and for-profit) organizations to partner with that will handle local projects, educational opportunities, work-site logistics, and even worship times. Find a partner whom you trust and that fits with your church's theological perspective.

Some organizations will cater to your group only, while some will combine your group with other groups from different denominations and churches. Some organizations provide you with a project and place to stay, while others offer a complete package that includes meals, devotions, transportation, and all the logistical support you will need. This might be a better option for your first trip.

Here are some guiding questions to help you choose:

- What kind of experience does this partner offer?
- What age range does this partner accept?
- Do I want a trip for my group only, or is it OK to include other groups?
- Will this organization help my group achieve its goals?
- Does this partner match my group's theology?
- What is the cost per youth? Per adult?
- How does this partner balance work, education, worship, and fun?
- Does this partner have a long-term commitment to the community?

Lastly, a good mission partner can give your group a great mission experience. Take time to talk to the youth workers in your area and see where they take their groups. A great mission partner will be an organization you go back to year after year.

Building Your Team

You don't have to do this by yourself, nor should you. A youth mission trip will require at least two adult leaders. For middle school, the recommendation is at least one adult for every five or six youth. For high school, the minimum ratio is one adult for every seven to ten youth. It is also a good idea to add an extra adult just in case. For a trip with twelve youth, three to four adults is ideal, for a group of forty youth, seven to ten adults would be ideal. Excellent mission trips sometimes have 50/50 split of youth and adults.

Spend some time, about six to eight months before the trip recruiting some good help. Delegate responsibilities to your chaperones, especially the tasks you are less comfortable doing yourself. This will take some of the burden off your shoulders and will give you some free time during the trip to connect with the youth. This is also a way to empower the adult volunteers. Here are a few examples of roles your chaperones could have:

- **Trip Leader**—That's you, you set the overall schedule, but they manage all the other leaders and ensure healthy group dynamics.
- **Registrar**—Manages sign-ups and paperwork prior to departure.
- **Head Chef**—Plans the meals, and decides who will help cook and clean up.
- **Spiritual Leader**—Organizes the devotional and prayer times.
- **Music Leader**—Plans which songs will be sung during worship times.
- **Fun and Games Guru**—In charge of "fun day" during the week, if scheduled, and also lead games and activities as needed.
- **Work Site Coordinator**—Decides who is on which work team and what tasks need to be accomplished each day.

- **Chief Communicator**—Handles the social media and communication with parents while you are away.
- **Transportation Captain**—Coordinates who rides in what vehicle and when, counts heads on the bus, and plans fuel stops.
- **Lodging Coordinator**—Determines who sleeps where.
- **Hydration Specialist**—Ensures everyone drinks enough water, and cares for everyone on the work site.

The more elaborate the volunteer's title is, the more valued they will feel. Depending on your context, some of these roles will not be necessary. One person may fill more than one role, and there will be roles on YOUR trip that aren't listed above. Remember, anything not assigned to a volunteer will fall on your shoulders. Also, consider which tasks (if any) can be performed by people who do not go on the trip—registrar, transportation coordinator, etc. Recruiting additional helpers to fill those roles will get more of the congregation involved.

Changing Lives . . . but Whose?

There are two sides to a mission trip: the participants and the people you are serving. The ultimate goal of a mission trip is to change lives, but whose lives? Is it the lives of the people in the local community you will be working with, for, and alongside? Or is it the lives of the people in your group? In truth, the answer is both.

Consider both groups of people in your planning, and determine how you will balance the needs and priorities of each. Some trips will prioritize the local community over the experience of the participants. For these types of trips, the work project comes first—finishing the water system or building the house will be priority over everything else. Some trips prioritize the experience of the participants first, ensuring they have a fun and spiritual time is more important than the actual mission work being done. For these types of trips, finishing the project will take a back seat to other activities and group bonding.

Both of these methods can produce an excellent mission trip; the important thing is making sure that the balance between work and participant experience fits your needs. Choose a partner organization that provides the experience you are looking for. Here are some guiding questions to help you balance these two groups:

For the Participants:

- How will your participants be changed?
- What will they learn?
- What kind of spiritual growth might happen?

- In what ways will they live and act differently after the trip?
- How will this trip improve the participants' relationship with God?

For the local community:

- What does the local community have to teach the participants?
- What impact will your presence have on the local community?
- How will you build relationships with them?
- Is the mission project actually meeting their needs?
- Is the project sustainable and empowering?
- How will this trip improve the community's relationship with God?

Things to Avoid

As you plan your first trip, be careful not to bite off more than you can chew. A rocky first mission trip will leave a bad taste in the mouths of your congregation and will inhibit future success of your mission experiences. It is also healthy to leave room for growth and ways of expansion for subsequent trips. It is much better to have the first trip be "just OK" so that the second trip can be great, than to shoot for the moon and fail on your first try. Here are five pitfalls to avoid:

1. **Long bus rides to get there**—For your first trip, think close to home. A good range would be more than two hours away but less than eight hours' drive. If you have a weeklong trip and you have to spend the night at a halfway point on the way there (and back), it will feel as if you are spending too much time in transit and not enough doing mission. Your group might be cranky and restless before you arrive.
2. **High airplane costs**—Along the same lines as travel time, be wary of expensive travel costs. If the airfare to get there is 40 percent or more of your total costs, you might be putting your resources in the wrong place. Traveling to exotic destinations can be a great mission experience, but it also adds an extra layer of planning, logistics, and potential problems that could be overwhelming for your first trip. High travel costs also limit who can participate, potentially excluding those who can't afford it. Most churches cannot afford to go on an international trip every year.
3. **Requires too many people**—You can have a great mission trip with six people, or sixty. The number of people doesn't really matter as long as your planning matches that number. As you begin preparations, make sure that your guesstimate on the number of people is realistic and that the trip will still be feasible if you fall short of that number. For example, if you're renting a vehicle that can carry fifty people but you have only twenty-five people, then the cost per person will be a lot higher. Or, you register with the mission partner for ten people but only six sign up, and then you have to eat the cost of those four spots, which makes the whole trip too expensive. Can the work project still be accomplished with less people?

One way to alleviate this problem is to plan on small numbers for your first trip. It is alright to have a limit on the number of people who can participate. You can always include more people next year.

- 4. Miscommunicating expectations**—The living quarters during the mission project can be good or bad, but people will still have a great time, even in less than ideal settings. However, if reality falls short of their expectations, they are more likely to have a bad time. A trip can be ruined for someone because they discovered there were not hot showers upon arrival, but if they had known ahead of time, it would not have been an issue. Communicate clearly with your participants and parents what the trip will be like, especially sleeping arrangements, food, showers, working conditions, and Wi-Fi availability. If your group is going to sleep on the floor, do not mislead them that they will be in a comfy bed. Do not undersell the amount of hours you will be working, either.
- 5. Lack of Contingency Plans**—When you are there, it is much easier to modify or ignore a contingency plan than to make one up on the spot. Spend time thinking about what you will do if *[fill in the blank]* happens. Who will be in charge? If someone gets sick, what will you do? If you have hours of unexpected free time, what game will you play? Where is the nearest hospital? Try to answer those hypothetical questions at least a month before the trip, rather than while you are there. This will prevent an unfortunate event from becoming a full-blown crisis. The success or failure of a trip will be determined not by how many problems there were but by how well those problems were solved.

Simple Tips and Hints

- Have a trip covenant with guidelines for behavior and expectations for the trip, and have participants sign the covenant.
- Have a conversation with your office manager, treasurer, or lawyer about what kind of insurance you will need.
- Have a back-up copy of all your paperwork that a separate adult is responsible for. This may save you a trip to get things copied or faxed to you.
- Prepare an emergency-contact sheet for your chaperones with phone numbers of participants, parents, and addresses of the mission site.
- Set up a communication plan to keep in touch with parents. Prewrite emails or text messages to be sent during the trip, with blank spots for filling in the details of that day.
- Make sure colleagues have the information needed to answer questions that come up back home. Parents may call the church office, or ask the pastor on Sunday questions about the trip.
- Overcommunicate with parents; it will make them more comfortable.
- Think about how you will share your trip with the rest of the congregation when you get home. Newsletter? Website? Video? Worship service?

- Consider your second mission trip while you are still away. Will you go back to this same place next year? What would you do differently? Keep notes to reread in six months.

Tips for International Trips

- Get a notarized letter signed by both parents to ensure that you can all board the plane, especially when traveling with minors. If you have one parent as a chaperone but the other parent is staying behind, they may need to provide a letter giving consent for their child to leave the country with only one of the parents.
- Check expiration dates on passports. Passports often expire before they say they do. Many airlines will not let you board if your passport expires within six months of departure, depending on your destination.
- Bring two copies of all passports in case someone loses their passport. The trip leader keeps one set of copies; a chaperone keeps the second.
- Divide your cash among multiple people or suitcases in case someone gets pickpocketed. Also, there may be legal ramifications if one person is carrying more than \$10,000 in cash, but no such issue exists for three people to each carry a few thousand dollars.
- Plan for lost luggage. If your group is bringing tools, resources, or curriculum, divide those among multiple suitcases so that one lost bag does not ruin the trip.