

Mission Trips

How to Take the Experience Home

Is your trip an integral part of a lifelong faith development?

Or is it just a fun time people remember fondly?

Does your mission trip lead to better discipleship?

Or is it a one-time occurrence without lasting results?

Do your participants come home and live differently because of the experience?

Or do participants go home to their daily lives as if nothing happened?

There are numerous articles explaining why mission trips are important to faith growth and group development, and there are countless examples of young people whose lives are changed on a mission trip. On the other hand, just as many youth go on trips but do not have their lives changed. A mission trip shows people a different way to live in community and gives them a better set of priorities. Human tendency is to return to daily life unchanged and return to former habits. This Quicksheet offers tips and ideas for deepening the spiritual impact of the mission trip.

Before the Trip

A mission trip is just one week out of the year, compared to fifty-one weeks living life a certain way; it is no wonder that a short-term mission trip is not long enough to change everything about a person's life and faith. The first step is to lengthen the experience. A weeklong trip can be more than just a weeklong experience. The following are possible ways to get your participants in gear long before the departure day.

List Hopes and Expectations

Invite participants to write down their hopes and expectations for the trip. This may be done at a pre-trip meeting or individually. Ask participants to bring what they wrote on the trip and spend some time reflecting on it. In what ways were their expectations correct or totally off base? Writing hopes and goals will encourage participants to actually work on accomplishing those items.

Prepare a Daily Challenge

Encourage your participants to give up something, as they do in Lent, or take on a new practice for a week (or the same length of time as the trip). Do this a month or two prior to the trip and schedule a time before the trip to debrief the activity. It is best if the daily challenge can somehow be related to the upcoming trip. Perhaps ask participants to sleep in a sleeping bag or on an air mattress to simulate the sleeping conditions on the trip. Maybe it is a food-related challenge, either eating the types of food you will on the trip (or giving up their favorite food or drink that will not be on the trip). If you are doing a work trip, invite participants to lift weights or carry a heavy object around to get them physically ready.

Do Team Building

Schedule a meeting a week or month before the trip and get everyone together to do icebreakers, name games, and team-building exercises. This will give your group a head start on the community experience of a trip.

Fundraise for the Trip

Require all the participants to fundraise at least a small amount of their trip fee. This activity is less about the money they will raise and more about the connections they will make. Fundraising will get participants thinking about their upcoming experience and will get them to articulate that experience to others. It will also build a relationship between them and their supporters. Participants should follow up with their supporters after the trip to tell them about it and to say thanks.

Set Up a Pre-Trip Work Day

In addition to pre-trip meetings, schedule a half-day work project a month before the trip. It is best to do the same kind of work you will be doing on the trip—that is, painting, framing, cooking, etc. This will strengthen group dynamics and boost confidence.

Assign Prayer Partners

Assign each participant the name of another participant as a prayer partner a few weeks before the trip. Invite everyone to pray for their partner's upcoming experience and to ask that God would be at work in their life to prepare their heart and mind for the trip. In addition to the power of prayer, this activity will build relationships and help each person to prepare themselves for the experience.

Commission the Group

One of the simplest ways to expand the experience and include the congregation is to commission them on the Sunday before your departure. Invite participants to stand in the front of the sanctuary so that the congregation may pray for them. There are numerous liturgies to choose from, and it is a good idea to use the Baptismal Covenant questions for the participants and the congregation.

Share the Packing

There are numerous items you will have to pack for your trip, and some items will be for the whole group. Divvy up those items, one to each participant. Youth will change their perception of the trip knowing that they are responsible for a key component, such as toilet paper or paint brushes. Ask families to go shopping for those items, giving them even more ownership over the experience.

During the Trip

While your group is away from home and all together, there are many things you can do to ensure that your trip experience lasts longer than the trip. Group building and perspective broadening will happen on a trip no matter what. Your focus is on capturing those grace-filled moments in a way that can be translated back home. You will also be preparing your youth to take the experience home by having them articulate what they love about the trip community and how their regular life is missing that sense of purpose.

Name Your Values

During the trip, youth will be living out different values than they experience at home or at school. Giving a name to these differences will help participants continue to live out the trip's values once they get home. During devotions, a meal, or other structured time, take a few moments to name the values of your trip community. What is it you and your participants collectively decide are your unspoken rules? How do you balance between safety and growth? Which is more important: kindness or being correct? Is greater emphasis placed on the will of the individual or what is best for the whole group?

If your trip community is developing as it should, then your group's values will be more in line with Jesus' teachings than the values of our capitalistic society. Naming these values and practices aloud will help each person identify how they may live differently when they get home.

Set Aside Time for Worship and Devotion

The spiritual experience of the trip should seek a balance between the context you are in, versus the context you come from, and the transformation taking place. Plan a theme and Scripture for each devotional time that balances these aspects. Here are guiding questions:

- Where did you come from?
- What or who did you leave behind to be on this trip?
- What did you bring with you?
- What do you hope to leave behind at the end of the trip?
- What is unique about the culture and context of this place?
- How is God at work in the context you are serving?
- What makes the community during the trip different from home life?
- What will you do differently when you get home?
- How are you transformed by this trip and context?
- What can your church learn from this context?
- What is something you want your parents or best friend (who is not on the trip) to know about this experience?
- What will you take from this place?

Choose a few questions above and seek to answer them in your worship times throughout the trip. You may have group discussions around a question or give a reflection answering the question for yourself. It is also wise to have other theological ideas interspersed and not focus 100 percent of the time on the experience at hand.

Begin Planning a New Project

During a trip, the creative juices will be flowing, and people will be bubbling over with ideas for the church, the next trip, or their own lives. Be sure to capture these ideas as they come, but also set aside some time to begin planning and implementing these ideas. Write concrete steps you or your group can take when you get home. You may also draft a letter to the church leaders about this idea or record a video to explain what you hope to accomplish.

Write Yourself a Letter

You have probably done this one before on a spiritual retreat because it is an effective tool. Have participants write a letter to their future selves, making a promise to do something specific or to live differently. Letters could also be about the friendships they have made on the trip, the sense of community they experience, or the closeness to God they feel. Collect the letters and take them home with you. Then a few weeks or a few months after the trip mail everyone their own letter. You can also include a note from you as the trip leader reminding them of the theological point you were hoping to make.

Conduct Non-Trip Business

I was once trying to set a meeting to plan some future program, and while we were struggling to get calendars aligned, I realized everyone on the planning team would also, coincidentally, be on the mission trip. We scheduled the meeting for a time during the trip, and it was the most productive meeting the group ever had. Another time there was a confirmation student struggling to connect with his mentor. By sheer luck, both were on a mission trip together. I set up a time for the two of them to meet during the trip to talk about the confirmation process. A beautiful relationship arose out of the shared experience of the trip.

Look for opportunities to plan or do the ministry of other programs while you are away. This will have a twofold impact. First, the group will be able to think outside the box more easily, and the trip experience will influence their way of thinking. Second, this will create a mental and emotional bridge between the non-trip ministry and the trip experience. When that future event or activity happens, everyone will be reminded of their trip experience.

Write Thank-You Cards

Bring cards and stationery. Set aside twenty minutes or more for everyone to write a thank-you note to someone back home. The notes may be to the people who supported the trip or to people unrelated to the trip.

After the Trip

The weeks immediately after you get home are when participants will be most likely to follow through on their hopes and promises made during the trip. A simple reminder may be enough to spur them on and help the transformation they experienced to last. The more time that passes, the likelier they are to return to the unchanged self. During the planning phase for your trip, pick one or two of the activities below and take steps to implement them when you get back. Add items to your calendar so that you do not forget to send the letters you wrote or hold that meeting you promised. Print address labels before the trip so that those letters can go out more quickly.

Keep the Texts Going

It is likely you had a massive group chat going during or before your trip. The day after you get back, keep the conversation going. The first meal you have when you get home and you are not eating foreign foods nor eating with all the participants is a great opportunity to remind people how much better it is to live in community

Send Follow-Up Letters

One to two weeks after the trip, send a follow-up letter to each participant. Remind them of great moments from the trip and the sense of community they felt. Ask them about follow-up actions from some of the promises they made to themselves or to the group. It is helpful to have a draft written before the trip.

Create Follow-Up Postcards

Did you know that you can make your own postcards using any picture? Simply attach a stamp and address to the back. This can be a great and simple gift to give to participants after a trip with a simple reminder to live differently.

Set a Pre-Arranged Meeting

Before or during the trip, set a meeting date that will happen after the trip for your group to follow through on at least one of the great ideas you had while you were away.

Plan a Picture Party

Plan to have a picture party after the trip where family and friends are invited to see pictures from the trip and hear stories. You can even include a meal that resembles what you ate on the trip.

Lead Worship

Dedicate an entire Sunday worship service to reflect on the trip and the experience you had. Invite participants to preach and lead liturgy. If you had trip T-shirts, have everyone wear them again.

Nurture Leadership Development

During a trip there will likely be a moment when a youth shows more maturity and leadership than they were previously capable of. Capitalize on those moments and remind the youth of their own story after the trip. Offer youth new opportunities to lead and put to use their newly learned skills. Maybe there is a building or maintenance project around church the youth could help with. Maybe they learned some new skills in the kitchen that could be used at the next potluck. Maybe there is a presbytery leadership opportunity.

Remind the Group Who They Were

One of the most memorable moments from my own experience as a youth was a time when our group was struggling with welcoming a new person. My youth pastor reminded all of us of the theme from our mission trip six months prior and specifically one of the prayers we had used. We prayed for God to open our hearts and to be more welcoming; but when the opportunity came months later, we had forgotten our prayer. The reminder convicted all of us to try harder and to live the way we had lived together on the trip.

Closing Thoughts

How Much of This Should You Do?

As you consider ways to expand your mission trip experience, think through how many of these practices or activities you can realistically accomplish. There is value in doing one or two things really well versus doing a dozen things with mediocre results. There is also the danger of biting off more than you can chew. As you plan, consider the length of your trip and how many devotional or worship times your group will have together. A good tip is to have about the same number of activities as you have days in your trip and to balance the activities from each of the three sections. A six-day trip would include two intentional activities before the trip, two times during, and two follow-up actions. Be sure to choose items that are appropriate for the demographics of your group.

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