



## Top Ten Practices for Short Term Teams

A tremendous amount of resources, literally millions of dollars, are spent annually on short term mission trips. Mission experiences are possibly the most effective tool available to the church to equip leaders and engage students in what God is doing in His global Church. Short term mission experiences can also play a critical and strategic role in furthering God's global Kingdom. With the great amount of resources spent on short term missions, the incredible opportunity to equip young leaders, and the potential to reach the lost, it is imperative we be good stewards and use those resources well. It is to that end that we compile this list of "best practices."

We have compiled this list of practices from our experience of preparing, sending, hosting and debriefing teams for the past 25 years. It is by no means exhaustive but presents some essentials as you evaluate and prepare to step in to what God is doing in His church outside your home culture.

### **Use short-term teams to tangibly support long-term work.**

Not all long-term missionary work is conducive to facilitating short-term teams. Therefore, when choosing which short-term opportunities to pursue, consider their potential to support the long-term work in that area. A great short-term team comes at the invitation of a long-term missionary who is serving in partnership with a local church or ministry. This way, the short-term team engages in a work supported through ongoing ministry that will not be abandoned after the short-term team leaves.

### **Clarify the purpose of the mission.**

The overarching purpose of the church is to make Christ known. However, individual mission experiences can serve secondary purposes within that goal. Identify the purpose you are seeking to fulfill in your ministry associated with each mission. For those in your ministry, is the purpose to engage students in caring for people in need, equip young leaders in peer to peer evangelism, or possibly leadership development? There are a many legitimate purposes for taking students on cross cultural missions. The key to successful engagement is to identify what you desire to see as an outcome of the experience so that the selected mission meets your objective.

### **Connect the trip to everyday life at home.**

Work to incorporate the objectives of mission experiences into life and ministry at home. If the objective of the mission is to equip students in evangelism, establish that as a norm of the Christian life at home and champion the efforts of students to share Christ with their non-Christian peers outside the church before and after the mission experience. If helping those in need is the objective, provide opportunities and resources to facilitate helping locally. The Christian life is a full-time endeavor, not to be relegated to a two-week summer experience.

### **Develop leadership in others.**

Mission experiences provide opportunities to engage others in preparation, training, planning, execution and follow up. Delegation, with supervision, lightens the load on the trip leader and develops the skills and faith of others. The experience gained can be utilized in your local ministry but also provides valuable Christian leadership experience beyond your ministry, both inside and outside the church. Lighten your load and invest well in other's leadership development.

### **Select the right people.**

While it can be tempting to include anyone who desires to be a part of the mission, it may be counterproductive depending on the objectives and nature of your mission. A trip to construct homes or do community service may lend itself well to being open for young teenagers, even those who do not yet know Christ. A trip like this can even be used as an evangelistic opportunity for participants. An inter-continental trip to lead an evangelistic camp requires a different level of maturity, both emotionally and spiritually. Some trips are suitable for junior high students young in their faith, others are only suitable for high-school ministry team level students or above. Inquire of the agency organizing the mission for their recommendation and use an application process for participants. Identification of a co-leader for the trip is an important step; be sure to have both a male and female in leadership if the team is mixed gender.

### **Share the experience.**

Others have invested significantly and are praying for your mission. Communicating well before, during and after your mission keeps everyone informed and relieves unnecessary stress, especially with parents of minor team members. Communicating what God is doing brings Him glory and helps everyone keep Him the focus. This can be done via daily group email, a blog post, or video update when local technology permits. Giving rotating responsibility to various team members (including students) distributes responsibility and helps them process the experience (and parents love hearing from their children!).

### **Debrief well.**

Leading team members in processing their experience will help them discern what God has taught or is teaching them through it, enable them to communicate with others about their experience, and prepare them to re-enter their home culture well and with grace. Knowing how to give both a short and a long version summary of their experience will engage more people and help reduce frustration with those who have limited interest.

### **Engage many to pray.**

As you enter into the realm of missions, you will experience increased spiritual warfare. Schedules during preparation, dissension in team members, travel complications and physical health are some of the easy areas for the spiritual attack (of course, there are more!). Your witness for Christ, whether it be explicit evangelism or through acts of service, will be encroaching upon enemy territory. If it wasn't, why would you be going?

You and your team need protection and those you will be a witness to need to have their hearts prepared for the message you bring. Prayer should be an integral piece of your team's preparation and should continue throughout your mission. Engaging your church in prayer and having each team member obtain a prayer partner(s) are essential to a good and fruitful experience. Not only does your team need prayer, but your host does as well as they prepare for your arrival; so ask for their requests as well.

**Begin early.**

There are a lot of moving parts to short-term missions. Research and selection of experience, recruitment of the right people, raising the required financial resources, travel documents and arrangements, team building & training, and trip preparation all take time. Six months or more is not too early to begin the process. Less time can compromise your mission and create excess work as you work to catch up.

**Prepare well.**

Train your team well. Your host should be able to provide guidance for pre-trip training. Integrate team building into your training time along with learning about the host culture. Develop good expectations and policies for travel safety, use of personal technology, behavior and finances.

Your host may assign responsibility for different aspects of your mission and may request you to bring supplies. Spend time as a team planning how you will fill these responsibilities, make assignments for gathering supplies and planning activities, and familiarize the entire team for what is ahead. A key quality for any mission team is to remain flexible...no matter how well the plans are laid out, something will inevitably change. Prepare your team to plan well but remain flexible.