

When is the Group Ready for a Mission Trip?

So when are teens going to be ready for a mission trip? Only the individual youth leader can answer that question. But our students are more likely to be ready when these ministry steps have been established:

1. The youth group has a good sense of what compassion is all about. In this country many of us don't like to think of ourselves as rich. But if you've done much traveling to other parts of the world, you know that even our poorest people have much more than those in the truly impoverished parts of the world. The sad thing is American young people often don't realize how blessed they are. They've been indoctrinated into a lifestyle of consumerism, as have many adults. It's so much a part of us that often we don't even see it.

Our youth group represents our "Jerusalem" in the Great Commission. It starts locally. If we want our teens to develop a lifestyle for missions, we must awaken in them the desire to exhibit compassion and charity at home. We need to teach compassion and charity in our youth group meetings.

One way of teaching this principle is to use simulations. Host a "poverty" meal with varying levels of food and service. Some will be fed steak and others will go hungry. Or you could plan a "homeless for the night" experience. Another option is to participate in events such as the "30 Hour Famine" which draws attention to the plight of the hungry.

2. An active local service ministry has been established. Our youth groups need to be able to minister at home before we send them to minister abroad. Some believe that taking our teens on a mission trip will wake them up to the needs around them, but I think this isn't usually the case. Without an active local service ministry already in place, it's too easy for our kids to come back home and fall back into their old patterns. They had a nice trip with lots of memories but no real long-term changes. Ministering locally is our "Judea." There's no shortage of needs when we look around our communities. It's every bit as important to meet the needs in our community as it is to meet the needs in Mexico, the Caribbean, or Africa.

There are many local service organizations with which to partner. There are many books that offer lots of great service ideas for your youth groups. Take the time to establish a rhythm of local service, and you'll further enhance the service aspect of future mission trips. And our teens will be more in tune to ministering locally when they get back home.

3. The youth group has gone on cross-cultural ministry experiences within a short drive from home.

Before immersing youth in a completely different country and culture, let them minister to those in their own country who come from significantly different cultural backgrounds. Our teens need to grasp the huge differences in culture and lifestyle within this country. Cross-cultural ministry experience in this country is our "Samaria." Samaria, though adjacent to Judea, was a foreign culture to the Jews. And like many misunderstood cultures and people within North America, Jews considered Samaria, and everything within it, offensive. When traveling, the Jews did all they could to avoid stepping foot in Samaria. But Christ commanded his disciples to go there and share the Gospel before they went on to the rest of the world.

Most church denominations have ministry projects set up that serve in cross-cultural settings. There are also parachurch organizations doing the same thing. Most of these ministries are ready and willing to partner with youth groups. Do a little research and make a few phone calls and you can be established in this sort of ongoing outreach ministry.

Ready for the Big Time

Of course, the individual youth worker will know best whether his or her teens are ready for a short-term mission trip. We may find our kids ready for a big trip even before we've accomplished Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria ministry experiences. Or we may be doing all of these and find our teens still aren't ready. It's an individual call.

Once we make the decision, we must allow ample time to prepare everyone for the trip. It's important to meet often, ideally starting about six months ahead of time, focusing everyone on the experience ahead and spending time in the word and prayer. A great idea is to do a team-building activity such as a ropes course.

And remember, just because a person can raise the money to pay for the trip doesn't necessarily mean that he or she should go on the trip. This is ministry. The purpose is to serve and to share Christ. It's a tough decision to make, but those who aren't spiritually ready should be excluded from the trip. Consider setting stringent criteria for potential participants. Use written testimonies and interviews by the leaders to help guide your decisions. Mission trips are reflections on our congregations, so it's important to send our best.

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