



The “Real Work” of Mission Trips

Experts Weigh in on What Makes for an Effective, Faithful Youth-Led Mission Program.

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In 2002, 16-year-old Vik Schaaf of Reedsport, Oregon, went on her first mission trip to Mexico. She was unprepared for the experience and, by her own admission, didn't contribute much. “I remember sleeping on the cement and watching my friends painting this church,” she says. “I was just kind of a punk about it.”

Things changed after Schaaf attended a peace and justice conference the following year and began learning about social justice issues. She returned to Mexico a different person at age 18, and then took three trips during college to New Orleans, where she worked on hurricane relief with Presbyterian Disaster Assistance.

Today, Schaaf is in her seventh year as the youth director at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Salem, Oregon. Mission has been a focal point for her ministry, and this summer she will take her youth to Romania on their first international experience.

Schaaf is far from alone in this. Youth-led mission began to swing into popularity beginning in the 1960s and has grown ever since. In 2004, Margaret Lyman of Fuller Theological Seminary estimated that more than 1 million US Christians were doing short-term mission trips each year, a sizeable portion of them youth.

In recent years, emphasis has shifted to long-term community mission that connects the local and the global. These initiatives strive to avoid the previous pitfalls of some short-term mission trips: cultural voyeurism, self-satisfaction, unexamined privilege, and the failure to achieve *mutual* faith transformation as well as sustainable, just societies.

Through Equipping for Mission Involvement, Presbyterian World Mission has been helping congregations learn how to put their faith into action by *partnering* with brothers and sisters from different cultures and life experiences.

Such mission seeks to answer Jesus' command to go and make disciples (Matt. 28:18–20) and to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and care for those who are sick or in prison (Matt. 25:31–46).

The impact of this mission has been great.

Bill Buchanan, cofounder of Asheville Youth Mission and Raleigh Youth Mission, figures that the youth groups hosted by his organization (now known as Youth Mission Co) since 2009 have done work valued at more than \$1 million.

Done right, mission trips also have a profound impact on the youth and adults who participate, says Jann Treadwell, a retired Presbyterian educator and author of *Unbound: The Transformative Power of Youth Mission Trips*. “To go out and do something really significant for, or with, someone else is so eye-opening,” she says. “Sometimes we can see immediately how a youth is affected by a trip, but other times we don't know until [much] later.”

Impactful mission trips don't just happen, however. They take hard work and careful planning. To learn more, *Presbyterians Today* spoke with Treadwell, Schaaf, and other Presbyterian youth workers about the elements of transformational mission trips.

Doing Meaningful Work

Treadwell is quick to point out that for mission to be effective, the work must be meaningful. It seems like an obvious point, but she says that this simple fact is often overlooked. Treadwell recalls the experience of one of her sons before she got involved in mission. “They painted chairs at a church down in Mexico; the next year, they painted the same chairs over again,” she says. “The kids were so disappointed. Someone was trying to create work for them.”

Of course, even meaningful projects can feel like busywork to teens, so Buchanan makes sure mission teams understand the significance of what they're doing. He'll point out that the food they're serving for lunch at Veterans Restoration Quarters, an Asheville shelter for homeless veterans, came from MANNA FoodBank, where they had sorted canned goods the day before.

Katie Patterson, who runs the Urban Youth Mission program at Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago, takes a similar approach. Groups that come through her program often make sleeping mats for the homeless out of plastic grocery bags—and interact with those who use them. “It's great when a group has been working on that, and they go out and spot those sleeping mats with individuals living on the street,” she says.

Even the most gung-ho group can accomplish only so much in a week (hence the growing emphasis on long-term mission). To help teens understand their impact, Treadwell liked to alternate between two sites—Taos, New Mexico, and the Mississippi Delta—when she was serving at a church in Dallas. Near the end of one Mississippi trip, her group took an impromptu tour of a house they'd helped build two years before. A

girl pointed to a paint stain on her shirt, and the homeowner's eyes lit up. It was the same color as the bedroom walls and was from her work there two years ago. "The woman teared up; it was so powerful," Treadwell says.

Meeting Youth Where They Are

The best mission trips offer just the right amount of challenge to the participants. For Buchanan, that means asking a lot of questions up front: What's their experience with issues like homelessness, hunger, and poverty? What's their exposure to people who occupy a different place on the socioeconomic spectrum? "For some groups, engaging with someone who slept under a bridge last night is a huge thing," he says. Others, however, may have done a lot of that back home and instead want to learn more about the root causes of homelessness and how different agencies work together to combat the problem.

Patterson takes a similar approach with her groups. She also finds out what each group likes to do and is sick of doing; if a group never wants to pull weeds again, she steers them away from an urban garden project. "One group was particularly interested in advocacy work with LGBTQ teens because there's a large population of LGBTQ teens in Chicago who are homeless," she says.

In some cases, Patterson's groups interact directly with agency clients. When that's not age appropriate, she makes sure a staff member teaches students about the agency and its mission. The goal, she says, is adding "education and context to their experience so there's a fuller understanding of what they did, why they did it, and how it matters."

Developing Relationships

Schaaf always tries to encourage her youth to realize that they are there for more than the work. On trips to Reedsport, where her group has been rebuilding a playground, they often play pickleball with a group of retirees. "It's just an opportunity to interact and be kids while at the same time doing something meaningful," she says.

That sort of activity had a profound impact on one of Treadwell's students, who went on to become a teacher. "He said that the seeds of this profession came after experiencing the joy of successfully teaching a local child to throw a Frisbee on one of our trips," she says.

Some people might think playing Frisbee or pickleball steals time from work projects, but Ellen Sherby, the coordinator of Equipping for Mission Involvement, argues that building relationships is the *real* work of mission trips. "It's not you doing *for* them but being *with* them—serving with each other and hopefully having some room for conversation and sharing faith," she says.

Whether a trip happens across the state or across the globe, Sherby recommends identifying a "bridge person," perhaps a Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) mission coworker, who can help the group build relationships. "Even in a place that's

close to where I live or in my own city, I need somebody to help me navigate so that I can have relationships in mission,” she says.

Creating Context

The best mission trips include a time to work, a time to play, and a time to reflect. Daily debriefing sessions allow youth leaders to add context to the experience. “I think a key thing is making sure your accommodations have a gathering space so you can do community building in the evening,” Treadwell says. “Staying in a motel with no place to gather and play games and talk about the day really limits that.”

Debriefing can be as simple as asking, “Where have you seen God at work today?” But it can also include more elaborate activities. In Buchanan’s programs, groups do weeklong art projects based on an annual theme. One year the theme was “Broken Boundaries,” so groups created collages of wooden blocks on which they wrote the boundaries they see in the world—physical, racial, socioeconomic, and gender-based. “Back home, it becomes a physical, visual way they could talk about those things,” he says.

Making Connections Back Home

The ultimate goal of mission trips, Buchanan says, is to inspire action and new understanding in communities back home. During debriefing sessions, his staff members will ask, “How is this similar to or different from what’s going on in your hometown?”

“That’s where some really rich discussion starts happening between those youth and their adult advisers,” he says.

A group from Faison, North Carolina, for instance, learned about MANNA Packs for Kids, which offers weekend food assistance, and convinced their local food bank to start a similar program. A group from Roanoke, Virginia, was so taken with the issue of youth homelessness in Asheville that they launched a yearlong campaign to raise money to help homeless teens back home.

And then there was the middle-schooler from Durham, who was struck by the idea that homeless people in his community, as in Asheville, didn’t have a place to use the restroom. “When he got home, he started talking to his church about it—and he wouldn’t stop talking,” Buchanan says. Eventually, a church member made arrangements to put portable toilets on the church’s property for their homeless neighbors to use.

During her mission trips, Treadwell always had participants send postcards to church members who had supported the trip financially.

Each September, the members of Schaaf’s youth group host a spaghetti dinner at Westminster Presbyterian Church. “They come and serve this awesome meal to the whole congregation; then they get up and talk about their experiences,” she says. “Every year, I have 14 or 15 students who want to talk about what they did and what they learned.”

In the seven years of her youth-ministry career, Schaaf has watched many students experience the same sort of transformation she did 14 years ago. On one recent trip, she couldn't drag a group away from a dilapidated trailer home they'd been cleaning up. As the grateful homeowner shared her life story with the teens, she looked at a rising freshman and said she reminded her of her own daughter.

"It was such an intense moment," Schaaf says. "That student has become a student leader now; she doesn't miss a trip."

Tools for Mission (sidebar)

Presbyterian World Mission offers an array of mission-planning resources at pcusa.org/missionresources. The section on planning mission trips includes extensive information, including sample schedules, guidance on choosing destinations, and tips for leaders.

Of particular interest are two book-length downloads:

- *When God's People Travel Together*, a three-volume set that includes a leader's manual, a resource to help participants reflect on their experience, and a set of Bible studies
- *Faith in Action*, a two-volume set for reflection on sustainable mission involvement