



Developing Student Leaders Through Short-Term Trips

By Ridge Burns

The wave of short-term missions' popularity has flooded even the youth ministries of churches across the U.S. In many cases, youth short-term missions trips have changed students' lives and produced career missionaries. In other churches, youth short-term trips have unfortunately become the essence of the ministry. Where employed optimally, youth short-term trips have served as vehicles for discipling students and developing student leaders.

Many good organizations will send your junior and senior high students on trips around the world. For many churches, these are the best outlets for youth short-term trips. However, if your church is prepared to do the extra work required to let your students help design and lead their own short-term trips, the resulting discipleship will prove to be invaluable. Yet before eagerly deciding to travel this route, several items must be in place before such trips will succeed.

Foundationally it is important that your church understand the purpose of youth missions trips. Why do you do them? How do they fit into the larger scheme of your youth ministry? Personally I believe that we do youth short-term trips for three reasons:


1. **To make disciples.** We want to produce disciples who, among several key characteristics, love God's world and His mission. Short-term trips will produce unique situations in which students learn about themselves and God can work in them.
2. **To expose students to other cultures** so that students may evaluate the one in which they live. To give them a glimpse of other parts of the world allows them to see both the positives and negatives of American culture. They return more thankful for what they have, and hopefully less materialistic.
3. **To change the entire church's view of missions.** As their sons and daughters head out to the world, a church's adults become personally involved and invested in missions.

It is also important to understand what youth missions trips are *not*. Youth missions trips are not missions in so far as major advances made by the gospel. They are an opportunity for students to build an appetite for missions. Real ministry results may occur but are not a prerequisite for success of the trip. Additionally, missions trips should not be the center of the church's youth ministry. Adventurous trips can wrongly become the showcase events of a youth ministry while eclipsing other major areas (such as discipleship and local outreach).

Before running overseas missions trips, I would also encourage your church to consider if you've "ramped up" for such involvement. Have your students already successfully engaged in simpler local opportunities, such as visiting a local mosque on a Saturday morning, working in an inner city soup kitchen, or funding a mercy ministry such as adopting a child overseas? If not, start at this point. The next precursor to church-sponsored youth missions trips would be sending youth on missions trips through other organizations, such as Teen Missions. These are critical intermediary steps en route to sending out your own short-term teams.

Other areas to assess are your church's openness to sending out teams, your sources for funding, and the preparedness of your potential leaders, both yourself and the students in the youth group

Once you've laid the groundwork and assessed your resources, I believe your church is ready to send your youth on your own church-sponsored trip. Please note that several organizations are willing at this point to plan and run entire trips for your youth missions teams. There are simpler ways to run such trips than the methodology that I propose here. But the following methodology is specifically tailored for churches that want to develop students into leaders by making them integral to the decision-making and leadership aspects of a short-term trip.



The following, then, are the steps to a student-driven short-term trip.

1. **Gain approval for the trip from the pastor, the missions committee, and students.** Their responses will tell you to what to pay close attention in your planning, such as cost or safety.
2. **Select a student leadership team.** Your core student leadership team (SLT) should minimally consist of a *student director* who runs the logistics of the trip, and a *student shepherd*, who will serve as a chaplain and the director of spiritual life on the trip. The most important part of assembling your SLT, regardless of its size, is insuring that every member of the team has a specific job to do, as prescribed by a job description. You should also select **adult coaches**. These would include any adults who will go as chaperones on the trip, or any adults who will help in your training.
3. **Develop a plan for the trip.** In conjunction with the student leadership team, I suggest that the leadership team begin meeting at least nine months before the trip, twice a month for two hours in the beginning. This frequency would obviously increase as the trip approaches. At the first meeting, you should develop a clear mission statement for the trip. Each SLT member should bring approximately 40 possible goals for the trip. At the first meeting, compare ideas and pare them down to a maximum of fifteen goals for the trip.

At the second meeting, put up several sheets of butcher paper on the walls of your meeting room. List each of your major goals on one of the sheets. Write every task that must be accomplished in order to achieve that goal. Assign a deadline for each task, and a student leader responsible for the task. Then write every task on an index card, and at the end of each future meeting, hand out to each student leader those cards with tasks that must be done by the next meeting. At future meetings, then, students are held responsible for accomplishing those tasks. As the leader, resource your student leaders but don't rescue them by doing their work for them.

Keep detailed minutes of your SLT meetings and circulate them to the pastor, missions committee and any appropriate parents.
4. **Secure a ministry site.** First, determine the criteria for your site. This will be driven by what you want to accomplish, your budget, and the trip's length. Give a list of your key criteria to the missions committee and ask it for suggestions. This brings the committee into the loop of the trip.

I suggest developing a list of at least two viable choices for

your site. Once you've determined your site, determine an on-site manager. This will normally be the missionary under whom you will be working. Give him/her a written job description that clarifies your expectations. This is important because some missionaries view short-term teams as a nuisance, and will not supervise them well. Such missionaries should not be your on-site manager. Make sure that you talk directly to this person, rather than someone in the missionary's home office who may make promises of which the host missionary is unaware.

5. **Take a pre-trip visit if it is at all possible.** Minimally, the adult leader should go. If the budget allows, any student leaders who can go should go as well. One year a trusted friend told me of a missionary in Ireland that my friend was convinced would host a great short-term team. I went to Ireland to visit this missionary and early in our conversation I knew that to work with this missionary would prove to be problematic. I changed my plane ticket and went to investigate an opportunity in Spain. That's where we went, and had a great trip. I'm sure that I averted a disastrous trip by simply visiting the field first.

On this trip, build relationships with the locals in advance. Familiarize yourself with the area, making sure that you know about:

- a. *The local hospital.* What signed forms would this hospital require if it needed to treat one of your students? Take those forms back with you.
 - b. *Day-off recreational possibilities.* Have at least one free day for students. Where could they spend it?
 - c. *Stores.*
 - d. *Churches.*
 - e. *The airport.* Find out how much it would cost if someone on your team had to leave immediately.
 - f. *Local police stations.*
 - g. *Local phone numbers* that a parent would call in an emergency.
6. **Develop a publicity plan for the trip.** Have SLT members publicize the trip at youth meetings, parent meetings, through mailings and through personal calls to youth group members.

At this point, it's tempting to begin to think that the adult leader must step in and "professionally present" the trip. Trust your students! Let your students promote the trip to your elders, missions committee, staff, etc. Frankly it's more difficult for these boards to say no to students than to you. Also, it connects students to adults and gets them to work together. One time we needed to get permission from our elders for a particular aspect of the trip. I sent the students in to talk with the elders. This elder board usually so tightly

timed its meetings that it used an egg timer to pace the agenda. I sat outside the room and waited. I was sure that something had gone wrong. When the students emerged they reported that the elders were so moved that they all got on their knees and prayed together.

7. Develop a budget. Use your church treasurer as a resource. One of your SLT positions could be that of student treasurer who works with the church treasurer through the process of keeping the trip's books. Put the budget in writing.

8. Plan for securing funding. I realize that a number of philosophies and church policies surround funding short-term trips. I personally suggest that students raise a third of the funds individually, that the entire team together raise a third, and that the church give a third of the needed funds. If your church opposes fundraising events, then don't include that as part of your plan. In any event, expect God to supply in miraculous ways!

9. Select your team members. This process should include a formal application and references. The application packet should also clearly explain expectations and requirements of all team members, such as fundraising, attending training, and on-field behavior. Be clear (on paper!) about what you're looking for in team members, including, as appropriate, spiritual maturity, skills, and past ministry experience. Stay firm on the deadlines.

10. Train students for the trip. Your training should cover the following areas:

a. Logistics. For example, if your team is going to camp during the trip, have one meeting during which the team must set up tents. Make it fun by turning it into a contest with prizes.

b. Culture. This would include issues such as basic survival language, and the essentials of culture shock that they can expect. If your team is going to an Hispanic culture, then jointly attend a local Hispanic worship service as one of your required meetings.

c. Ministry training. Students should be trained in sharing the gospel and giving their testimony (in simple terms for a translator). If your team is going to do drama or music, it should go prepared for its performances.

d. Construction training. If your team will be doing construction, you should train the team in what it will be doing and the tools it will be using.

e. Travel plans. What should they bring and how should they pack? What paperwork is necessary?

f. Team covenant. Members should jointly agree on and sign a covenant regarding team expectations for issues and

values such as conflict management, a servant attitude, why someone would be asked to return home early (and who would pay for the ticket change), etc.

11. Get the entire church involved. Have team members secure prayer partners back home. Commission the team publicly. Invite the church (especially parents, elders and staff) to come to the send-off. I suggest that teams leave on a Sunday afternoon, because it gives your adult volunteers a Saturday to rest.

But once the team leaves, I believe that team members should receive no mail or phone calls. The purpose of the trip is to extract them from their culture. Give them their mail on the trip home. The team can communicate with the church either through maintaining a website or calling into the church office and leaving a voice message.

Post-trip

12. Publicly report back to the church. I encourage team members to bring back a physical object as a symbol of the trip, that they will use in the presentation. This should not be something that is illegal to take out of the country, or to bring back to the U.S.!

13. Wrap up the trip. This would include debriefing students by having them fill out an evaluation, and meeting to help them process the trip and determine future involvement in missions. Your student treasurer should balance the books with the church treasurer. Select your leaders for next year's trip. Do this in part by asking this past team's leaders for their advice concerning next year's leaders. When you select next year's leaders, pair each of them up with the student who did that job last year, so that the outgoing leader can explain the job to the incoming leader.

I like to take my SLT out for a fancy dinner when we get back as a way of saying thank-you. I also give each team leader a framed photo of the team, and a calligraphy thank-you note.

This method of sending students on short-term trips is certainly more time-intensive, but I've found that it reaps rich rewards in developing students into leaders.

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