



Since many youth leaders plan future mission trips for their youth groups at this time of year, NNYM pulled together three leaders in the youth missions movement: Noel Becchetti, Sean Cooper, and Jonathan Hasz. We asked them to discuss how we can involve our youth in missions experiences that bear fruit and have greater impact.

What are important issues to consider in selecting a missions experience?

Noel: The most important issue to consider in selecting a missions experience is, *"Why are you doing this?"* Are you looking for an "experience?" Or do you want to offer authentic service as you and your group learn more about God, His world, who lives in it, and what it means to be Jesus' hands and feet in a cross-cultural situation, even briefly?

I'm really concerned that much of what we call "missions experiences" are not much more than glorified vacations taken under the auspices of "ministry" so that someone else will help to fund it.



Sean: I agree. Unfortunately, some youth pastors are simply looking for the adrenaline rush of a one-week cross-cultural experience that is divorced from the day-to-day ministry they do the other 51 weeks of the year.

If I had to boil it down to one issue, I would say it's important to consider the long-term impact both for the students going, as well as those they are interacting with in another culture. What are you aiming to cultivate in your students' faith in Christ? How does this experience weave biblical themes into the other experiences they are encountering every day? Do they see the value of relationships as part of this missions experience, or is it viewed as simply another event or task?

What are the pros and cons of partnering with a short term missions provider?



Jonathan: A great threat to missions overall is an ineffective, poorly planned short-term mission (STM) trip. This leaves the participants feeling that missions are not worth the effort. A benefit of finding a trusted STM partner is letting that partner do the set-up work, plan the logistics, set up the ministry using tried methodology, use established economies of scale to increase purchasing power, and pool resources. That enables the youth leader to concentrate on training, the trip and debriefing extras to make the experience more eye-opening, effective, and lasting.



Noel: Another big positive to partnering with any legitimate STM provider is that they will have the long-term relationships in the field that you most likely could not develop. Cross-cultural ministry (like most ministry) is all about relationships: the more in-depth and long-term those relationships are, the better it is for your experience.



Sean: On the other side of the coin, I think that youth pastors sometimes disengage from the relational work that is the very essence of ministry in other cultures. In other words, the STM provider, serving as a middle man/woman, handles so much of the details that depth is missed in working with key leaders in those areas.



Noel: Another possible issue is that working through a provider will likely be more expensive. They have to maintain and support the staff and infrastructure that allows those long-term relationships to grow and develop, whether groups are in the field or not. So there is no way to work through an agency for the same cost as doing it yourself. The question is: "Do you have the contacts and relationships to create an effective mission experience in the field?"

What are the biggest errors that most youth leaders make in planning or preparing for a short-term missions experience?



Jonathan: Many youth leaders think planning a mission trip is similar to planning a retreat, and so they focus on the logistic details (of which there are many) and not the ministry. Planning effective ministry takes a lot of time, relationship development, and experience.



Sean: To me, it's choosing where to go and with whom you cooperate on the field. There is a lot of good material available to youth pastors on how to get from here to there logistically. But I see little out there on how to appropriately select a strategic partnership that reflects the values and strengths between the two parties involved.



Noel: Another big error is not thinking about your purposes and goals. Many youth leaders just don't think this through. STM has become a rite-of-passage "given" for many in youth ministry, to be scheduled alongside the ski camp and senior banquet.

If short-term mission trips are approached correctly, it will be much more of an investment and commitment for your group than their ski retreat and other fun (albeit meaningful) youth-ministry events. That's why any reputable mission agency has thorough and challenging pre- and post-trip training courses, as well as an effort-intensive schedule (including regular debriefs and processing) while on-site.

Many NNYM members want their mission experiences to have a lasting effect on the lives of their youth. What can they do to extend the immediate impact for the long term?



Sean: As a youth pastor at a missions-minded church, I've given much thought to this question. First, we should start with the question of mission. How has God called my church and youth ministry to complement the work He is doing around the world?

BIOS



Noel Becchetti is president of Center for Student Missions, which has planned and led inner-city mission trips for youth, adult, and family groups since 1988. Prior to his taking the helm at CSM, Noel was senior vice president at Youth Specialties, where he worked in several capacities for nearly thirteen years, including the launching and direction of YOUTHWORKER Journal. He lives with his wife, Kyle in El Cajon, California, and has two children.



Sean Cooper grew up as a missionary kid in Brazil, South America. As youth director at Northland Community Church in Longwood, Florida, his goal is helping students see their part in God's grand narrative, connecting them to their local and global communities. Sean and his wife, Addie minister together, taking their daughter Emerson with them as they travel the world.



Jonathan Hasz is the executive director of Teen Mania's Global Expeditions. He worked as a high school administrator, coach and teacher for seven years before coming to Teen Mania in 2000. He is active in the NNYM Missions Affinity Network, and has a passion to see young people changed as they change the world. Jonathan lives in Lindale, Texas with his wife Kelly and their daughter Jordan.

Once that question is answered and crafted, then look for the match that will enhance the ministry efforts on both sides of the equation. For instance, if you have a church that is gifted in the area of evangelism, look for a complementary ministry emphasis that has a similar focus.

Then, if you want to weave the experience deep into the lives of those in your ministry as well as whom you are serving, spend time in meaningful discussions while on the trip. An easy place to start these days is around the subject of "global giants." Ask those whom you are serving what *they* think are the biggest challenges in their community and country. Ask your own students the same question, and compare similarities or differences. Integrate those themes back home into your next teaching series to tie things together.

Look for "youth ministry to youth ministry" connections in your global work. Even if you use a short-term agency to help connect you to a project in another country, take the step to meet church leaders in that area and find out what they are doing to reach out to the youth in their community. You will find much common interest in the struggle to reach out to students that transcend cultural barriers.



Jonathan: Great points, Sean. Two critical aspects of a trip that will enhance the immediate impact for the long term are *trip leadership* and *training/debriefing*. Training and debriefing can set the trajectory for the participants as they blast into the mission and as they come out of it, and apply their mindset and worldview back to everyday life. Being intentional about what we want young people focusing on and thinking about as they experience their mission can help us intentionally take advantage of teachable moments and their experiences.



Noel: Also, we can't forget the importance of maintaining relationships with partners.

We have seen group/ministry partner relationships develop that have continued and grown for literally decades, with massive positive impact for everyone involved. This is the beauty of short-term mission when it really works: the establishment and continuation of these kinds of long-term, cross-cultural friendships and partnerships.



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What input do you have for integrating mission experiences into the overall youth ministry?

Sean: You have to first decide whether or not you are going to focus on the full picture of what God is doing in His kingdom globally, versus just locally. If you go down that road, you have to prepare yourself and the ministry for an emphasis that is year-round, not simply the handful of months around the trip. The missions experience is not a stand-alone event, but rather a piece of the greater vision of cultivating students into a life of service. Once the jump is made in seeing God's kingdom activity, you no longer differentiate between "local" and "global;" you bring the gospel fully to the whole.

Jonathan: Take advantage of every mission experience that students in your ministry are involved in. Let your kids learn vicariously through those who do go. If one young person spends time in Africa, have her share about her experience, show pictures, and talk about what God has done in her life. The passion can be contagious.



Sean: Finally, let me share this challenge: What would youth ministry in the U.S. look like if we all made a radical commitment to become a "Global Student Ministry?" You will not only train students for a life of service locally and globally right now, but you will prepare them for their future vocation by showing them the connections God is making in His kingdom in business, government, the arts, sports, and other areas of focus. ♻️



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