

After the Mission Trip

You're back from the mission trip and after all the shared stories and pictures and some intentional debrief, you soon slide back into the busyness of life.

The liminal experience of being outside of your comfort zone and growing tremendously during your trip is all but forgotten and the rich soil of community that was cultivated among the team members on the trip has quickly dried up due to the scorching demands of the day once you return.

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As the days turn into months, you talk less and less to the team members that had become like family. When you do run into each other, an exchange of memories and smiles occurs, but deep down you long that God was still doing amazing things through each of you, “like God did on that trip.” Over time, you resign yourself to the lie that only on mission trips do amazing things happen and you, like many others, start living mission trip to mission trip.

It doesn't have to be like this. There's more than just living mission trip to mission trip.

So, how do you transition from just going on mission trips to ongoing missional living?

By leveraging social media we can help students go from a one-time mission trip to a multiplying movement of missional living.

In this article I will outline necessary goals that can be taken after a mission trip to ensure ongoing transformation in the lives of your team, but more importantly, the continuation of the work that God has started in and through them.

With a proper theological and sociological mindset, social media can help you and your ministry accomplish these goals:

1. Enable the team to remember their story
2. Gather the team around their mission
3. Provide a sea of communication
4. Facilitate ongoing and collaborative learning
5. Invite people to join what God is doing in and through the team

Though technology and social media is always evolving, today Facebook is the most popular social networking site among teens. For that reason, the practical applications within this article all occur within a Facebook Group.

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Goal #1: Enable the team to remember their story

The Hebrew word for remember is found 233 times in the Old Testament (Strong's 8217). The ability to remember is a critical attribute in our relationship with God, especially as we become bombarded more and more with distracting messages and anti-Gospel stories daily. In the same way that the Israelites constructed monuments to remember what God had done in a particular place, social media provides the materials to construct an ongoing memorial to what God did during your mission trip. Photos, videos, and discussions of the trip can be constantly added, creating a living, breathing memorial that enables the team members to remember their story.

Social media is the perfect environment for this as research shows that many adolescents first started using social media in order to capture, modify, and share personal photos and videos.

Practical Application:

- Set a goal to comment on 5 posted pictures from the trip each week. This will create a culture that remembers.
- Create a discussion thread entitled, "Remember when..." and let the fun begin.

Goal #2: Gather the team around the mission

The idea of "gathering" might seem strange to some if it does not occur at a specific physical location and time. However, social media has redefined the concept of "gathering." In fact, some research has shown that the lack of physical proximity can actually help rather than hurt the team. A paraphrase of the old adage, "absence makes the team grow stronger," is more than a trite cliché. When understood and harnessed, it can be extremely powerful because "gathering" can occur with great frequency and consistency when it doesn't rely on the ability to line up the schedules of all team members.

By changing the mindset from the "mission trip" to the "mission of God" as the center around which the team revolves, you will enable kids to transition from just going on mission trips to ongoing missional living. There needs to be a transition in focus on what God did on the mission trip to what God is currently doing through your lives now.

Practical Application:

- Create a new group that students can join that focuses on ongoing missional activity rather than just the trip they went on. Specifically, the name of the new group should not be the location of the mission trip but rather a vision of missional living. (For example: Tonga 2009 becomes Loving Others 24/7)
- Post a short video or written devotional each week that recalibrates the team around the mission of God. Encourage dialogue around it.

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Goal #3: Provide a sea of communication

While the internet has been often called a “sea of information,” social media has enabled it to become a “sea of communication” as well. Much different than a pipeline, a sea has neither a single starting point nor a unidirectional flow. It is vast, dynamic, and much more powerful than a pipeline. Letters, phone calls, and text messages are all one-way pipelines of information. Social media enables everyone to be the catalyst for communication, thus opening up a dynamic and powerful dialogue that is as vast as the sea.

This concept can actually allow small groups of people who communicate through social media to produce more results than large corporations who communicate through top down communication pipelines because social media allows groups to work faster, smarter, more creatively, and more flexibly. Your role, as leader, is to create the sea. As Seth Godin says in his influential book Tribes, “Great leaders create movements by empowering the tribe to communicate. They establish the foundation for people to make connections, as opposed to commanding people to follow them”.

Practical Application:

- Provide weekly discussion questions that revolve around living missionally.
- Enable students to be able to post their own questions and discussion topics. (Within a Facebook Group this would mean making each student an Officer rather than a Member)

Goal #4: Facilitate ongoing and collaborative learning

It has been said that “leaders are learners,” so this curve has to begin with you. It is essential that you create an environment and culture that values ongoing learning. The emerging generation that has grown up with the Internet is arguably better primed to be lifelong learners because of the immediacy and breadth of information the internet offers. A wealth of knowledge is capable of being explored without having to leave home. Research has shown that this has dramatically lowered barriers to self-directed learning. Take advantage of it.

The key, however, is being a facilitator rather than an authoritarian teacher. Through facilitating ongoing and collaborative learning, students will learn much more than information, they will learn how to lead. Research has revealed that online groups provide an opportunity for youth to engage in thought and opportunities that would not normally be available to them.

Practical Application:

- Post free excerpts from some of the great curriculum resources from Fuller Youth Institute (One Life Curriculum will give you a year’s worth of material) or the action/advocacy resources from International Justice Mission (Prayer Guide for the Abolition of Slavery could be a 5 day prayer opportunity).
- Create a discussion thread entitled “What I’ve Been Learning” and publicly encourage students whenever they share what they are learning.

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Goal #5: Invite people to join in what God is doing in and through you

What happened in Fiji shouldn't stay in Fiji. If you partnered with a local church in Fiji and served alongside them for a week, it shouldn't remain a mere moment in time. There's a huge difference between a moment and a movement. Movements occur when people talk about what happened, when ideas spread within the community, and when others join in. All of a sudden, something bigger and more powerful than your mission trip begins to multiply and spread. On the internet, this is described as "going viral." When something goes viral, it spreads like an epidemic. Let what God did on the trip and is continuing to do through you go viral.

Practical Application:

- Make your ongoing missional group open and invite others to join the movement. (Because you are most likely working with minors, use discretion in creating an open group. While there are great benefits in helping students value being part of a community that is open, it must be tempered with the need to protect students emotionally as they are vulnerable in their online sharing. You can still keep the original mission trip group private as I suggested in a previous article in order to protect the potentially sensitive material that the students posted.)
- Regularly share with the entire youth group (or even better: the entire church) what your team has been doing locally since you've returned from the mission trip.
- Allow the movement to become bigger than the mission trip and bigger than you.

Great Facebook Groups that are already doing this:

Often, it helps to see what's working and what's not before diving right in and leveraging social media for a specific purpose. Explore these sites, make observations, and contact the administrators if you have any questions or comments. Learn from other people's journeys and remember that you have much to offer as well. We need your voice and your perspective to contribute to the ongoing discussion of how we can better serve God in each of our specific ministry contexts.

Mission Year: A yearlong urban ministry program focused on Christian service and discipleship.

I Am Second: A movement that started in Texas that revolves around the premise that "I am second" and "God is first."

Heart Support: User submitted content to encourage conversation, help, and education on the subjects of addiction, depression, eating disorders, self injury and suicide.

Action Steps:

1. What have been some of the greatest hindrances in helping students live beyond just mission trip to mission trip?
2. Of the 5 goals listed above, which one resonates the most with you?
3. Of all the practical applications suggested, which do you believe would be the most effective in your specific ministry context?

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