

MISSION TRIP SAFETY – Have you covered it all?

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“Trevor! Get down off of the roof!!” Nothing wakes a mission trip chaperone more effectively from a deep sleep than those words, just after dawn. We had been warned that Trevor, a wonderful addition to our Maranatha mission trip to the Dominican Republic, was a climber. In fact, his mother had approached each of the chaperones with her personal request to watch for his propensity to scale everything in sight, and of greater concern, his complete lack of long-term planning when contemplating his next summit.

By the end of the trip, we had successfully kept Trevor safe. He was the first to volunteer to run wiring in the church rafters, the first to inspect the roof for leaks, etc. Whatever involved altitude, we could guarantee Trevor was first up the ladder. Only a slight mishap with a hive of bees, predictably at the top of a palm tree where Trevor was collecting coconuts for the group, marred an otherwise accident-free mission opportunity for these eager high school students.

But the question must be asked, “Did we do enough?” Had we anticipated the many variables that could create risk or injury to those in our care? Based on successfully returning all of the students to their parents with limbs intact, you could say yes, but was it good planning or Providence?

Any trip involving children or young adults is a challenge, but mission trips, especially overseas trips, add a special responsibility that is often underestimated. The basics of a safe mission trip involve three major categories that should occupy your specific attention – physical, emotional, and spiritual safety.

PHYSICAL SAFETY

This subject gets the most attention by far. Physical safety while traveling encompasses many more facets than we can explore in this article, but a few key issues to prepare for include:

- **Packing list** – Details are dictated by the duration of the trip, the climate you will be traveling to, and the remoteness of the site. Do you need passports/visas? Are there special dress code suggestions to avoid offending local customs? Don't assume attendees will think of everything on their own.

- **Medical** – Immunizations before you go, and medical support on-site while you are there. Permission slips and medical releases **MUST** be with you at all times! Remember, food and water differences country to county can cause different reactions from person to person. Educate, and be prepared for the worst!

- **Supervision** – What should be the ratio of students to adults, both on the job site and during downtime? Is the group large enough to break it down into smaller sub-groups to keep better track? Make sure you have an ironclad protocol for the head count, and this should be followed **EVERY** time you gather or reconvene the group.

- **Safety equipment** – Will you be painting, raising a roof, or pouring a foundation, or all three? Remember the proper equipment necessary for a safe construction site.

EMOTIONAL

For many of the participants, this is their first experience out of the comfort zone of everyday life. You will likely deal with a host of emotions resulting from this unique exposure.

- **Culture shock** – No matter how much preparation you provide in advance, there will be a period of transition when attendees contemplate poverty for the first time, living conditions (including their own), and basic health and wellness differences from what they are used to.

- **Interpretation** – Communication may prove difficult. What gestures are inappropriate in this culture, or may lead to unwanted attention? Have you considered an interpreter at the job site, or for the living/dining environment?

- **Homesickness** – Some will be away from home for the first time, or at least farther from home than usual! In fact, much of the experience will stretch nerves to the breaking point. Can parents reach children and vice versa from the site? Is that a good idea?

- **Culture shock** – I repeat this on purpose, because you must not forget that many feel some shock on the *return* to their former life. This is usually more pronounced after longer trips, but there may be a reaction to the excesses of North American culture, a desire to change lifestyles and habits. Be prepared to work with attendees as they come to grips with these new emotions.

SPIRITUAL

This is often overlooked as a safety issue, as it is assumed that mission trips are inherently “life-changing” experiences. However, this aspect must be managed just as carefully, to provide the eternal impact that is so important. We subscribe to the philosophy that we are going to the mission site to help others. In doing so, we fill our time with a plethora of activities – building, painting, and repairing during the day, providing worship services and Vacation Bible Schools during the evenings and weekends, filling every available moment in service to our fellow man.

It is easy to forget that an important part of the experience is the change that comes *inside* each participant. Don't forget to schedule downtime during the day. Time to reflect, privately and in group activities, on what has been accomplished, physically, emotionally, and spiritually, both for those we came to minister to, and within ourselves.

A successful mission trip is more than just new buildings and intact limbs. Ultimately, it results in changed lives, both at the site visited and in the hearts of those who visited. As we consider the safety of those we will lead into this wonderful experience, remember that our goal is always to protect the whole person – body, heart, and soul.



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