



# Missions as Leadership Training: Developing Urban Leaders from the Inside Out

Picture the typical youth mission trip. More than likely you will visualize a group of 14-year-old, white, suburban youth giving piggyback rides and teaching songs to Hispanic children, serving meals to the homeless, hearing lectures from missionaries and ending the week before getting back on the bus or plane by reflecting on all they learned.

So what's missing from this picture? Where are the students of color and the youth of these under-served communities? Often they are only in the picture if they are being served, not acting in service or leadership roles.

Most of us know mission trips are crucial components of almost every youth ministry. Being able to show young people they are able to serve as Jesus' hands and leading in productive ministry allows them to grow immensely in their faith and

leadership capacity. Although urban youth may not be the first faces to appear when you visualize young people serving, these experiences are just as, if not more, valuable to kids from the city.

The fact is that the largest growing mission field—urban centers—are in desperate need of strong leadership, but few of those leaders actually come from the city or from immigrant and ethnic communities and churches. Given the right experiences and mentoring, urban students can become the forefront leaders in restoring and transforming the communities from which they come.

One primary and proven venue for increasing leadership opportunities for all youth, including those from under-served communities, is short-term mission trips. These service-learning projects offer all youth the opportunity to practice leadership skills and reflect on the experience to learn more about themselves. Skills essential to leading, such as brainstorming, decision-making, goal setting, teamwork, responsibility, implementing strategies and evaluating results can be taught and practiced as teens plan and carry out significant service projects.

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## Train on the Go

Many urban youth groups successfully have utilized mission experiences to develop their student leaders. A group of Latino youth from Los Angeles raised the funds to go to Brooklyn, New York. There they had their first experience outside their own community and served a largely Asian neighborhood by running a Vacation Bible School. This Latino group learned, many for the first time, what it means to serve and lead rather than be served and led. The wonderful outcome was that the group returned to the Pico-Union neighborhood they called home and began serving at their own local S.A.Y. Yes! Center with at-risk youth.

Another group, from a mainly Cantonese church, left their own city and served at a sports camp in Miami. They coached children from Haiti, West Africa and Cuba. This allowed them to gain the confidence to go back to their own community and cross the avenue that separated Chinatown and Little Tijuana to partner in beginning a junior high, after-school program aimed at serving students from both cultures.

Lastly, New York City is where a group of Caucasian and Native American youth from Minneapolis first experienced a densely populated and diverse neighborhood that they had known only from watching "CSI." In cooperation with a local ministry, they helped develop a meal program for the homeless.

This group was so well-prepared to lead that when they returned to the Twin Cities they got their whole church engaged in providing shelter, food and other crucial services to the homeless in their own community.

Mission trips are vital and can be most successful at leadership training if they include the student in a serving and leading activity in which he or she can reflect critically on what was observed and learned, determine what was useful or important to remember and use the information to perform another activity back home at church, in the community or on campus.

## Cross the Barrier

It's key to look for mission trips that not only have your group serving but also developing relationships across cultures other than its own. A good mission trip will provide opportunities for active

leading and directed learning. You will know that your mission trip was successful when you hear your students say, "I never thought I could do \_\_\_\_\_, but God used me to do just that." If your group returns home not only fired up to serve but with the ability to lead, you will know the time, effort, resources and sacrifices were worth it.

Many urban youth workers already know their groups are full of leaders. Breaking the cycle of only being recipients of service and accessing resources to participate in cross-cultural mission trips outside of their city are existing hurdles these urban groups will need to overcome. The first step for these groups may be to serve in simple ways right in their own community to prepare themselves to go elsewhere. Serving in a variety of ministries (soup kitchens, Vacation Bible School, playing Bingo at a nursing home) all increase the chances that the youth will find the niche in which they best fit. Even committing to serve one Saturday a month will expand their horizons and allow them to build relationships while building character.

## Partner with Others

Sometimes urban youth leaders shy away from engaging in cross-cultural mission trips simply because of cost. With a little digging though, you'll find there are resources out there to launch urban youth groups into service. While it's not wise to let anyone do a mission trip for free, innovative fundraising can be key to involving all potential leaders. There are many mission agencies that provide scholarships that make trips more affordable. Many organizations provide creative fundraising ideas, as well. Don't hesitate to contact these agencies directly to inquire about the different resources that may be available for your team.

Another option is to bridge with a suburban youth group. Develop a relationship with a group different from your own group's culture. Suggest joining that group on a mission trip. Groups that serve together will begin the difficult process of reconciliation. Making a trip more affordable often can multiply the impact that a group could make individually. Fundraise together; go through pre- and post-trip training together; travel together. The more time you invest in each other's groups, the



CSM leaders gather around a mural in Chicago.

more successful your trip will be!

A quick but strong warning to suburban youth workers would be that all too often suburban youth ministries think of partnerships with urban or ethnic youth groups in an "adoption" paradigm. Instead, consider a "bridge" metaphor that allows your group and a culturally or socio-economically distant group to learn mutually from each other; work toward genuine, biblical reconciliation; engage in teamwork; make a powerful impact on their world; and develop all the students as world-class Christians.

Never fall into the trap of believing that at-risk youth cannot serve or lead. Experiential mission trips enhance leadership skills and build positive attitudes among all youth. Expect the outcome of your mission experience to include leadership development, confidence building, empowerment and mission-force strength. Together we can build the next generation of urban Christian leaders among all people. **YWJ**

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