Projects vs. People

Short-term missions, Kids Alive Service Teams included, are almost by definition centered around programs and concrete tasks, designed to be accomplished in a short period of time.

But in order to sustain the kind of change that matters, they must do so much more. Our team must be ready and willing to invest in relationships with the people who will benefit from our projects. The wood and steel and paint we leave behind will be appreciated, but these projects cannot, especially of themselves, break the cycles of poverty that keep a community from giving its children hope for the future.

It’s important that we look at our finite tasks with bigger eyes, ones that see our projects as “containers” for engaging those we serve. Our short-term tasks also give shape and context to our opportunities to encourage, support, and fellowship with believers on the field, whether they be missionaries, national staff, or church leaders. “The project doesn’t exist solely to meet the need in the community, but also to provide a venue for relationships to grow and develop.”

Relational Focus: Being a Faithful Presence

In every stage of your trip, be ready to invest in relationships. You will have chances to interact with the ministry staff, people in the church, bus drivers, construction workers and others…Take advantage of every opportunity to get to know the others around, and share Christ’s love with them. From the moment you start asking for support and traveling to serve, you will have the opportunity to positively impact others.

Getting to know others values them and shows that we are “in this together,” serving the same God and working toward the same goals. We can’t just provide material resources; we must help to put in place the interactions and the trust that will inspire the children, their families, and in many cases whole communities that make our projects valuable over the long haul:

...if we think of physical materials as the primary impact of a short-term team, it’s easy to miss the most important components. God certainly wants us to share with others what He has blessed us with (2 Cor. 9:11). Bringing these resources, gift and talents to the field has great potential to produce a change in a community. However, if done outside the context of relationships, the results will likely lack long-term fruit.

It’s easy to convey the impression, without even realizing it, that we believe God showed up when we did. But our fields and ministry sites are full of dedicated men and women who feel His presence there every day, who labor long hours in difficult circumstances relying on His strength. To be sure, He goes with us and ministers through us, but He is no stranger to the ministries and staff we are serving.

They, as well as the children, have stories we need to hear and who need to become a part of us as we join with them in service. And they need to be encouraged and receive joy through the relationships we build so that they can be empowered over the long term to offer hope to vulnerable kids.

Avoiding the “Quick Fix” Mentality

Most projects are accomplished fairly quickly and have an end date. Relationships take time and, ideally, don’t just come to an end. We can’t change the world in a week or ten days, but we can set in motion the relationships that will affect the ministry long after the team leaves.

Making this a priority will honor those we are serving and set the tone for mutual respect, which is an important outcome of every project we engage in.

While it’s important to form and nurture relationships with those on the field, it’s just as critical that we allow missionaries and national staff to lead. They are the experts; we are there, like Barnabas in the
Scriptures, to “come alongside” — to encourage, support, assist, shore up, fill in gaps, multiply strengths. Letting our national staff and missionaries take the lead shows them respect. It also helps ensure that projects have proper “buy-in” rather than just being done at the prompting of Service Teams who show up with the resources. Any time it’s apparent that a team is there to dictate, direct, cast doubt on previous work, or in any other way convey ideas of superiority or condescension, that team forfeits not only the goodwill of those we work with, but likely the effectiveness of our labs in the long term.

Another positive outcome of letting local leaders “hold the reins” is that it fosters long-term independence and creativity. It may be satisfying for a team to feel that their expertise or brain power or muscle will change the dynamic on the field in the short time they’re there, but national leaders are going to remain on the field, serving for years if not for decades. What we don’t want to do is leave behind the kind of help that creates resentment, disillusionment, and cyclic dependence.

When in doubt, opt for the projects, schedules, and approaches that take the long view!

**Building Solid Relationships**

The goal of “building relationships” is an admirable one, but just how do we go about building cross-cultural relationships in ways that foster understanding and avoid misunderstanding? In this section we’ll get very practical, discussing concrete ways to form and nurture the relationships that give life to our mission.

An overarching principle as we move into the practical: we must love people for who they are, whether children, workers at the ministry, or members of the community with whom we come into contact.

This may seem elementary, but it is truly critical. There is a temptation to see missions as a task to be accomplished rather than a lifestyle of loving others and sharing hope. God is asking us to enter into their stories and discover how He sees them. The world may have labeled them poor, backwards and worthless, but in God’s eyes they have priceless value and are fearfully and wonderfully made. Consider these ways of building God-honoring professional relationships and friendships with those you meet:

1. **Learn some of the language and have the courage to use it.** Your hosts may also be English speakers, but your effort to enter into their world by learning common words and phrases in the local language is one of the quickest ways to show your interest in them — and to avoid a perception that a short trip isn’t worth the effort.
2. **Take advantage of shared meals.** When there is an opportunity, sharing a meal is a cultural win and helps build relationships.
3. **Ask questions.** The children you serve and the people you work with are bound to ask you questions. But show them your interest by asking them the same kind of questions and really listening to their answers. Hearing their stories forms a foundation for understanding their needs.
4. **Answer questions.** Questions aren’t just interruptions; they are the raw materials for the building of friendships. People in your host country are interested in you, your family, your personal story, even photos. Share them!
5. **Ask for help.** You’ve brought your skills and expertise to the field, but the ones who live and work there day after day have their own, sometimes very different, skills. Asking for their help builds goodwill and provides you the opportunity to broaden your own skills.
6. Take breaks from work when there is time to play or build relationships. The project is important; people are more important.

7. Accept gifts graciously. A gift from someone from another culture is usually a significant and meaningful gesture and indicates that person's desire to show gratitude and goodwill. Don't refuse—even if the gift is something that makes you scratch your head!

8. Don't put nationals on the defensive about their culture. It's fun to compare and contrast cultures, but you're there to learn, not to make locals feel that you are looking down on their ways of life. Find ways to cheer them on and show your appreciation for the differences.

9. Share your testimony. There will be opportunities, especially after initial steps in building relationships, to share the testimony of your conversion to Christ and the way He directs and affects your life. If He is the reason you're there, they need to know!

Who Is Our "Audience"?

The "audience" of the Service Team is much bigger than just the children we serve. Nationals, church members, community leaders and members, drivers and construction workers—these and many others are watching and absorbing even when you are not actively engaged with them. Nothing you can say while sharing your testimony speaks any louder than the messages you send when you think no one is looking.

One of the first and most important ways that your audience forms impressions about your team is the interactions they see among members of the team. In the Gospel of John, Jesus says, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." (John 13:34-35) It's an unmistakable identifier, visible to all, that we are His disciples, and it's especially important in our dealings with those who don't yet know Him.

Francis Shaeffer, in his book The Mark of the Christian, comments:

It is possible to be a Christian without showing the mark, but if we expect non-Christians to know that we are Christians, we must show the mark.16

We want all to know that we are a Christian ministry, even as we acknowledge that not all of them will be Christians or even happy to have us there. Whether at the airport, on the plane, traveling in country (and especially if you're wearing matching shirts with your church's name!), people will notice how you interact.

Your mother may have told you that "Kindness starts at home." In this case, the kindness, forbearance, and sensitivity we show to our own team members will be the springboard for how we build relationships with those on the field.

Caring for Children by Caring for the Caregiver

You're going to a Kids Alive ministry site because you love kids, right? So it's natural that you're looking forward to spending time with them, learning about them, making a difference in their lives. You, and they, are hoping for meaningful interactions and relationships.

It's important, though, to keep in mind that national staff are the main source of developmental and spiritual impact in a child's life. Focus on the long-term caregivers, teachers, parents, staff, missionaries because they are trained and specialized to do what you wish you could accomplish in one week, but they do it year round, in the right language and culture. Encourage and support them to make a long-term difference...Enjoy the children, of course, but don't make them your only focus!
National workers also minister with a deep understanding of the circumstances and trauma that are part of their children’s stories. And their influence goes far beyond the lives of those immediately committed to their care:

They are year-round messengers of the Gospel. They are influencers and listeners. Rain or shine, they visit families in homes and look for opportunities to effect change in people’s hearts. They bring to the table a special ability to build relationships with community members, which is a key tool for community transformation. They inspire hope, shining the light of Jesus in the world’s most vulnerable places.  

We can never replace these dedicated men and women and shouldn’t try. In fact, one of the best things we can do for the children is to support and encourage their caregivers, some of whom labor to the point of exhaustion in settings that are hard to imagine. (We’ll explore some practical ways to do this in a later session.)

**Welcoming the Interruptions**

God uses people – ordinary people who have ordinary lives. Sometimes daily life gets in the way of our “best laid plans.” We deal with this in our own worlds every day, but it’s important to think through ways to deal with and maximize the opportunities presented by interruptions in the schedules we’ve carefully prepared for our trip.

When things don’t go as planned, when projects and supplies aren’t ready on time, when it’s raining too hard to work outside, when the bus driver is late...it’s tempting to be discouraged. But often, God has orchestrated what appears to be an obstacle as a gift – to build a relationship, to pray, to re-think the task, or even to rest.

There’s no trip where everything goes as expected. So it’s a good idea to prepare ahead of time with some strategies to maximize interruptions and “down time.” List some topics for prayer or discussion. Plan for ways to give encouragement to a struggling missionary or an overwhelmed worker. Grab a partner and go for a short “prayer walk.” Look at every interruption as an opportunity for “stretching” and growth that might not have been possible if our plans had succeeded perfectly.

The mind of man plans his way, But the LORD directs his steps.
Prov. 16:9 *(NASB)*

**Get Ready to Grow:**
**Making Room for Personal Impact**

You’ve decided to participate on a Service Team because you want to help children and missionaries through projects and relationships. But God has yet another reason: your own growth and spiritual development. And preparing for that growth is part of “packing” for this trip.

If all you do to prepare for your mission trip is pack a suitcase, you might be missing the “mission” part of your trip. Just like you wouldn’t go on a trip without first packing the right clothing and gear, you shouldn’t go on a mission trip without first preparing your mind and heart.

This isn’t a selfish consideration. God has designed this experience as part of your growing in His likeness, and it’s something to look forward to!

Consider as part of your plan for growth:

1. **Prayer.** Pray alone. If you’re married, pray with your spouse. If you have children, enlist their prayer support. Pray with your team. Ask your church to pray, and pray with
them. Pray for the mission, for your trip companions, for those you will encounter along the way, for the communities you’ll visit, for local church leadership in those places. And don’t forget to pray for yourself, that no opportunity for growth will be missed.

2. Devotions. Nothing replaces the daily planting of the Word in your heart, and in times of high activity, stress, and physical and spiritual depletion, that need becomes even greater. In this manual you’ll find daily devotionals that will help you focus on some of the issues you’ll encounter on the field, but it will also be helpful for you to continue the devotional practices that have led you thus far in your spiritual development.

3. Sharing. There’s great value in sharing with your team members and others what God is doing in your life as you prepare for and participate on a Service Team. And don’t overlook the value of hearing the growth He’s causing in your team members as well. Remember—we’re in this together!

4. Practicing grace. “A mission trip can be the most physically, spiritually, and emotionally demanding week in a person’s life. Anticipating those demanding situations can go a long way in helping you navigate potentially difficult moments during your trip. And the best way to navigate difficult, stressful, and draining moments throughout your trip is to embrace one thing: grace.” If your flight is delayed, if they’re out of vegetarian options on the plane, if the local food tastes weird, if your project gets rained out, if you don’t sleep well, if you get bit up by bugs, choose to embrace:

- Flexibility over obstinacy
- Gratefulness over complaining
- Encouragement over gossip
- Kindness over sarcasm
- Grace over entitlement

Living out a life of grace doesn’t happen accidentally. It’s worth thinking about now, and praying about how you will react when the inevitable stresses of international travel, close quarters, fatigue, and cultural differences come calling.

A one-week trip is but one of the resources that God will use to grow you, and it will be much more effective if it’s approached with spiritual goals in mind. You might come home with strong muscles, but we want you to build spiritual “muscle” as well. It’s a worthwhile goal, one that’s important enough to prepare for with intentionality.

It’s Never Over: Team Preparation for Lasting Change

The impact of your Service Team trip should continue long after you return home. God’s goal is to create lasting transformation in your life as well as at the ministry site He’s leading you to serve. And having long-term impact means seeing through a far-sighted lens: the actual trip is only part of a much larger picture.

As you prepare for personal change, remember that you have a responsibility to be a part of your team’s growth in all the areas we’ve discussed. You’ll participate not just in these pre-field sessions, but in on-field and post-field debriefings that will help you understand and process your victories, your struggles, your surprises. Sure, you could do some of this by yourself, but don’t underestimate the richness and clarity that come as a result of looking at the same experiences from the slightly different viewpoints of your teammates.
You'll also consider, especially following your trip, how God might use this experience as a springboard for future service. Whether that means a ministry down the street, a career on the mission field, or a life of service and encouragement to those on the front lines, your upcoming trip could very well be the next step in your response to the call:

Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

Matt. 28:18-20 (NIV)

**Group Discussion and Personal Reflection:**
**Maximizing Opportunities for Change**

1. What does it convey to those we are serving when... we value building relationships with children, staff and missionaries? ...we focus only on accomplishing projects?

2. How can we prepare ahead of time to build relationships well?

3. What are some practical ways to prepare before the trip, so that we can take advantage of interruptions and see them as opportunities?

4. What opportunities might be missed if we are solely focused on the children?

5. Just like teams strive for long-term impacts among those we serve, how might God be working to create a long-term impact in your life?

**Practical Team Preparation:**
**Mission Statement, Team Unity, Conflict Resolution**

As you’ve planned for this Service Team trip, you’ve no doubt discussed why you’re going and how you’ll go about accomplishing your team’s goals. Following this team meeting, you’ll want to formalize these concepts, creating a series of statements which will help clarify the purpose – and to which you can return after the trip to help evaluate the experience. We’ll break these into three main areas:

**Service Team Mission Statement**

Create a team mission statement to help you develop a common purpose, goals, priorities, and values that you will strive toward as you journey together. Keep it short!

Our mission as a Kids Alive Service Team is to ___________________________ (tasks and relationships)

So that ___________________________ (expected outcomes and benefits)

We will do this ___________________________ (how/what is important in teamwork)²¹

²¹

**Personal Mission Statement**

Create a personal mission statement, unique to you, to help you determine your purpose and priorities for being part of this Service Team. Keep this one short, too!²²

²²