

A Practical Checklist for Your Next Mission Trip

Sixteen years ago I prayed a dangerous prayer. I said to God: “Here am I, send me”—and I knew He would take me seriously.

Since that holy moment, I have traveled to preach in 29 countries, and I will leave tomorrow for Iceland. Last year I slept in 58 different beds, some of them extremely uncomfortable, because I surrendered to the call to share Jesus in other cultures.

Missionary travel is biblical. Ever since the Lord called Abraham to leave Ur, God’s followers have been hitting the road to carry His message to foreign places. (And many, like the prophet Jonah, have resisted the call!) The early disciples carried the gospel from Israel to the entire known world in the first century without the benefit of airplanes, smartphones and credit cards. So today we have no excuse when it comes to fulfilling this amazing global assignment.

Perhaps you are preparing to go on a short-term missionary journey this summer. A mission trip can change your life, but it can also turn into a disaster if you fail to plan. Here are a few reminders to help you prepare.

1. Don’t go alone. Jesus sent His disciples two by two. It is best to go on mission trips in teams. There have been times when I flew alone and met other people in the country I was visiting. But my preference is to always have companions with me. And a mission trip is a perfect opportunity to take disciples with you so you can mentor them along the way.

2. Be sure you are covered in prayer. It’s vital that you have intercessory support while you are on a missionary trip. I always send a prayer letter to my supporters before I leave, and I give them specific information so they can pray

effectively. It's also a great idea to have your pastor and other church leaders lay hands on you and pray before you depart. You will feel the support!

3. Get the right documents. You can't travel outside the United States without a valid passport. You may also need a visa in your passport depending on what country you are visiting. To find out if you need a visa, check out the country's embassy website. In some cases you will have to mail your passport to the embassy with a fee. In other cases you simply need to pay a fee at the airport when you arrive at your destination.

4. Get your shots! Some countries require travelers to have certain immunizations. Go to the U.S. State Department website to find out if you need these. It's cheaper to get these at your local health department than from a doctor. You will receive a yellow health card with official documentation of your shots. Keep this card with your passport on all trips. Do not be foolish and presume that God will automatically heal you if you didn't protect yourself from disease.

5. Pack wisely. Find out from your hosts how they want you to dress. In some countries preachers are expected to wear suits even though it is extremely hot! Don't assume you can dress however you want. Be sensitive. You should dress in a way that honors your hosts. (In some countries it is considered inappropriate for men to wear shorts, for example, or for women to wear pants.) Also, be sure you research what type of electrical plugs are used in the country you are visiting. If you don't take the right plug adapter, you will not be able to recharge your phone or other devices.

6. Take the right amount of cash. I avoid using my credit card in developing countries because some vendors will steal your number. Determine before you leave how much cash you need, and store the cash in a concealed pocket. Go to a bank to exchange currency. It is unwise to use currency vendors on the street

unless your host is with you and he feels the rate is good.

7. Take interest in the people you are ministering to. Mission work is incarnational. To be effective you must identify with the people. Eat with them, laugh with them, be affectionate with them and serve them. Set your cultural differences aside and be relevant. I do this by learning some phrases in the local language, learning facts about the country and eating the local food. I also try to build lifelong relationships and I stay in touch with the people after I get home. Never engage in “hit and run” missions. Stay connected!

8. Learn to use a translator. If the people you are visiting do not speak English, you must depend on a good translator when you teach or preach. Usually your hosts will provide the translator—but you should make sure this has been arranged before you leave. You may have the best translator in the country, but if you don’t know how to speak properly using a translator the people will not benefit from your message. Speak in short, clear phrases or complete sentences, and then let the translator translate. Don’t use slang or American expressions. And don’t scream or be theatrical. Remember: The people need to hear your translator, not you.

9. Prepare your heart to be a servant. The last thing the world needs is a spoiled American traveling to a developing country. We are called to deny ourselves as we follow Christ. Don’t make demands when you are with your hosts. It is wonderful if you have hot water in your shower, Internet access or a nice bed. But don’t go expecting to be comfortable, and don’t complain about anything when you are there. You might suffer a little from heat, mosquitoes, broken toilets, thin walls, noisy roosters, leaky roofs or gross food, but I promise those inconveniences won’t kill you.

10. Be flexible! In most foreign countries, especially in the developing world, people think differently about time. Church meetings start late. Schedules change. Transportation is

unreliable. Electricity goes out often. It is easy to get frustrated if you are used to American efficiency. You must learn to relax and rest in God. Your hosts may tell you the meeting starts at 9 a.m., but don't get upset if everything is two hours late. This is the reality of the mission field. Remember the old adage: "Blessed are the flexible, for they will not be broken."

And finally, when you return from your trip, it's important to debrief. Don't just jump back to your office job. Take some time to process. I minister to many abused people when I travel, and I hear a lot of horror stories. I also see a lot of poverty—and this can weigh heavy on my heart. It's important to talk to some friends about what you experienced after you return.

Don't just bottle up your feelings. What did you learn? Share what troubled you. Cry if you need to. Be open and let God speak to you about what you saw during your trip. He will expand your compassion so He can love a broken world through you.

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