

Mission Trips & Work Camps

(From the Archdiocese of Cincinnati, 2007)

Service learning can take place in powerfully effective ways through mission trips and work camps. These have become normal fixtures in many parish summer youth ministry calendars across the archdiocese, and can be life-changing moments in the lives of young people.

Mission trips can be either domestic or international. They are frequently arranged in conjunction with a sponsoring organization, often a religious community like the Comboni Missionaries, the Franciscans, Glenmary or Maryknoll. They can last as little as a weekend, or as long as a month, although the typical length is one or two weeks. There are as many different kinds of experiences as there are different kinds of missionary activity. Participants may find themselves restoring housing in Appalachia, teaching in a Vacation Bible School on an Indian reservation, or serving food in the inner city.

Work camps are relatively new experiences for young people. Typically scheduled during the summer months when young people are more available, work camps are week-long, structured programs of service, prayer, fellowship, religious education and reflection. In short, a work camp provides a complete and well-organized program of service and formation for youth. Rather than having to plan all of the complex logistics of a mission trip, adult leaders can opt into a work camp package that makes all of the arrangements for you. In preparation for a work camp, adult leaders typically need to attend to fund-raising to meet the substantial per person fee, transportation, and collecting tools and supplies. Service sites and the entire program during the week away are planned and coordinated by the work camp staff. An example is Young Neighbors in Action, a work camp conducted by the Center for Ministry Development. Information about opportunities such as these is available from the Office of Youth & Young Adult Ministry.

Be sure to consider legal and liability issues, insurance, transportation, chaperons, etc., as well as essential planning fundamentals related to Catholic Social Teaching.

Advantages of Mission Trips & Work Camps

- Since both mission trips and work camps typically involve an extended immersion in a very different socio-economic, cultural or ethnic world, participants find many of their fundamental assumptions about life challenged. Such experiences are ripe moments for conversion into a deeper appreciation of the prophetic dimensions of the Gospel.
- Groups that share such experiences tend to bond deeply. Fast friends in faith for life often emerge from these kinds of experiences.
- It is not unusual for young people to come to a clearer sense of a personal call or vocation to ministry or service by virtue of such experiences.

- Both mission trips and work camps typically involve service to the poor – thus, not only are the poor served, but participants deepen the kind of solidarity with the poor that is at the heart of much of Catholic social teaching.
- Interdenominational Christian work camps can provide a wonderful context for ecumenical interchange and a chance for Catholic youth to encounter and learn more about the faith of other Christian denominations.

Some Concerns about Mission Trips & Work Camps

- A great deal of preparation, advance planning and fund-raising usually precedes these events. Typically adult leaders need to arrange for transportation, lodging, food, and secure building supplies, lumber, tools, etc., as well.
- Since such programs are so time- and resource-intensive, they can have a detrimental effect on other dimensions of the comprehensive youth ministry effort in a parish or school.
- Safety is always a very important consideration in traveling with young people. This concern is amplified exponentially if the destination is a third-world country, or a location with little or no access to health care, or a place subject to political unrest or exotic health threats. Adult leaders must exercise great care in selecting destinations, in working with reputable sponsoring organizations, and broadly, in ensuring that all participants will return safe and sound.
- Both Protestant and Catholic organizations sponsor mission trips and work camps. If a parish is contemplating a Protestant-sponsored trip, leaders need to thoroughly check out the theological assumptions and doctrinal content that their young people may encounter as part of the experience. As a general rule, Catholic-sponsored programs will adhere to the principles of Catholic social teaching – one less thing for adult leaders to be concerned about.
- The cost of mission trips and work camps can be prohibitive for groups or individuals.