



Put down the camera . . . please

Reframing youth mission trips



Summer had arrived. I knew it was summer when pictures of kids on mission trips began to pop up all over my newsfeed on Facebook.

I've been in youth ministry for almost 13 years. I've traveled all over the world on mission trips and for conferences with youth. I've painted houses, spackled, tiled, taught vacation Bible school, and served meals. Every summer I, like many other youth pastors, pack my suitcase multiple times and head out on the road to serve God and God's people.

Every summer I too stand behind the camera as the youth from my church work, snapping pictures to prove to our congregation that, yes, we did indeed go on a mission trip, and yes, we did spend all that money you helped us raise to serve God.

The first day back from a trip my church secretary, like yours, asks for all the pictures so she can put them on the church website and in the newsletter. Our presbytery office will send out a mass email at the end of the summer asking for all those pictures so they too can post them.

But this past summer, I tried something different. I didn't take any more pictures of my youth standing among the poor children they're serving. I didn't ask them to stop immediately as they're handing out a food tray and pose.

This summer, I put down my camera, and I'm inviting you to do the same. Put. Down. The. Camera. Please.

When we go on a mission trip, our goal is to serve, learn, grow in faith, and experience what is out there in the world. We're going where the Lord has called us. While it's nice to have some pictures as memories, and it's nice to have something to show the congregation, mission trips are not the time to practice our Annie Leibovitz skills. I promise you, even if you set your camera to "black and white," it doesn't make your mission experience better or more authentic.

As I watched pictures pop up on my newsfeed of mission trips, I couldn't help but become more and more frustrated with my friends and with myself. I saw pictures of church kids with homeless people, and my first thought was "Great pic! I hope I get one like that!" I didn't think about the great service they were

doing; I didn't think about their experience, or more importantly, about the particular story of the homeless person in the photo. And I realized something very important—great pictures aren't mission.

Without pictures we had to find a different way of sharing with our congregation what we did. We had to go "old school" and actually talk to one another. We had to share stories. We had to build relationships.

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Giving up the pictures was hard at first. With the advent of smart phones, the temptation to immortalize our every step runs deep. But I noticed something interesting last summer: each time I asked the youth to leave their phones behind, they didn't seem to mind, and pretty soon I didn't mind either. Suddenly, instead of looking for photo opportunities, they listened to the people they were serving; they formed relationships; they really *looked*.

I know it might seem unlikely or impossible even for youth today, but they are in fact capable of giving up technology, including the phone, for an experience out in the world. If they can do it, we can do it. Hey, most of us were actually born before cell phones even existed, right?

So this summer and on future mission trips, I'm inviting us all to participate in a different kind of challenge: don't photograph, participate. Even if you actually are Annie Leibovitz, I assure you, your mission work will still happen without pictures to prove it. And without the camera in front of your eyes you may see something new, wonderful, and beautiful—God's holy world and holy people.

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