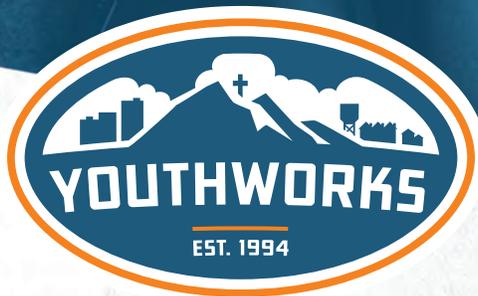


MISSION TRIP PREP ESSENTIALS:

Forming a Culture of Us

Addressing the dangerous
"Us vs Them" mentality in missions



25 YEARS OF CHRIST-CENTERED MISSION TRIPS

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THIS IS AN ESSENTIAL READ FOR HEALTHY MISSIONS

A quick note before you begin.

After 25 years of facilitating short-term youth mission trips, we've recognized a number of essential topics that every youth worker should include in their pre-mission trip prep work. This guide book is designed to introduce you to one of these topics in a way that you can utilize it on your own, with a group of your volunteers, with student leaders, and even in small groups of students going on your mission trip. It's not an easy topic but it's necessary, and here's why...

We cannot advance in our pursuit of justice without calling out the destructive mentality of "us vs. them" that pervades our society. This guidebook will address some of the underlying forces that, when unnamed, can undermine efforts towards understanding and community-building. Here's a quick look at what is to come:

Cultivating Self-Awareness

The journey begins with ourselves and our stories. We all have tales of triumph, tragedy, migration and settlement that have shaped our lives. Knowing our own stories can lead to understanding and empathy towards our neighbors and increase our capacity to bridge divides.

Mitigating the Impulse Towards "Othering"

The impulse to view others with skepticism, fear or judgement is not new, but is part of our cultural and biblical heritage. Jesus confronted this throughout his ministry, providing an example of radical humanization of everyone he encountered.

Identifying Implicit Bias and Hidden Fears

In a society that promotes and celebrates self-determination, it can be difficult to admit something like implicit bias, the nature of which is shaped by factors outside of our control. Yet, Christians are not exempt from socially-conditioned biases or hidden fears and are susceptible to inadvertently perpetuate them if we are not aware of how they work.

IN THE END, WE WANT THIS GUIDE BOOK TO REMIND YOU OF THIS TRUTH...

For God did not give us a spirit of fear, but of power, love and a sound mind.

This encouragement from Paul to Timothy captures the journey towards forming a "Culture of Us," a shared celebration of humanity and commitment to caring for one another.

We know this is a difficult topic, and one that can't be fully covered in a guide book like this. So we're here to support you along the way. Don't hesitate to reach out if you have any questions or are looking for any more information.

Ready for it? Let's jump in.

INTRODUCTION:

The Intersection of Social Justice & Discipleship

Black Lives Matter

#MeToo

Refugee Crisis

Mass Incarceration

Young people of the 21st century are encountering ideas, people and movements at an accelerated pace and with unprecedented complexity. Many social movements highlight, or even amplify, divisions or differences with language of “Us” and “Them.” Awareness of these movements among our students can be liberating and empowering for some, but confusing or discouraging for others.

Youth workers are often on the front lines of helping students navigate their experiences with changing relationships, identity formation and developing worldviews.

This can feel intimidating even for the most informed and practiced youth worker, but can be especially daunting for those who feel unprepared or uninformed about social issues or cultural schisms.

This guidebook is designed for youth workers who want to expand their proficiency in leading students at the intersection of social justice and discipleship.

Before we can get to the other chapters, here are some suggestions for getting the most out of this resource:

- **More questions, less answers.** Commit to engaging the material with curiosity and a posture of openness. Allow questions to form and commit to sitting in the discomfort of those questions, even if (when) answers do not come easily.
- **Notice the squirm.** At some point, you will likely feel uncomfortable with where the material is leading you. Take some deep breaths and invite the Holy Spirit to sit with you as you consider the reason you might be feeling uneasy. These are the situations that often lead to “a-ha!” moments if we sit with them long enough.
- **Marathon training in progress.** This is no sprint! The journey of thoughtful, prayerful reflection and intentional action is a long and meandering one. Be patient with yourself and take time to process your hopes and fears as you remain committed to learning for the sake of yourself and the students you lead.

- **Buddy system.** Invite a trusted person or two on this journey with you. It will help with perspective, encouragement and creative action.

This guidebook includes three chapters, each with a mix of prompts that invite engagement and reflection. We are confident that you will gain important and empowering insights that will impact yourself and your ministry.



- CHAPTER 1 -

Cultivating Self-Awareness

Some of us were assigned the task of creating a family tree in grade school. The more elaborate the tree, the more the student seemed to know about her heritage. Some branches might even include full names, places and dates instead of just names or titles, like “Grandpa,” or “Aunt.”

The symbolism of a family tree evokes roots in kinship, connection to distant relatives and a sense of place in the broader human story.

Your Family Story

Take a few minutes and jot down as much as you know about your family heritage. Include names, places, and any other details you remember about how your family story was written by the lives of those who lived it. Consider the following prompts that might uncover some additional nuances to your story:

- How far back can you trace your family’s migration from other parts of the world? What caused them to move as they did? How were they received in the places they settled?
- Does your family story include a variety of ethnicities / races or just one?
- What was the socioeconomic standing of the people in your family over the generations?

It is sobering, and perhaps inspiring, to see our lineage, the people whose lives led to our own. These are the people that we may have gotten our curly hair, green eyes or tall stature from, but they certainly played a large role in the circumstances we were born into and probably shaped the values that are most important to us.

Knowing our own family story can also help us see the forest instead of just our own tree; every human being has a heritage that includes many of the same events, challenges and successes as our own. The details are different, but the reasons people marry, move, celebrate, mourn and pursue their dreams are relatively universal across humanity. Self-awareness cultivates openness towards others and grounds us in an understanding of shared human experiences.

Your Community Story

Now that you have considered your own family narrative, let's explore the story of your community. This will take some research unless you are already well-informed about the history and demographics of the place you call home.

We're not shooting for expertise-level knowledge (unless that is your thing – then go for it!), but more of an intermediate level of awareness about who shares your area code and how the community got to be what it is. **The goal of this exercise is to find our footing within the broader narrative of our community.** Our natural human inclination is to center ourselves and our personal experiences in the middle of the story, effectively pushing other experiences to the margins without even realizing it. This exercise will affirm our place in our community without having to be in the center. This is a small practice that can tear down “us vs. them” and build a culture of just “Us.”

WHERE DO YOU LIVE?

We'd like you to answer this familiar question using the following prompts:

1. Was your town/city founded before or after WWII?
2. What is the racial makeup of your neighborhood? How does that compare to the wider city or region?
3. How closely do the public schools, local businesses and elected officials represent the broader community demographics?

Answering one simple question with these nuances in mind adds context and texture to our understanding of place – ours and our neighbors. Here is a bite-sized description of what the above questions are getting at:

1. Residential areas today are significantly impacted by two developments that happened after WWII – suburbs and interstate highways. Highways made suburban development possible since people still worked in the cities, but lived in the outer edges of the metropolitan area, requiring reliable and fast transportation routes. If your community is younger than about 65 or 70 years old, it probably has generally bigger yards and homes than urban neighborhoods, and it is also most likely to be heavily white since that was the demographic that could afford the suburban lifestyle. This wealth has probably been passed down through generations, leading to a higher concentration of wealthy families in suburban areas compared to urban neighborhoods.
2. Even if your community has racial and ethnic diversity as a whole, it is likely that particular neighborhoods are segregated by race. There are reasons for this that reflect personal choices, but the underlying and most comprehensive reason can be traced to public (government) and private (banks) policies on the books until very recently. These policies explicitly restricted home ownership to “whites only” in many urban neighborhoods and almost all of the suburban developments from the 1940s to the 1970s.

3. Local institutions are microcosms of the community as a whole, providing insight into how cohesively different people live, work and learn together. What are the student and staff demographics of the schools? Are local businesses owned by a broad range of people in the community or a small sample? How closely do elected officials represent the diverse populations of your city?

Now that you are reflecting on your community, let's move on from our prompts and have you spend a few minutes considering your own questions and observations.

As a student of your community, what do you notice or want to better understand? Jot your thoughts below.

How do you see your community differently now that you have taken some intentional time to know it better?

How do you understand your place in the community, considering the broader perspective of the area as a whole?

IDEAS FOR ACTION

The goal with this whole chapter is to know ourselves better so we can know our community better. Our unique experiences are important and contribute to the fabric of our surroundings; this is the same for everyone! Understanding and naming our own stories creates space in our imaginations for the stories of others.

With the pace of life most of us lead, intentional reflection about anything is hard to come by; kudos to you for taking some time to examine your personal and community stories. We hope these exercises helped you gain a refreshed perspective on some of the factors that shape your life and neighborhood.

Here are some tips for bringing your insights to the students and volunteers in your ministry:

- ▶ Exchanging family stories is an excellent team-building exercise and fosters belonging in the group, so consider setting aside time for personal sharing.
- ▶ Facilitate a community study similar to this one with your volunteers. Make sure to leave enough time for both the exploration and follow-up discussion so it can truly be a shared learning experience.
- ▶ Students might be more attuned to their schools than their neighborhoods, so consider leading a “school study” so they can examine where they fit within the broader school culture.
- ▶ Commit to praying for your community. There may be residual effects of racist policies or a legacy of discrimination that has a real impact on members of your community. If you discern that not everyone feels equally welcomed, be part of the solution and do whatever you can to extend genuine welcome to your neighbors.
- ▶ Keep communication lines open with students who want to process more deeply.

- CHAPTER 2 -

Mitigating the Impulse Towards "Othering"

Anyone who has read the Bible could not describe it as boring. Okay, maybe some of the Old Testament books or passages fall into that category, but there is an abundance of drama, romance, strange characters and surprising victories.

A theme throughout the Bible is God's desire that Israel, and then followers of Jesus, would shine like bright lights and draw more people to God because of the beautiful way they live. (Isaiah 49, Matthew 5) God shared specific instructions about how they could do that, but following through has been a problem for humans since the beginning.

So, at least we are not alone in our social, political, economic and cultural divisions. We have plenty of company in our human condition to build walls instead of cultivate community.

MIND MAP OF DIFFERENCE

One of the ways we can get off track from God's ideals for us is our reflexive reaction to difference, especially when it comes to other people. We all have a threshold of how much another person can stand out from what we are used to before we distance ourselves. It usually isn't mean-spirited, but, if left unaddressed, it can grow into negative stereotypes and an "us vs. them" mentality.

This abstract idea will be made more concrete with the following exercise.

Take a few moments to consider divisions in multiple levels of our society, beginning with your immediate community and branching out to your state/region and then to the national level. You will be asked to consider the nature of the division and what might be at the root of it. Please do not feel pressure to get the facts right; this is much more about your perception and personal experience than be factually correct.

Local Level

Where do you observe division in your local community? Be as specific as you can.

What do you know about how these divisions started?

State Level

Where do you observe division in your state? Be as specific as you can.

What do you know about how these divisions started?

National Level

Where do you observe division nationally? Be as specific as you can.

What do you know about how these divisions started?

PROCESSING DIFFERENCE

Do you see any themes across societal levels?

Social divisions often start with some form of cultural difference. Our cultural identities are core to who we are, so it makes sense that we would feel protective of them, especially if we sense a threat. Unfortunately, we often translate benign differences as threats when, in fact, they are just differences.

Let's take holidays, for example, because they are central to cultural expression and reflect our values as individuals and faith communities.

Your city might include white Christians of European descent, Southeast Asians who practice Animism, Chinese people who abide by Confucianism, Muslims who celebrate Ramadan, and/or Jews who observe Yom Kippur.

As Christians, we like to go all-out for Christmas and Easter and we like to see visible icons of these holidays out in public. As we perpetually hum “Joy to the World,” talk of cookie exchanges or the epic egg-hunt we have planned, our Jewish or Muslim neighbors might be preparing for the solemn holidays of Yom Kippur or Ramadan, which focus on repentance and fasting as practices that lead to greater religious discipline and obedience.

The vibe is going to be different, let’s be honest.

As Christians, we can choose how to interpret the contrast.

- One possible response is to see the different practices as a personal, or even spiritual, affront; if we see ourselves as the center of our community life and others on the periphery, this is a common response. Without consciously realizing it, we might have a default setting in our brains that moves beyond simply noticing the difference to assigning a negative or inferior value to it.
- We could also choose understanding and respect for the shared freedom we have as Americans to practice our religion without interference. Evangelistic goals aside, we can choose to interpret the difference as a reflection of their cultural and religious values instead of an intentional affront to our own. We might even notice the commonality woven amidst the difference – expressions of faithfulness and celebration with loved ones.

MINISTRY OF RECONCILIATION

Divisions at all levels of society are real and painful and affect us all in different ways. Not everything can be simplified to personal choices with individual people, but those things have an impact; us choosing to think and speak differently can eventually lead to new patterns and worldviews that disarm the destructive power of “othering.”

As followers of Jesus, we have what Paul called in 2 Corinthians 5, the “ministry of reconciliation.” We get to participate in the ongoing work of unity, restoration and peace-making as we follow Jesus’ example of reconciling us to God. Reconciliation is difficult, gritty, and humbling work and goes against the grain of our socialization.

But there is hope! The same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead is in us (Romans 8), empowering us to choose understanding and peace over hostility and division.

IDEAS FOR ACTION

This can be mind-bending work. Once we realize that we have perpetuated divisiveness and “othering” without even trying, it can be difficult to know how to mitigate it. Where do we start? Here are some suggestions for you personally and for your youth ministry.

- ▶ Revisit the exercise about societal divisions at least once a week for the next month or so. This will help to stay engaged and mindful of some powerful undercurrents in our culture. Make sure to pray for reconciliation in all the areas you wrote down.
- ▶ Incorporate stories, observations and wonderings into your sermons or volunteer training. Model what it looks like to notice difference without passing judgement.
- ▶ Learn about the different cultural groups in your community – and encourage your students to do the same in their schools – so you can be more informed as you interpret noticeable differences. Prioritize looking for commonalities, too!
- ▶ Regardless of the level of cultural diversity in your community, we can find patterns of “othering” in human relationships, even within the same family, peer group or congregation. Apply these same ideas to the most local of all your relationships and circles of influence.



- CHAPTER 3 -

Implicit Bias & Hidden Fears

Put your thinking caps on! This chapter is going to get a little “brainy,” like actually looking at some brain science and how our tiny neurons work together to influence how we live.

We’re ministry experts, not brain experts, so this will be a basic, 101-level introduction to the connections between values and actions. It turns out that we do not always live out our professed values and, while there are many reasons why this might be, brain science is one of them.

Consider the following riddle that reveals how this works:

A father and son get in a car crash and are rushed to the hospital. The father dies. The boy is taken to the operating room and the surgeon says, “I can’t operate on this boy, because he’s my son.”

How is this possible?

The surgeon is the boy’s mother.

Gender roles have been more inclusive for decades, so it is unlikely that most people would find it impossible to imagine a female surgeon. Yet, the stereotype, or bias, of surgeons as men is so deeply embedded in our collective consciousness, most of us automatically imagine the surgeon as a man, get stuck in that frame of thinking, and cannot imagine another scenario without explicit prompting.

Bias is not biologically wired into us; we make associations based on what we have been taught and exposed to in small doses over long periods of time. In the riddle example, when we’re presented with the operating room scenario, our brains produce information based on previous activity and connections between data points. Since images and stories of surgeons are almost always male, our brains take a shortcut and draw that conclusion rather than taking the time to consider other possibilities.

Unless we train it to do just that.

Are you ready for the longest, fanciest word in this chapter? *Neuroplasticity*

This is where brain science and faith principles work together in really cool, empowering ways.

Neuroplasticity is the idea that our brains are not set in their ways forever, but can be reworked with effort and repetition. This is very much like what Paul says in Romans 12:2: *Do not be conformed to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.*

Culturally-conditioned biases and stereotypes are powerful, but often do not reflect beauty, truth, or any of the fruits of the Spirit listed in Galatians 5. We have to reprogram our brains to recognize negative and harmful biases. With God's help, we can override those in favor of thoughts that better reflect our faith commitment, which, in turn, leads to actions that also better reflect our goal to live like Jesus.

In essence, scientists have confirmed what God designed; our brains can be trained to process information in ways that reflect our values and faith commitment.

CONDITIONED TO FEAR

There is another side to this neuroplasticity. If our brains can be trained to be more gracious and empathetic, they can also be trained to be more fearful and prejudiced.

What are some examples of things or people you have an instinctive reflex to fear?

In what ways were you taught to fear these things?

How do these fears play out in your everyday life?

In what ways might these fears get in the way of your discipleship?

Fear is a necessary part of human survival. It indicates perceived danger and prompts an immediate response to remove the threat. All animals have a fear impulse. What makes humans different is our ability to reason; we have the mental capacity to discern whether the fear is legitimate or a false alarm.

Remember in the last chapter when we explored the idea of “othering” and our tendency to translate difference as a threat? A poorly trained fear-reflex can add fuel to that fire and lead to an outsized response to something we didn’t need to fear in the first place.

A historically significant, horrendous example of this taken to the extreme is the complicity of German citizens in the genocide of six million Jews during WWII. These were your average Jane and John Doe Germans who became convinced that extermination of the Jews was necessary to their survival as a nation and people.

How did they become convinced of something so ridiculously offensive? How could these people, many of them Christians, buy into such a clearly hateful mentality?

Neuroplasticity.

Through a strategic, relentless and passionate public relations process that lasted over a decade, the worldview of Adolf Hitler was transmitted through speeches, images and public forums. What may have struck the average German citizen as laughable in 1933 started to be taken more seriously when the message was still being delivered in 1937, 1940 and through the war.

Hitler capitalized on the real fear of Germans who wondered how they would recover from the first world war (they lost pretty badly). Over time he convinced them that their recovery and return to greatness would not be possible unless the Jews were out of the picture. So, Germans gradually started to ridicule, suspect and fear their former neighbors and friends.

Consistent, convincing messages stereotyping Jews as inferior + fear = German complicity in genocide.

Neuroplasticity and being “transformed by the renewing of our minds” is serious business!

While there is plenty of hostility in the world, most of us will not experience anything like the extreme example of the Holocaust. Still, we are all susceptible to being manipulated by fear into thinking and behaving in ways that contradict our values and Christian commitment.

Take courage, friends! With humility, courage and persistence, we can assist in the transformation of minds – ours and those of our students. The following suggestions are designed to help you continue processing the ideas of implicit bias and hidden fear, as well as offer ideas for incorporating these ideas into your youth ministry.

IDEAS FOR ACTION

- ▶ Identify one or two specific thought patterns that you find unhelpful to your discipleship. Then, create a plan for how you can train your brain to think differently. Creating mantras that you repeat several times each day are a great way to start. (“Choose curiosity today,” or “Different is not bad. Different is just different,” are some examples.)
- ▶ Take your student leaders on a mini-retreat to talk about Romans 12:2, “Do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your minds.” Invite them to share ways your ministry can focus on renewing minds related to their social justice concerns.
- ▶ Practice confession. If you have been going through this material with others, consider ways to confess to each other. If not, find a trusted person to share your biases and fears related to social justice and invite prayer and continued conversation.



BEFORE YOU GO

Next Steps as You Continue to Explore This Topic

Our goal with this guidebook is to walk alongside you as you explore cultural divides that function almost on auto-pilot. We hoped to illuminate some of how these divisions happen and interrupt the harmful effects of these realities on the fabric of our communities.

The beginning of this guidebook encouraged you to identify a travel companion, a buddy that can help you process your ideas and questions related to bridging social and cultural divides. Draw on your shared wisdom and courage as you commit to taking more steps towards learning how to create a “culture of us.”

We have only scratched the surface, so please consider extending your inquiry by checking out some of the resources listed below. This is by no means comprehensive, but will point you in the direction of further exploration.

- **Free Hidden Biases Test.** Researchers at Harvard developed an online assessment that reveals hidden biases based on gender, race, income level, and a host of other categories. The tests are free and can be a helpful tool to gain insight into hidden biases. <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/>
- **“The Danger of a Single Story,”** by Nigerian novelist, Chimamanda Adichie. This TED talk from 2009 has been viewed over 17 million times. She brilliantly makes the case for listening to one another tell our own stories as a way to connect humanity.
- ***The Spirit of the Disciplines; Understanding How God Changes Lives*** by Dallas Willard (1990). A helpful companion to a journey toward mind and heart transformation.
- ***Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation*** by Miroslav Volf (1996). A seminary-level book that unpacks what draws us to, or repels us from, one another.
- ***Disunity in Christ: Uncovering the Hidden Forces that Keep Us Apart*** by Christena Cleveland (2013). A look at division within the body of Christ through sociological, psychological and theological lenses.

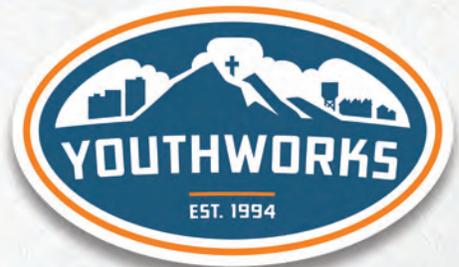
Remember that you are not alone on your journey towards “creating a culture of us.” We are right there with you, taking our own diligent steps towards facing our own biases and fears. We seek to be agents of healing and renewal in all of our communities and relationships. We are thankful to be on this road together!

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