

ENGAGING,
EQUIPPING, AND
EMPOWERING
EVERY STUDENT

On a Mission Trip



FRESH
MINISTRY CONSULTING



A QUICK NOTE BEFORE YOU BEGIN...

This guide book was created in partnership with Jesse Criss and Fresh Ministry Consulting because of Jesse's passion for training youth workers. Through his ministry, he's utilized the content in this guide book to help his own team and others create a vision and framework for discipling every teenager in their ministries.

Utilizing Jesse's approach, this guide book is designed to help you consider how to engage teenagers on your mission trip in a discipleship framework, regardless of where they are spiritually. Here's a look at what you'll find in this resource:

- ▶ **5 Types of Students**

The first chapter introduces a framework for recognizing five different stages of spiritual maturity we see in students. "The Handprint" will help you to identify characteristics of these stages and equip you for ministry before, during and after your mission trip experience.

- ▶ **5 Types of Students on a Mission Trip**

It is one thing to understand students at home, in the familiar context of space and schedules. Mission trips involve a swath of newness, some of which will be challenging for even the most spiritually mature students on the trip. This chapter translates the framework of the first chapter into the specific context of a YouthWorks mission trip.

- ▶ **5 Ways to Engage Students on a Mission Trip**

Different strategies will be effective with different types of students. This chapter introduces concrete practices that will help youth leaders reach students during and after the mission trip.

- ▶ **The Handprint Framework**

Frameworks like "The Handprint" are most helpful when we remember that they are generalized and not localized. The final chapter of this guidebook reviews the framework, while also drawing attention to exceptions and outliers that may not fit neatly in any category, yet still need to be served and understood.

We hope that Jesse's passion for training youth workers shines through this resource, and that you are better equipped and supported because of it. If it sparks any questions or conversations, don't hesitate to reach out for more information to Fresh Ministry or YouthWorks. We've got your back.

**Cheering you on,
YouthWorks + Fresh Ministry Consulting**

HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE

Whether your youth group has 15 or 115 students, it can be difficult to gauge where they are at spiritually. Our default can be to direct our ministry energy to the largest or loudest in the group, effectively marginalizing those that are at a different place in their spiritual lives.

This guidebook introduces a framework designed to help you direct your ministry energy to all the students in your group. “The Handprint” identifies five stages of spiritual development and common characteristics of each stage. Simply glancing at your hand can remind you of the different types of students on your YouthWorks trip and how you can engage each one more effectively.

The first chapter introduces the framework, followed by a chapter dedicated to applying the framework to the mission trip context. The third chapter provides concrete, practical ideas for engaging each type of student, especially during and after the trip.

Here are some suggestions for getting the most out of this resource:

- ▶ **Take notes.** Keep a notebook handy so you have a place to jot names, observations and questions as you engage with this material. It will be easier to apply the framework on the mission trip if you have notes to reference.
- ▶ **Plan ahead.** As soon as your trip roster fills up, consider how the specific people on your mission team fit into this framework and what that means for your effectiveness as a leader. Teach the other adults on the trip about the framework and collaborate about how to make sure no student falls through the cracks.
- ▶ **Remember the trees.** The Handprint framework creates order out of chaos. Not that your youth group is chaotic, but frenzied youth leaders with full plates can understandably lose sight of the needs of individual students. As you consider this framework, remember that it is the “forest” and paints a broad brush. Don’t forget about the individuality of each student.

This guidebook includes a combination of prompts that invite engagement and reflection. Through your engagement with this resource, we are confident that you will gain important and empowering insights that will impact your ministry.

- CHAPTER 1 -

5 TYPES OF STUDENTS

Take a good look at your hand. Maybe even trace it and keep the sketch nearby as you continue through this chapter. Our goal is to illustrate how a simple handprint can add depth and texture to understanding students. Greater nuance will help you reach students where they are at spiritually and recognize when and how movement happens between the stages of spiritual maturity.

The five digits of a hand will shape our discussion of the five types of students. As you review this illustration, consider specific students in your group or community.



CARE-LESS

These students could care less about Jesus or the church. Their attendance at events is likely due to boredom, a friendship with someone in the group or because their parents force them to be there. These students are often at ministry gatherings because they are chasing someone or something; sometimes they are following a friend who may or may not be more spiritually mature than them, they could be lonely, or they could be subconsciously looking for a sense of purpose.

Care-less students are associated with the thumb for a couple of important reasons. The first is that this category of student is usually a small portion of the group on the whole. If they participate, it might be sporadically or for the events that seem like the most fun. They may even be dismissive about any kind of spiritual focus or conversation.

The second reason care-less students are assigned the thumb position in this framework is because of the distance between the thumb and pointer finger in an outstretched hand. The distance is greatest between these two digits, reflecting the distance between care-less students and the next stage of student – those that are curious. It can take a long time for care-less students to move into a different spiritual space and some will never make that move, or at least not while they are still in youth group.

Care-less students need to understand that they are welcome in the group and have an important role. Indeed, the thumb is the most important digit of the hand, even though it is set apart and not as aligned with the fingers as they are with each other. Care-less students can feel marginalized if we are not intentional about valuing their presence in the group. Without them, we can easily lose perspective on our mission to be “salt and light” (Matthew 5) and forget that there is a mission field in our own schools and neighborhoods.

► Reflect

- How much of your youth group would you consider to be on the thumb of your ministry?
- Do these “care-less” students feel welcome and valued by adults and other students?
- How can you develop adults and students to more intentionally engage this category of student?
- What can you learn from care-less students about youth ministry?



CURIOUS

The most defining characteristic of this category of student is their interest in asking questions. Sure, some of their inquiries might be more about creating a distraction or drawing attention, but most of the time, these young people are genuinely interested in knowing more about Jesus, the church and what being a Christian is all about.

Students in this category care. They want to know what a life of following Jesus looks like and will mean for them. They are often the ones who ask the most profound, raw and authentic questions that reveal their hunger for truth and meaning. Or they might ask twenty questions in the first five minutes of a conversation and wear you out by their bottomless pit of wonderings.

Either way, these students are a gift to any ministry. Curiosity can be a virtue that encourages open-mindedness, wonder and discovery; these are important traits to cultivate in teenagers and our curious students can help to set the course.

Curious students are associated with the pointer finger because it is the first step once students decide that they do care about their spiritual lives and are interested in learning if Jesus is the answer for them. The distance between the thumb and pointer finger helps us understand that this process takes time. We need to trust the Spirit will move as they ask questions and consider answers.

► Reflect

- How much of your youth group would you consider to be on the pointer finger of your ministry?
- Do these “curious” students feel welcome and valued by adults and other students? The distance between the thumb and pointer finger is great, but as students move towards curiosity, the Spirit moves with them as they ask questions and consider answers.
- How can you develop adults and students to more intentionally engage this category of student?
- What can you learn from curious students about youth ministry?



CAUGHT

As the tallest finger on the hand illustrates, the students associated with the index finger usually comprise the largest subset within a youth group. These students have caught the vision and made a choice to follow Jesus.

Many youth leaders find this group of students to be the easiest to work with because they already want Jesus and want a supportive community. They are unlikely to be there out of coercion or under false pretenses, although friendship and peer connections are a strong motivator for any teenager. Some “caught” students may continue to ask a lot of questions, reflecting a lingering stage of curiosity, some are eager to grow in their commitment, and others are content to practice their faith on some form of autopilot setting.

Jesus’ parable of the sower in Matthew 13 is helpful in understanding this category of student. Just because students have chosen to follow Jesus does not mean they do not waver or face challenges. If the roots of their faith are shallow or they are susceptible to being overcome by weeds, they may struggle to exhibit fruit. Students in this category need continued investment, attention and spiritual care, even though they are the “easy” kids to have in ministry.

On the other hand, take care not to show favoritism or disproportionately invest in this group at the expense of other students. Most youth leaders are naturally drawn to students that are the most receptive. The index finger towers above the others, offering a poignant reminder for those who work with a broad spectrum of students – help these students thrive without leaving other students in the shadows.

► Reflect

- How much of your youth group would you consider to be on the index finger of your ministry?
- Do these “caught” students feel welcome and valued by adults and other students?
- How can you develop adults and students to more intentionally engage this category of student?
- What can you learn from caught students about youth ministry?



COMMITTED

As we move to the fourth digit of the hand, we see students taking their faith more seriously and making an intentional effort to grow in maturity. Committed students are those that have not only caught the vision of following Jesus, but actively look for ways to make their relationship with him more meaningful.

Incorporating a practice of spiritual disciplines is the vehicle many students use to move from the index to the ring finger in the Handprint framework. If their roots are in healthy soil and they have help thinning out the weeds of distraction and temptation, these students are likely to seek opportunities to grow. Study, prayer, observing Sabbath, or journaling can be helpful ways for students to create space for spiritual maturity.

Committed students are not interested in simply being called or known as a Christian. To this group, their faith means something significant and they desire to live it out with greater integrity.

In this way, the symbolism of the ring finger is a perfect fit for students in this category. As a common symbol of covenant love between marriage partners, rings on this finger are a visual reminder to all that the ring-bearer has made a loving commitment to put another first and live with that person in mind.

Students in this category are often the glue that holds a ministry together. They are not the largest subset of most youth ministries, but they are grounded, faithful, and tested. They have experienced doubts or trials and yet continue to trust God and want to be active in the church community.

► **Reflect**

- How much of your youth group would you consider to be on the ring finger of your ministry?
- Do these “committed” students feel welcome and valued by adults and other students?
- How can you develop adults and students to more intentionally engage this category of student?
- What can you learn from committed students about youth ministry?



CONTAGIOUS

The final category of student in the Handprint framework illustrates those that not only live for Jesus but are actively living out the Great Commission. These students influence and catalyze other students to grow in their faith. They have an impact on people at all stages of spiritual awareness and maturity.

The pinky finger is the shortest digit on the hand, reflecting the relative size of this group of students compared to others. According to stories Jesus told in the gospels, most of the seed scattered by the farmer yields no fruit. But the small percentage that does yield fruit, yield way beyond their capacity.

The presence of this type of student in a youth group can have an outsized impact on the whole community. Their energy and enthusiasm draw people to themselves and also to the source of their joy and love, making these students natural evangelists. A small but mighty army of students with contagious faith can shape the culture of a ministry and infuse the whole group with joy and peace.

► **Reflect**

- How much of your youth group would you consider to be on the pinky finger of your ministry?
- Do these “contagious” students feel welcome and valued by adults and other students?
- How can you develop adults and students to more intentionally engage this category of student?
- What can you learn from contagious students about youth ministry?

You did it! You made it through a crash course in The Handprint framework for understanding different types of students and how they engage their spirituality. The next chapter applies this framework to the specific conditions, opportunities and challenges of a YouthWorks mission trip.

- CHAPTER 2 -

5 TYPES OF STUDENTS *On a Mission Trip*

Pop quiz!

What is the most important type of student to have in your youth group?

Trick question – ALL are important!

What about on a mission trip, though? How might care-less, curious, caught, committed and contagious students fit with the goals and purposes of a YouthWorks trip? This chapter builds on what we looked at in chapter one by applying these five types of students to the specific context of a mission trip.



CARE-LESS STUDENTS

Just as students in this category of spiritual awareness and maturity may have ulterior motives for coming to youth group events at home, if care-less students are on the mission trip, it is likely for reasons other than evangelism or spiritual growth. The investment of time and money might deter this category of student from participating more than any other group, but there is still a good chance you will have at least one care-less student on your mission trip.

Students who fit this description and are on the mission trip will likely need significant time and attention from adult leaders. Without a deeper spiritual grounding and motivation, they might be more susceptible to distraction, complaining or missing the point of sacrificial service. Or these students could be all-stars on the mission site but remain disinterested in group processing, worship and devotional time.

This group of students will need more time to consider the goals and expectations of the trip, so adults should be prepared to *s l o w d o w n* when ministering to these students. Take time to get to know them, listen to their observations and questions and go the extra mile to make sure they have a sense of belonging and feel accepted by the group.

► Reflect

- Imagine your team roster for this summer's YouthWorks trip and consider who might be in the care-less category of spiritual awareness.
- How can you help prepare adults and other students to welcome and embrace the care-less students in the group?
- Take a moment to pray specifically for any care-less student you imagined.
- What additional preparations can you consider that would help the care-less students on the team have an even more meaningful experience?



CURIOUS STUDENTS

If you have ever spent extended time with a pre-school aged child, you may have felt like you were playing a never-ending game of 20 Questions. Kids at that age experience daily wonder about the world as their brains expand to take it all in. Everything is new and amazing!

With no disrespect to curious teenagers, taking them on a mission trip might feel a little like a perpetual game of 20 Questions, played in the comfort of a 15-passenger van or as you share a ladder on the work site. As we noted in chapter one, curious students care; they care about why they are there, what impact they are making and why the community needs help in the first place.

They may be bolder in engaging community members directly as they experience different aspects of the mission trip. These students also may have more questions of their peers and adult leaders. If these students do not come from a Christian background or have limited experience with biblical stories and spiritual language, their inquiries may seem unusual. They could reflect either a very elementary understanding of spiritual matters or a deep wisdom and courage. Yes, these students can be tiring, but their curiosity is a gift to the team!

► Reflect

- Imagine your team roster for this summer's YouthWorks trip and consider who might be in the curious category of spiritual awareness.
- How can you help prepare adults and other students to welcome and embrace the curious students in the group?
- Take a moment to pray specifically for any curious student you imagined.
- What additional preparations can you consider that would help the curious students on the team have an even more meaningful experience?



CAUGHT STUDENTS

This will most likely be the largest subset of students on your team, although they still represent a broad spectrum of spiritual maturity and understanding. Some of these students will lack the self-awareness to know how their faith impacts others on the team that represent different digits in the Handprint. As the largest group, it is easy for these students to go with the flow, stay under the radar, and not be challenged.

The parable of the sower (Matthew 13) is helpful when thinking about how these students might experience the mission trip. Consider a “caught” student whose faith has shallow roots. She might be easily discouraged when something is difficult or goes wrong. She has not developed spiritual resiliency and will need encouragement to push through challenges.

A student who claims Jesus as lord and wants to follow him but is easily distracted is like the plant that gets choked out by weeds. This type of student might lose focus or be on the trip more for the location or peer group than the mission itself. If there is conflict on the trip, these students might be more likely to be sucked into the drama and lose sight of the purpose of the trip.

A student who has strong roots and an ability to stay focused often experiences significant spiritual growth on a mission trip. These students are not derailed by distraction but remain interested in the core purposes and vision for the experience.

► Reflect

- Imagine your team roster for this summer’s YouthWorks trip and consider who might be in the caught category of spiritual awareness.
- How can you help prepare adults and other students to welcome and embrace the caught students in the group?
- Take a moment to pray specifically for any caught student you imagined.
- What additional preparations can you consider that would help the caught students on the team have an even more meaningful experience?



COMMITTED STUDENTS

Even if this is their first mission trip, committed students are likely to be among the most engaged people on the team. They are eager to learn, discover and grow in their understanding of themselves, the world, God and each other.

Relationships are deeply valued by these students and they will want to capitalize on the unique circumstances of a mission trip to begin or strengthen relationships. This includes how they approach establishing connections with the community; they may be quick to engage residents or show eagerness to learn about the community’s culture and history.

Committed students are also likely to bring intentionality to their relationships with peers and adult leaders. They see deep value to the living/learning/serving integration, even for just one week, and will lean in to make strides in positive relational connection.

These students will also be motivated to grow closer to God during the trip. They may be more open to trying new disciplines or communal practices that lead to spiritual growth. As the ring finger on the Handprint, committed students are ready to make sacrifices for the sake of others and to stay focused on the mission.

► **Reflect**

- Imagine your team roster for this summer's YouthWorks trip and consider who might be in the committed category of spiritual awareness.
- How can you help prepare adults and other students to welcome and embrace the committed students in the group?
- Take a moment to pray specifically for any committed student you imagined.
- What additional preparations can you consider that would help the committed students on the team have an even more meaningful experience?



CONTAGIOUS STUDENTS

The “pinky” group of students bring a contagious energy and enthusiasm to every situation, including the mission trip. This subset of students will be small compared to others, especially the “caught” group, but their impact will be significant.

The potential for this group to exert positive influence over the team is based on their “sold-out” attitude about Jesus, the group and the purpose of the mission trip. Contagious students will make every aspect of the trip look easy; they will bring an upbeat attitude toward even the most menial task and find ways to cheer up any downcast team member.

Contagious students may surprise you as they demonstrate leadership qualities and generosity of spirit. They will accept responsibility and encourage others to do the same. Mission trips provide a fantastic opportunity for these students to grow in skill development as they practice different ways of influencing their peers and adult leaders.

► **Reflect**

- Imagine your team roster for this summer's YouthWorks trip and consider who might be in the contagious category of spiritual awareness.
- How can you help prepare adults and other students to welcome and embrace the contagious students in the group?
- Take a moment to pray specifically for any contagious student you imagined.

- What additional preparations can you consider that would help the contagious students on the team have an even more meaningful experience?

The human hand was already a marvel, but now that we have seen how the Handprint framework can help us understand our students better, it is even more impressive! Keep your sketch of a handprint close so you can continue to fill it in with ideas for engaging all the students represented by each unique digit. The next chapter will walk you through each of the five categories of student, offering concrete ideas for effective ministry on a YouthWorks mission trip.

- CHAPTER 3 -

5 WAYS TO ENGAGE STUDENTS

On a Mission Trip

The goal of this guidebook is to equip you with a practical way of conceptualizing the different levels of student engagement and help you translate the concept to the mission trip setting. So, before you do anything else, pause and check to see how well you remember characteristics of each of the 5 types of students from The Handprint framework.

Care-less

Curious

Caught

Committed

Contagious

How did you do?

Try explaining it to a colleague or ministry volunteer if you are still a little fuzzy on what each of these categories suggests about the spiritual development of students.

The previous two chapters outlined the five categories of students, first in a generalized youth group context and then with a mission trip context in mind. This chapter will build on that foundation by offering suggestions for engaging students in each stage of spiritual development.



CARE-LESS STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Students in this group are largely motivated by reasons other than faith commitment. They are just as likely as any other group of students to be hard-working and kind. They also bring a beneficial presence to a mission trip team because they represent people we can reach with the Good News.

When care-less students are on your team:

- During pre-team meetings and early in the trip, make extra efforts to connect with them so they know they belong and are welcome.
- Draw them into conversation about what led to their decision to participate and listen for spiritual nuggets you can pursue later.
- Avoid discriminating against these students when it comes to assigning tasks or ministry opportunities and make sure they don't feel overlooked or forgotten. Trust that the Spirit will work through all students, even if they are spiritually care-less.
- Invite a committed or contagious student to intentionally invest in cultivating a friendship with students in this group. Peer interaction goes a long way in casting a compelling vision for the following Jesus.
- Look for opportunities to connect the activities of the mission trip to spiritual truths and qualities of discipleship.



CURIOUS STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Curious students will want to talk about the mission trip experience before, during and after it happens. The Bible clearly identifies our minds as an avenue for worship, emphasizing that our thoughts and ideas can be pleasing to God and lead to spiritual growth. Keep this in mind as you consider the curious students on the trip. Their curiosity may spark growth in others, too!

When curious students are on your team:

- Set a tone of openness and invitation in the team so curious students feel comfortable asking questions.
- Resist needing to have an answer for every question. For curious students, the asking is often more important than the answering. If you show interest in their thinking process and intellectual interests, they will feel accepted and will be more likely to stay engaged.
- Research the community you will be serving and learn about the history, culture and strengths of that particular place. Then, when curious students ask questions, you have some perspective to offer.
- Agree to disagree and "fight fair." Okay, we don't really mean fight, but the idea is to cultivate a focus on respectful conversation and open questioning, even if their ideas seem way off-base to you.
- Make sure these students feel fully included in the group, even if they have not caught the vision of Jesus or made any decisions about following him.



CAUGHT STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Caught students comprise a large category of students in your group and, likely, on your mission trip. Don't be deceived into thinking they are all at the same place spiritually, despite how they might appear on the surface. Students in this category have made a choice for Jesus at some point in their lives, but they range from barely hanging onto their faith to feeling ready for more serious discipleship.

When caught students are on your team:

- Take time to check in with each student, even if you have known them for years and see them every week. Ask them about their faith and genuinely listen to what they say.
- Model and share testimonies of the natural cycles of faith. Students need to know that it is normal to move back and forth between intimacy and distance in our relationship with Jesus and that the door is always open to revive our devotion.
- Look for ways to encourage leadership in these students. Increased responsibility on a work site might be just the thing that catalyzes a deeper connection to Jesus. Publicly affirm students you see taking a step out of their comfort zone or sacrificing for the sake of others.
- As you hear from students about where they are at spiritually, identify a specific way to challenge each one to go deeper in their faith.
- Invite students in this group to work closely with you on ideas for serving your home community. Making that connection might help them recognize credibility and integrity in the youth group on a deeper level.



COMMITTED STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Committed students will help to anchor the entire team in its purpose and goals for the week. They have already demonstrated a personal desire to grow closer to Jesus and have taken some steps to do so at home. The mission trip can be a fantastic environment for students in this category to further develop spiritual disciplines and learn new outlets for sharing their gifts.

When committed students are on your team:

- Introduce new ideas for students to use in their personal prayer time and/or invite them to lead corporate prayer times.
- Invite these students to share stories of their faith journey and how God has been working in their lives.
- Offer genuine feedback on what you observe in these students during the trip. Include both positive and constructive comments that reinforce messages of grace, hope, humility and confidence.
- Make writing and drawing supplies available and encourage these students to explore new ways of expressing themselves to God. Include prompts that draw from the mission trip context as well as questions about their relationships with God, themselves and other people.
- Imagine these students as young plants that need staking, weeding, fertilizer and pruning. Find ways to draw out beauty from each of them throughout the week.



CONTAGIOUS STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Contagious students will help keep the whole team focused, energized and mindful of the purpose of the trip. This small but mighty army of student leaders will spread positivity and help keep the group motivated. This is a chance for them to shine, so help them find ways to contribute their best selves to the team and community.

When contagious students are on your team:

- Meet with them before the trip to find out what they are looking forward to and excited about. Then work together to identify specific ways they can contribute to those aspects of the trip.
- Invite these students to identify peers in the care-less or curious stage of spiritual development and spend intentional time together each day of the trip.
- Explore aspects of your role that could be delegated to contagious students, offering them real leadership opportunities and a chance to develop a new skill.
- If there is conflict on the trip, invite these students into the discernment process of how to navigate the issue in ways that honor all involved and keep the group's focus on serving the community.
- Invite contagious students to plan post-trip events designed for sharing stories, giving thanks and connecting the value of respectful service to needs in your home community.

If even a few of the ideas suggested in this chapter are put to use on your mission trip, we are confident that the students in all stages of spiritual development will have an enriching, meaningful time of service and growth.

CONCLUSION

Congratulations! You are now a certified expert in The Handprint framework for understanding the spiritual development of students. Well done!

Okay, “expert” might be pushing it a little, but your efforts to understand this framework reflect an impressive commitment to your students. Our hope is that you feel more equipped to identify stages of spiritual development and support students wherever they are.

In the space below, jot down 4-5 things you want to remember about The Handprint and its implication for your ministry.

Our final note is to emphasize that some students might stump you. You will encounter students who don't seem to fit anywhere or, conversely, seem to be in all of the stages at once! The most important thing is for each individual student to feel seen, heard and welcomed in your community. This framework is not intended to be rigid or limiting; it is simply a mental structure for understanding spiritual engagement of teenagers.

Remember that you are not alone on your journey towards greater understanding of students and how they experience God. We are right here with you, cheering you on and learning together with you.



CARE-LESS



CURIOUS



CAUGHT



COMMITTED



CONTAGIOUS
