



WHAT TO EXPECT SERVING IN *Small Town Communities*

YouthWorks has been facilitating mission trips for over 30 years now, and we are continually confronted with the fact that real service cannot happen outside the context of relationships. We desire for students, Adult Leaders and staff to learn that people matter, attitudes are important, and the posture of our hearts determines how we connect with others. The reality is that every community has a distinctive story, including both strengths and struggles.

Our hope is that through your time in this community you will:

- *increase your awareness of life in a small town*
- *reflect on the impact you can have in your own community*
- *feel connected to the people and places you serve, dispelling any stereotypes or fears*
- *deepen the way you think about God, your neighbors and yourself*

LIFE IN A SMALL TOWN

Unlike the hum of city traffic and business of urban life, the atmosphere of a small town is slow, quiet and more personal. There are fewer choices in a small town – where to eat, what movie to see, where to shop, where to hang out, making some things seem simpler and more straight-forward than in large urban areas. Cultural trends and social issues also tend to be different than in urban areas.

Life in small towns may feel slower, but to simply say it's slow misses the bigger picture. The focus of life in these communities is often about relationships. With fewer distractions and plenty of familiar faces, residents value conversation and friendships. They usually know their neighbors, but also their barber, the guy at the gas station and the person in the next aisle at the grocery store. This close community can build a strong support system, but it can also create conflicts that leave some on the margins.

The close-knit atmosphere also means that when your group comes into town, residents will know it! This gives your group a greater ability to impact the community positively, but it also means that you'll be in the spotlight all week long. Wherever you go in the community, residents will likely know who you are and what you are doing there.

As you serve, get to know the people you meet. They will enjoy meeting someone who has traveled to be in their town. Take the opportunity to meet community members who have invited YouthWorks and supported us in many ways as we come to learn and serve. You'll find that the stereotypes you've held about certain kinds of people may not hold true. We invite you to join us as we continue to let go of preconceptions and interact with people as they are and not as we expect them to be.

As you prepare, ask your group these questions:

- What are some ways culture or ethnicity impact our faith, ministry and relationships?
- How is your culture similar or different to the culture of the community you will serve?
- What are some stereotypes we might have about the community we are visiting? How might these be untrue?

SERVING IN A SMALL TOWN

At YouthWorks, we have learned that there are a number of typical reactions you and your group may experience as you step into this type of community. Understanding key aspects of a community before entering it will help your leaders and youth respond appropriately. Here are a few we'd like to highlight for you.

Time Sensitivity

Spending time with people is valued more than being on time. As a result, things don't always run on schedule; community members may show up "late" to an event. This is not a sign of disrespect. When you meet someone for the first time, think about "visiting" instead of "meeting." Spend time getting to know people before you try to get things done.

Quiet/Listening

Small towns tend to be quiet places. Please be mindful that large groups of teenagers bring a lot of energy and noise to a quiet place. When in the community, try to be mindful of your energy and volume.

In the Spotlight

People will know you are in town, so be very aware of how your behavior looks to others. Something as simple as driving too fast through town or being unfriendly at a store can reflect poorly on your presence in the community.

Access

Smaller communities do not always have ready access to the variety or quality of conveniences you may be used to in your home community. Things like health care facilities, places of business and internet connections are not always readily available. Check your expectations as you enter the community and be careful how you speak about the community when around others. Finally, don't assume that every amenity will be right at your fingertips.

We hope that this information helps as you continue to prepare for your trip. Please take time to talk with your group about expectations about the type of community you will be serving. Groups who have intentionally taken time to process and prepare before they go on their trip have more meaningful individual growth, team solidarity and community relationships.

Being Like Jesus in this Community

Small town communities are complex places. It's easy for all of us to label a community and its people with all sorts of stereotypes. These labels feed our perceptions and influence how we approach people, situations and relationships. As you prepare, think about how you will approach each person and situation with the kind of grace that Jesus demonstrated to each person he met along the way. The following characteristics¹ are great examples of how your students and adult leaders can prepare their hearts for their mission week.

Serve with Humility

Jesus came to earth with the attitude of a servant. Jesus did not come as a powerful king, but as a powerless infant and later in life a carpenter. If you want to serve others, have a humble attitude. Become a servant focused on listening instead of speaking and learning instead of teaching. Come with a humble heart that is ready to jump in and serve wherever needed, whether it's cleaning a bathroom or listening to a life story. Come ready to put the needs of those you serve above your own.

Don't Depend on Privilege

Jesus had access to privilege and wealth, but he voluntarily chose poverty instead. Your time in this community may feel like poverty. The sleeping arrangements are probably less comfortable than you have at home, the food may not be what you prefer and the temperature may be uncomfortable. Our hope is that this week of service will remind you to depend more on Jesus by living outside convenience and, sometimes, going without.

Encounter Brokenness

Jesus stepped out of the order and harmony of heaven into the disorder and brokenness of Earth. You are called to do the same. You will encounter brokenness during your time in the community. God is calling you to be present among the broken, not to draw conclusions or judge. Instead, open your eyes wide to the needs around you, both in your YouthWorks community and when you return home.

¹Muriu, O. (2009, December 29). *Pace and place of missions today*. Urbana Conference 2009. Retrieved on January 28, 2011, from <http://www.intervarsity.org/page/urbana-09-audio>