

5 VIEWS ON YOUTH MINISTRY SHORT-TERM MISSIONS  
Are Your Trips Helping or Hurting?

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## 5 VIEWS ON YOUTH MINISTRY SHORT-TERM MISSIONS

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# INTRODUCTION

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MARK OESTREICHER

Short-term mission trips are the best and the worst things we do in North American youth ministry.

Let me back up a bit before I unpack that.

While I'm certainly not the oldest person still actively involved in youth ministry, I'm getting up there. Math isn't my strong suit, but I think it's been about thirty-nine years now (the last twenty-one of those at my current church, where I work with the junior high ministry). I haven't been on as many short-term mission trips as my friend Danny Kwon (who wrote the fantastic books *Mission Tripping: A Comprehensive Guide to Youth Ministry Missions*, and *Mission Tripping—an Interactive Journal*), who's logged well over fifty trips. That sure is a lot of trips for someone who doesn't work for a short-term missions organization! My memory is a little blurry ('cause I'm old—did I mention that?), but I think my count is roughly twenty-five trips.

On top of that, I've served on the board of a short-term missions organization. And these last two decades, I've been in roles (first at Youth Specialties, and now with The Youth Cartel) where I've both observed the “players” and dialogued with thousands of youth workers about their trip experiences with at least a hundred different short-term missions organizations.

I don't tell you that to start this book with some sort of resume. Instead, I write that to say: I've had an awful lot of input that has informed my extremely strong opinions and beliefs about youth ministry short-term missions (which will be referred to interchangeably as STMs in this book).

## **I Took My First Trip Because I Was Told Not To**

When I was a young youth worker (back in the middle ages), I was

an active part of a local youth ministry network in my city. The core of that group included about ten of us, and there were some serious heavy-hitter youth workers in that group whom I looked up to with admiration and aspiration. All of them were focused on high school ministry, and I was the only young guy, and the only person focused on junior high ministry. I felt kinda like a little brother or a mascot amongst them, and lapped up everything they said. I wanted to emulate them. I wanted to grow up and *be like* them.

One day at a gathering of this group, we were talking about short-term missions, and I mentioned that I was wondering what it would be like to take my junior highers on a short-term trip. This was in the early 1980s, and I'm pretty sure no missions groups were offering trips for junior highers at that point—I didn't know anyone who had done a junior high STM (though that could have merely been ignorance on my part). But when I mentioned this idea, my heroes around the table strongly and unanimously told me that short-term missions should be reserved for high schoolers, and that I would be absolutely wrong to take my group on any sort of STM.

I remember this so clearly, because it was in that moment this collection of youth ministry superstars became human in my eyes. Because they were wrong—and I knew it.

The next year, I fumbled my way through a trip to a Native American church in Northern Minnesota with a group of a dozen junior highers (I literally could not find an organization to take us at that time, so I just reached out to a mission church in my denomination and asked if we could come help). I'm sure we did tons of things wrong. But I also saw the impact on my young teens and through my young teens.

### **My Worst Trip Ever**

For a number of years, I loaded teenagers (specifically young teens, since I was a junior high pastor) into vans, and spent weekends at local city missions, and weeks in urban centers and cross-cultural contexts. We started taking junior highers to Mexico—driving twenty-four hours each way from Omaha—and that trip became the centerpiece of our summer programming. We prepped those kids like crazy, even requiring a weekend-long Mission Trip Prep Retreat.

After a few years, someone from my denomination asked if we would open up our trip to other youth groups from around the nation, and about six or seven other churches joined us. They all brought high school groups, and we were there with a big group of junior highers. I went in nervous that our little kids wouldn't have the impact of the other, older groups, and that it would be obvious to everyone, including my group. But just the opposite was true: Most of the other groups were there for what I could only call "ministry tourism." They were there to do a tiny bit of work for the poor and wretched people (please read that with sarcasm) of the village we visited, and to feel better about themselves in the process. Evening debriefs were full of sympathy-tears and pity-projections, but I knew those high schoolers were going home unchanged, and that we'd actually done damage—in the colonialism sense—to the beautiful brothers and sisters we were theoretically serving. Honestly, it sucked. And as the person putting together the trip, I felt responsible.

I knew it was time to do some deeper thinking. I'd grown up with missionary parents (who worked in a mission agency home office), and had good access to people and other sources of great missiology.

And all these years later, that's what this book is at heart: a youth ministry missiology book. Missiology, if you're not familiar with the word, is simply the study of Christian missions, particularly in terms of how methods and purposes are informed by theology, beliefs, worldviews, and assumptions.

### **Why 5 Views?**

A few years back, The Youth Cartel decided to publish a line of "4 Views" books. The similar series I was aware of were mostly focused on theological debate. Our idea was to create a line of books that offered thoughtful *but practical* dialogue about issues in youth ministry. We knew the issues had to be topics youth workers wanted help on, but on which experts in the field disagreed.

We also made a commitment (to ourselves, really) that these books would be written by in-the-trenches youth workers *doing* what they wrote about, rather than experts with opinions, but little to no

experience.

Our first book in this line was *4 Views on Pastoring LGBTQ Teenagers*. And the second was *4 Views on Talking to Teenagers About Sex*. Both of those books, and this one, focus on topics that wonderful and thoughtful youth workers disagree on. In all three cases (the first two books and this one), there are plenty of youth workers who didn't or don't realize there's even anything to disagree about! But that's part of the point here: These issues matter greatly, and we want our tribe to be more intentional.

Just when I was wrestling with how to articulate the different “views” for this book so I could pursue writers, I received a book proposal from Kurt Rietema, one of the contributors to this book. He was proposing a book about youth ministry short-term missions as “privilege alleviation.” I was super intrigued by his thinking and impressed with his articulation, and knew this had to be one of the views. So, my notes to myself for the five views (before we had any contributors other than Kurt) were:

1. The way most youth min STMs are done these days (work camp approach)
2. Focusing on developing long-term partnership with Indigenous church leaders and serving under their direction
3. Why urban trips are so important, and why they can be so horribly bad
4. “Privilege Alleviation” (Kurt's view)
5. Being shaped for mission, rather than going on a mission trip

Those five concepts, based on the contributors' core commitments and worldviews (really, their missiology), have been shaped by five fantastic practitioners, all of whom I respect deeply, and have become:

1. A Holistic Approach to Work Camps (Todd Freneau)
2. Developing Long-Term Partnerships with Indigenous Church Leaders (Jim Noreen)
3. Approaching Urban Missions as Life-Long Learners,

- Advocates, and Allies (Susie Gamez)
4. Alleviating Privilege through Short-Term Missions (Kurt Rietema)
  5. From Charity to Solidarity: Decolonizing Short-Term Missions (Jon Huckins)

As with our previous books in this line, each of the contributors also offers a short response to one of the other views, creating something of a dialogue.

OH, and somewhere along the line, I thought we needed a couple of specific issues addressed, and we added two short appendices: one on the uniqueness of trips with junior highers (written by Todd Freneau), and one on multigenerational mission trips (written by Shawn Kiger).

### **Back to My Opening Statement**

I still believe, quite strongly, that short-term missions are the best and the worst things we do in North American youth ministry (my “North American” qualifier there is due to the fact that youth min STMs have become something of a cottage industry in the U.S., and are often approached *very* differently, if at all, in other countries).

In fact, I’d go as far as saying that the majority of youth ministry short-term missions are problematic, at least partially. They may have some value for the participants, but they often inadvertently teach bad theology and worldviews that are more about imperialism than the kingdom of God.

But, when done well, with thoughtfulness, humility, and an informed missiology, all recipients can benefit in profound ways that build up the kingdom. I chose “all recipients” very intentionally in that previous sentence, as the best STMs are not about us who go as “givers” and those we visit as “receivers.” Instead, we are all receiving, and hopefully experiencing something that smells a little like heaven. We hope this book nudges you in that direction.

# 5 VIEWS ON YOUTH MINISTRY SHORT-TERM MISSIONS



## VIEW 1: A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO WORK CAMPS

BY TODD FRENEAUX

### INTRODUCTION

When I was a teenager in youth group, my church never provided an opportunity for us to go on a short-term mission trip. Truthfully, I never even knew what a mission trip was until I returned to the church a few years later to volunteer as one of the leaders for the youth group.

I lived close to Washington, DC, in northern Virginia, and I remember struggling with why there were so many homeless men and women living on the streets there. I was a starry-eyed twenty-something who wanted answers as to why things were the way they were so that I could change the world, of course.

It was the 1980s and there was a lot of press about the homeless in the nation's capital. I decided to go into Washington, DC, on a very cold winter day to get an up-close look at what was happening. I was hungry for answers and very interested in what life was like on the streets. I took a tape recorder and interviewed several homeless men and women. Standing around a fifty-five-gallon drum that contained a roaring fire, I listened while three or four of these men spoke freely about their lives. I remember wanting to spend that night on the streets to see what it was like. I came very close to doing so but

BIOS

**Mark Oestreicher** is a partner in The Youth Cartel, which provides resources, training, and coaching for church youth workers, and is the author of many books for youth workers, parents, and teenagers. Twitter: @markosbeard.



**Todd Freneau** Before he co-founded the Jeremiah Project, Todd Freneau's goal was to make a living writing country music. He still thinks he should've been born a Wild West cowboy, believing to this day he was born in the wrong year. He serves as the Jeremiah Project's Executive Director ([www.jeremiahproject.org](http://www.jeremiahproject.org)), where he lives out his passion for mission, ministry, and leadership development with middle and high school students. He lives with his family in Williamsburg, VA, where his impressive collection of cowboy hats is displayed.



**Susie Gamez** Canadian by birth and Korean by heritage, is now Mexican by marriage and American by immigration. With a passion for reconciliation, racial justice, and the Gospel, Susie and her husband Marcos met at Fuller Theological Seminary while getting their M.A. in Intercultural Studies. They are now proud parents of four beautiful LatAsian kids. After serving as a youth pastor and church planter in South Central Los Angeles for 14 years, Susie now resides in Sacramento and serves as the Co-Lead Senior Pastor at Midtown Church.



**Jon Huckins** is the Co-Founding Director of The Global Immersion Project, a peacemaking training organization helping people of faith engage our divided world in restorative ways. He co-leads an intentional Christian community in his neighborhood of Sherman Heights in San Diego and has a master's degree from Fuller Theological Seminary.



Jon is married to Jan and is a dad of four kids, a speaker, and a writer. His latest book is *Mending the Divides: Creative Love in a Conflicted World*. Find Jon at [jonhuckins.net](http://jonhuckins.net), Twitter, or Facebook.

**Shawn Kiger** is the Director of Youth and Missions at Wright's Chapel UMC in Ladysmith, VA. He has been in youth ministry for over twenty years and is a certified youth ministry coach through The Youth Cartel. He and his wife, Nikki, have two daughters and a St. Bernard.



**Jim Noreen** is a non-profit leader, focusing exclusively on effective short-term missions through a local church partnership model. Jim serves on the leadership team at Praying Pelican Missions and lives with his wife and four kids in the suburbs of Minneapolis.



**Kurt Rietema** is the Senior Director of YF Neighborhood at Youthfront and lives and works in a diverse, under-resourced neighborhood of Kansas City. His work includes youth social entrepreneurship, short-term mission, community development, and creating just housing and lending partnerships for immigrants.



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