So, you want to go on a short-term international mission trip? That’s great! The LCMS Office of International Mission has prepared this document to help you navigate the unique opportunities and challenges inherent to international mission work. Please take a few minutes to read through these best practices, which are designed to help your team have a safe and productive experience.

1. POINT TO JESUS.

Jesus Christ conquered sin and death for you, and in Him you have the ultimate victory. Fix your eyes on Him as you serve. Point to Him in the content of your speech and the quality of your service.

Whether you’re helping with a medical clinic, teaching farmers new agricultural practices, leading a vacation Bible school or raising a roof, you aren’t doing it to gain points with God. Jesus already won all the points for us. “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19). Thus, we have the privilege of serving, simply because that is who we are in Christ.

Love those you serve. When they ask why, you get to tell them about Jesus! Then connect them to the local congregation so they can keep learning even after you leave.

2. PREPARE YOUR VOLUNTEERS FOR SERVICE.

Do your research. What is the history of the country you plan to visit? Is there a national church body in altar and pulpit fellowship with the LCMS, and are there LCMS missionaries currently serving there?

The LCMS Office of International Mission can help connect you to our missionaries or the partner church in that area. LCMS career missionaries have worked hard to gain insight into the broader culture and especially the local church. They can provide valuable context about the place you will serve, its challenges and its opportunities.

If there are no LCMS partners, is the LCMS supporting any projects or entities there? Or would you consider one of the 60-plus countries in which we have partner churches and/or a missionary presence as an alternative?

In addition, be sure to research the culture of the country, as well as what physical fitness or experience might be required for team members. Knowing this can help you prepare your team for service. Consider doing background checks on participants, as well as holding pre-field training for the entire group with an experienced leader and/or the host missionary or local
church. The team itself is a micro-culture, and building a positive group dynamic should begin months prior to departure.

RESOURCES:
- The Synod's work around the world: international.lcms.org
- Insights into different cultures: hofstede-insights.com/product/compare-countries/
- Facts about different countries: cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/
- The “Culture Smart!” book for the country you will serve in. Amazon.com is a good place to search for these.

3. EQUIP YOUR VOLUNTEERS TO MAKE INFORMED DECISIONS ABOUT RISK.
Traveling internationally can be a rewarding experience, but it comes with its own set of risks. Epidemics break out. Protests turn violent. And governments can impose new standards without warning. It’s important to get the most up-to-date information about the country you are planning to visit.

Start by checking with the U.S. Department of State and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. What visas are required? What about vaccinations? Will you be in a part of the country that has a high risk of disease (e.g., malaria, typhoid)?

Then, consider these additional questions: Does your health insurance provide coverage in the country you will be visiting? Does your life insurance policy nullify your coverage if you enter a “red zone” country or an area that is considered at risk? Are you physically and emotionally able to deal with the stress of travel in an environment where familiar comforts and medical attention might be absent? Have you purchased insurance for emergency evacuations? Have you registered your travel with the U.S. Department of State?

Please note that you take on significant legal burdens if you have unaccompanied minors on your trip. Do your research so that you and the minors’ parents are both making fully informed decisions. Make sure all necessary releases are in place before departure.

RESOURCES:
- Emergency insurance: MissionTripInsurance.com
- U.S. Department of State: travel.state.gov
- Smart Traveler Enrollment Program: step.state.gov
- U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: cdc.gov/travel

4. RESPECT THE RIGHTS OF PARTNER CHURCH LEADERSHIP TO IDENTIFY WHAT TYPE OF SERVICE IS NEEDED.
The Synod’s partner church in a particular country has the right to set goals and provide direction for your work. Remember that you have been invited to serve, and do so with a spirit of humility, letting go of your own priorities. Following the partners’ lead encourages them and builds their capacity.
Your relationship with your hosts is not one-way, with you bringing all the value. Jesus is the one who does that! Your hosts have much to offer you as well, and they work hard in preparation for your visit. Take time to appreciate their gifts, the beauty of the country, the food (the good, the bad, the weird), the music and the fellowship. Having fun and serving are not mutually exclusive.

5. HELP PREVENT UNHEALTHY DEPENDENCY.

When working in a country that doesn’t have the same financial resources as the U.S., it can be tempting to use money or things to solve problems. Most of the time, these won’t solve anything, and they can even have unintended consequences, such as creating inequity between one local congregation or pastor and another.

The most important thing you bring is the Gospel. In general, it is best to check with the local missionary or church partner before giving out any money.

6. BE FISCALLY TRANSPARENT.

Being faithful, even with a little, is important. Stewarding the resources that we are given for a specific purpose demonstrates faithfulness.

While you don’t need to post all of the receipts from your service, you should be ready to explain how the funds were used — particularly if funds were donated. If you are blessed with a surplus at the end of your service, talk with your supporters about how those funds should be used. Even better, have a plan about how any extra will be put to work and share that with your supporters from the beginning.

7. CONNECT VOLUNTEERS TO RESOURCES TO EXPAND THE IMPACT OF THEIR SERVICE INTO THEIR LOCAL COMMUNITIES.

Your service does not end when you return home! Take time to debrief with your team to draw lessons out of what you experienced together. It may be helpful for you to do this personally with a trusted friend, family member or pastor as well.

Thank your supporters, including your church, and share your experiences with them. Remember to keep the primary focus on how you saw God at work throughout your trip.

Finally, think about how you can build on the mission trip experience by:

- Praying for a missionary or partner church;
- Serving again;
- Considering long-term service;
- Reaching out to immigrants or minorities in your own community;
- Growing in faith personally; and/or
- Supporting a missionary or project financially.
Trip wrap-up discussion questions for teams:

- What have you learned about your identity as a baptized child of God?
- How will that impact your life as a follower of Christ?
- What did you learn or experience that will change the way you live and represent Jesus in your home church and community?
- How can you continue to support the ongoing work in the community where you served?
- How might you further participate in the mission of your congregation, district and community with what you have learned?

Resources:

- Every One His Witness® Lutheran evangelism program: everyonehiswitness.org
- Immigrants Among Us report and Bible study from the LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations: blogs.lcms.org/2018/ctcr-bible-study-immigrants-among-us-a-lutheran-framework-for-addressing-immigration-issues/