

IMMERSE

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HOW TO NOT HAVE A SUMMER MISSION TRIP

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Bio: The Christ-journey with all its ups, downs, shifts, twists and reversals. Sounds a lot like adolescence, and a lot like where we are as culture, nation and world. As a believer, husband, daddy, and fellow journeyer (pastor) I have found the most unstable and rewarding part of this calling is community. Living, breathing, imperfect community. I believe Christ calls us all to be reformed, redefined, and reborn in the context of the relationships he has placed in and around us. Whatever all that means is really exhilarating to me as I move forward in youth ministry alongside youth workers, parents, students and the kaleidoscope of all the souls these relationships represent.

Canceling a formative youth ministry experience like a mission trip is a difficult decision. This year we had to make that decision twice. We typically have a 3-4 month lead into our mission trips with monthly training and community serving expectations. As the registration deadlines drew closer we could see the writing on the wall. I'm sure the economy contributed to the lack of momentum for the spring trip. So we ramped up the info and planning for the summer trip, believing the families and teens that couldn't commit earlier would be hungry for summer to roll around. No dice. We were stunned. We always go on mission trips!

Then the introspective questions began. What were we doing wrong? Do we need to communicate better? Why weren't folks excited this year? What will we do instead? These questions led to a different question: "What is Jesus up to? Maybe we aren't supposed to go on a mission trip this year. Would that be okay?" Of course it *should* be okay, but even if everybody were okay with this large absence, would I be okay, as the youth pastor?

My volunteer mission leader and I took the dilemma to our team of leaders. Their overwhelming response was refreshing: Don't force it. Wait and see what happens. Maybe it's okay if we don't plan a replacement trip or experience. See what Jesus does. Let there be space. Whoa. I had sensed this was the direction to go, but was open to the leading of Jesus in the group's wisdom. I didn't expect the ease with which they let the mission trip go. It was freeing...and difficult at the same time. What kind of youth pastor can't pull off a mission trip? The kind who is willing to struggle with identity issues wrapped up in delusions of success via constant activity, that's who.

Chatting my wife up about this personal angst led me to a place where I made peace with the whole deal. In a moment of conversational beauty, she simply commented, "It's been nice having you home more, and I've noticed the difference in us and our kids."

So I asked her to share her reflections. Here's what she had to say.

Reflections from a Former "Proud Single Parent"

"Summer has always been a time for youth pastors to jump in with both feet and run until you drop. I'm not sure about the average, but I know for my husband, three weeks away from home was his usual limit. To many that may seem very low. For a man with three little kids, it's sanity. The three weeks over the summer consist of one week with junior high, one week with senior high, and one week for speaking at a camp.

Those three weeks are something that I, as a wife of a youth pastor, am prepared for and know are coming. We talk to our kids and let them know when Daddy will be gone and when to expect him back. They are okay with it, but they obviously miss him when he's away. I grab the bull by the horns and become that single parent that most youth pastor's wives are from time to time. It's not easy. It's tiring. It's frustrating at times, but we're doing it for the Kingdom, right? It's for a great purpose and those kids, whom your husband ministers to, need him. They deserve to have his time. Right?

This past year, our spring break mission trip was canceled and it was decided that our youth group would focus on a mission trip during the summer. Additionally, my husband was asked to be the speaker at a camp in our region, and we decided that he would do that. The stipulation was that his family would be allowed to come. So last fall, we planned on all being gone to a camp, together for a week. Our kids were thrilled! They were going to get to go to camp with Daddy!

As springtime rolled around and it was time to get down to business determining who would go on the summer mission trip, only one person out of the youth group showed interest. Other kids were either already going to be somewhere else, didn't have the money, or just weren't interested in going somewhere else in their already busy schedules. So, it was decided that it would be canceled. What?! Cancel the mission trip after not having one during spring break, either? What's happening to the youth group?! Now the summer would only claim two weeks of my husbands' time, and one of them would be with us tagging along. When we realized this, we picked our jaws up off the floor and started grinning. How refreshing would it be to actually have a summer together? Let me tell you. It has been amazing! Our kids, ages 9, 6, and 3, have been more balanced and aren't expecting Daddy to go somewhere again next week. Daddy has actually gotten to attend some swimming lessons, has energy to play on the weekends, and isn't constantly napping when he's home. Yes, you know how it is. Though your spouse may be home, they're either exhausted from the trip they just got back from, or mentally gone already for the next one. Well, that hasn't been the case in our home this summer. Now, those all-day activities that happen throughout the summer are a piece of cake! Our kids don't blink an eye when Daddy is out on the lake with the teens or floating the river and going to a BBQ afterward, because they know he's going to be home that night and they'll see him in the morning. Hmmm. That actually sounds like

a functional family unit. Could it be that a youth pastor's schedule can be filled with fun things during the summer without being gone weeks on end, be balanced with his family, AND still be okay? Absolutely.

What kind of example are we setting for our up-and-coming adults when we are modeling absence from our families in the name of God? Now, don't get me wrong, going away from home to help others and traveling to district camps is great. It should be done—in moderation. Don't we want our kids to grow up knowing how to spend time with their spouses, cherishing those moments with their kids that only happen when they're not in school? How else will they learn it unless they see it being done?

Now, what about those students who feel the call into ministry? How much harder are we making it for them when we show them they have to be gone from their families during the summer in order to have a successful ministry? Ouch! "Hello, congratulations on your engagement! By the way, your spouse is going to be gone from you for weeks on end during the summer. Not to mention those retreats throughout the year that are so great for students and youth staff. Welcome to the ministry! Oh, and if you have kids, you will wear the Proud Single Parent badge with honor. It's just expected."

How is THAT life-giving? The truth? It's not. I'm not trying to ruffle any feathers or bash those who spend so much time away from home in the name of ministry. Truly, I'm not. I just want there to be someone who stands up and says, "It doesn't have to be that way!" Family is important, too. Spouses should be called to their families first. Family should be their first priority. How can a youth pastor successfully minister to his youth group if his family life is unbalanced, or heaven forbid, a wreck?

Take care of your family, spend time with them, balance your time away from them, and you will be more ready and more equipped to minister to who God has called you to. That has been my experience as the wife of a youth pastor. Not to mention the fact that your spouse will be more rested, your kids will be more grounded, and your youth group will get the pastor they deserve—one who has things in balance with God, at home, and in the ministry."

A Closing Thought on Mark 6:30-31 by the Youth Pastor

The temptation is to end this reflection with all the ways we as a youth ministry have compensated for our mission-tripless summer. We haven't. We've served at our local rescue mission. We have picked up garbage after community movie nights in the park. We still do all the normal summer stuff during youth group time and worship gatherings, and still participate in the community.

The difference I notice is in my family and me. The time I have to read, reflect, vision, and pray is refreshing. I'm not rushed to the next youth ministry thing. I have open space to connect with friends and teens. I have open spaces to use for soul revitalization. I never really inventoried how much energy investment goes into a good mission trip experience. I just did it. The effort was just part of the landscape. This summer has given me new

perspective. Now I'll never forget and neither will my wife and kids. It has been a great summer.