

How Sixteen Hours in a Van is a Really Good Thing (The Power of Relationships on Youth Mission Trips)

Doc Newcomb

OK, see if you can top this story.

I once drove a 15-passenger van...loaded with teenagers...and Christmas presents...through heavy Chicago traffic...in the snow...to the Cabrini Green Housing Projects...with (are you ready for this)...the music cranking *loud* while the youth sang along. (Cue: thunderous applause!)

I know, I know. Please. No, really. You're too kind. Don't. Stop it. Oh come on, now, you can really stop applauding. You're embarrassing me. Really. I mean it now.

What?

You mean...you're not that impressed?

You say you've got a better story?

Actually I probably do, too.

Youth leaders have great traveling stories. A good friend of mine, Rob Ratliff, took his youth group on a mission trip to a reservation in South Dakota. The driver of the second van didn't notice the driver of the first van had stopped and WHAM! Plowed right into the back of it! Van number two was un-drivable. They were in the middle of nowhere with no phone service and no help. To make a long story short, they left the van there, tried unsuccessfully to get Triple-A to tow it, and eventually met the police later to discover the van had been completely burned while they were gone!

But I tell you what--the kids on that trip will never forget it. It only made the story of their mission trip better.

Back in 2000, GROUP Magazine conducted a survey of Christian college students. GROUP asked what happened in their high school years to make their faith so strong they maintained it during college. Of the top four responses, *three* had to do with trips they went on with their youth group. (The top four in order: mission trips, crisis experiences, big events, camps.)

In other words, *going places together* is a big deal to helping kids develop a strong faith in Jesus.

Why? Well, I think it has everything to do with the power of trips to increase *relationships*.

And relationships are *huge* when it comes to discipling people--youth and all other ages.

In 2004, Group Publishing contracted Gallup to conduct a survey on the importance of relationships among church members. What they found was rather dramatic, even to people who

already know how important relationships are. Basically, the results were clear that the more churches do to help members develop relationships with each other, the more those people grow closer to God!

The full results, along with helpful tips on developing relationships among all age groups in your church, are in *Friendship: Creating a Culture of Connectivity in Your Church* (Group: 2005). The author of the study, D. Michael Lindsay, wrote: "Perhaps most important is the finding that spiritual development--long a priority of church leaders--is not dependent on a particular program or initiative. In fact...the key for helping parishioners deepen their faith is relatively simple: Create a faith community that values relationships, spiritual transformation will follow. The 'silver bullet' for spiritual depth is not a successful outreach program or an in-depth Bible study; it is, instead, a faithful community of love and friendship."

Which brings me back to those youth mission trips.

There's something special about riding in a van together for hours on end. Think about all the things that happen in the van...you have to figure stuff out together like who sits where, what CD to listen to, what to talk about, when to stop to eat and pee, what games--if any--you're going to play...*plus* the students are sitting close together for a long time...*and can't leave!*

It creates the perfect cauldron for what M. Scott Peck wrote about in *A Different Drum: Community Making and Peace* (Touchstone, 1987). The two stages that stand between Pseudo-Community and Community are Chaos and Emptiness. Spend enough time in a van with a youth group, and you'll go through both of those stages...and probably a few others Dr. Peck never knew about!

(While vans are primo youth group--especially youth mission trip--transportation, buses are great, too. Years ago when so many kids wanted to go on our church's youth mission trip, I hired a bus...and it was great! I could make personal contact with every kid and adult on the trip. Some adults taught kids a popular card game, euchre, and we played that stupid game for hours and hours on end. One of the guys even organized a double-elimination euchre tournament with brackets and the whole bit. And he'd get on the bus loud speaker from time to time to give tournament updates. Such fun!)

Fun was a huge deal in the Group Publishing study on relationships in the church. If relationships with each other are key to a growing relationship with Jesus, fun is the key to relationships. Group's study found that churches that provide opportunities for members to have fun together foster better relationships. Well heck, we youth ministers have been having fun with our youth group kids forever! Van (and bus) rides are prime youth ministry locations for having fun.

So since you're going to be doing so much good while you travel together with your students, here are some tips to take advantage of your time...

1) Gary Rohs develops van devotions for his group's mission trip every year. At 10:00 a.m. on the first day, every van is supposed to play the devotion CD he and some leader students created. It's based on the theme of the mission organization they use each year.

2) Remember safety first at all times. No exceptions. That especially means no driving through the night. *Really* bad idea.

3) The youth can choose the music, but the driver controls the volume. You don't have to accept any music, however. One time our youth sang an angry profanity-laced lyric while listening to one of their CD's. I calmly ejected the tape (it was that long ago), rolled down the window, and threatened to throw it out. Instead I tossed it back over my head. They got the message.

4) If you're in a van, insist that a youth ride shotgun. The driver gets to know that student more, and the other adult or adults get to ride in the back and get to know the other students.

5) If you're in a bus, don't allow all the adults to sit up front while the youth sit in the back. Get back there to where the kids (and the fun) are!

6) Have a plan of what to do if you break down on the road. Don't fret about those little set-backs--they just make the stories better later. Handle them like a pro.

7) Tim Casey, a youth leader in the Chicago area, doesn't forbid personal head phones in their youth vans, but he makes it his goal to always be more interesting than what's on the headphones...engage the kids enough to make them see the value of taking off the headphones and building relationships.

One year while planning our youth mission trip, one of the girls spoke up to encourage us to go farther away than we were planning. Why? Because she enjoyed the bus rides so much she wanted as much time as possible in it!

Oh those great trips with your kids! You'll never forget them and neither will they. Take every advantage of the wonderful opportunity you have to build relationships while you travel...and enjoy seeing your kids grow closer to Jesus in the process.

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