

YOUTH LEADER GUIDE

FAITH & MISSION

Intergenerational mission projects: How to help teens & adults connect

Brad Griffin & Rachel Dodd



Fuller Youth Institute

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Content: Brad Griffin & Rachel Dodd

Design: Helen Kim

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YOUR CHURCH: Utilizing untapped resources

“It had never occurred to me to invite grandparents along on a student mission trip until Julie asked if hers could join us for two weeks in Costa Rica. In many ways, Bob and Jean were the heroes of that trip. They offered an ultra-safe presence to teenagers and adults alike, and their years of wisdom steadied us without smothering us.”

When it comes to planning a youth mission or service trip, Bob and Jean are just one example of the untapped resources church communities offer. But getting your church involved in a transformational mission experience with students and adults takes thought, perseverance, and often a bit of diplomacy.

How does serving together contribute to teenagers’ faith formation and their discovery of identity, belonging, and purpose?

At the Fuller Youth Institute (FYI), we’ve been exploring questions like this for over two decades.

Early in FYI’s research, one theme repeatedly emerged: **Ministries see more transformative growth when they walk with students before, during, and after a mission or service experience.** What’s more, our findings reveal **the power of intergenerational relationships in the faith development of young people.**

With the help of scholars, researchers, and youth workers, we’ve created a host of field-tested resources used by youth groups across the country. Throughout this guide, you’ll find practical ideas to help you:

- ☑ Nurture intergenerational support for your next youth group mission trip or service experience.
- ☑ Equip adult leaders to practice rhythms of encouragement and support to boost students' growth potential as they serve together.
- ☑ Spark conversations that lead to reflection and faith formation.

We know you're busy, so this toolkit provides discussion and reflection questions, practical steps, and checklists to catapult you and your students into a deeper relationship with your congregation before, during, and after your mission trip or service project. We also know it takes courage to make dramatic changes to the way your group approaches missions and service.

So brave leader, bless you. We honor your heart for mission, service, compassion, and justice-seeking. We honor your love for young people and their discipleship journeys. We're cheering you on and can't wait to hear how God leads you and your team forward.

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BEFORE YOU SERVE:

Build a framework for intergenerational connection

Just like Bob and Jean's church learned, serving together can catalyze supportive intergenerational relationships that help young people form lasting faith. Yet many leaders have found they need to explain the "why" of serving together for both young people and adults. So as you cast vision, give lots of framing.

Whether you're planning a local project in your community or a short-term mission trip, here are helpful tips we've learned from experienced leaders:

Connect with your church's missions or outreach committee to help its members understand the goals of your trip or project.

- Does your church already support ministries or ministry leaders in the region or organization you'll be serving? Check with your committee and consider building on these relationships before and during your work.
- Invite a few students to attend a church missions or outreach committee meeting and share a purpose statement for the trip or project.
- Consider inviting some committee members to participate as volunteer leaders.

Explore creative ways the congregation can support your trip or project financially.

- Partner with other ministries to make fundraising a shared effort.
- Empower parents to participate in the planning and leading of fundraisers and events.
- Invite a pastor or leader from the community you'll be serving to give a short talk or sermon on their ministry and what God is doing there already.

Invite the whole church to pray for you and your students.

- Provide a list of specific prayer requests in your church bulletin or newsletter.
- Ask your children's ministry if your students can pair up with one or more children and invite those children to pray for them.
- Meet with your senior adult ministry and pair each student with a senior prayer partner. (We've provided a list of intergenerational prayer partner questions in this guide.)
- Lead a sending or commissioning prayer in a worship service before you leave for your trip or begin your project.
- If any prayer groups are gathering during your service experience, ask them to pray specifically for your students.
- Ask the parents of one or two of your students to lead your congregation in prayer at any church gatherings or services while you're gone.
- Make sure any updates you're sending from the trip are communicated to the whole church (as appropriate).



Pressed for time? Check out **Talking About Why We Serve Others**, an On-the-Go Discussion Guide [available in the FYI store](#). You'll help students explore their thoughts and feelings about helping others, discuss biblical examples, and create a shared purpose statement for your upcoming trip or project.

BEFORE YOU SERVE:

Intergenerational prayer partner questions



Choose a few of the questions below to help spark faith conversations between teens and adults in your church.

QUESTIONS FOR BOTH PARTNERS:

- Tell me a little about who you are, where you've been, and what God is doing in your life.
- What do you think your friends would say about you if I asked them to describe you?
- Read Micah 6:8 together. When you think of what God requires of believers, what comes to mind? What are some ways you might act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God through this mission experience?

QUESTIONS FOR THE STUDENT:

- What made you want to be part of this team or experience?
- What is it you're hoping for or anticipating from this experience?
- Is there anything about this experience that makes you worried or anxious? Where do you think those fears are coming from?
- What do you tend to do when you're worried or anxious? How can I pray for you about your fears?
- How do you hope to be changed by your work?
- How do you hope others will be changed by your work?
- What are a few specific things I can pray for as you prepare for the trip?
- What are the ways I should pray for you during the trip? How do you think I can pray for your family?



Mix it up! Whenever you have an opportunity during your meetings leading up to an inter-generational trip, mix up the generations with get-to-know-you games, table assignments, or work teams. Be sensitive to the level of awkwardness that everyone can handle at first. Ideally, any mixed group should include at least two students who know each other.

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WHILE YOU SERVE: Create opportunities for shared experience and reflection

Adult volunteers play a vital role in helping students grow during a mission trip or project. Beyond managing logistics, caring adults help students reflect on their experiences, make sense of them, and recognize how God may be at work in and through them.

Curate caring connections

Empower adults on your team to support student growth by demonstrating and communicating these principles:

Growth happens through experience and reflection.

Students will encounter new and stretching situations—culture shock, fatigue, or group challenges—and are constantly trying to make sense of what these moments mean for their faith and identity.

Your role is to slow things down.

Plan moments to pause, reflect, and notice where God may be at work, especially during fast-paced or unfamiliar experiences.

Offer steady support and gentle feedback.

Encouragement helps students stay open and keep trying. Thoughtful feedback helps them move beyond first impressions toward deeper understanding.

Help students question quick assumptions.

For example, seeing smiles in an under-resourced community doesn't always mean happiness—it may reflect hospitality or cultural norms. Gentle questions invite deeper listening and compassion.

Be patient with the process.

Students may not fully understand their experiences right away. Adults who model reflection and patience give students permission to process meaning over time.

Throughout the trip or project, spread out jobs evenly, looking for opportunities to level the field and set up young people to contribute in ways that might surprise adults. For example, you might invite a teenager to lead the morning devotions while an adult CEO is placed in charge of filling water coolers for the day. This can be fruitful for both of them.

These experiences are also great skill-building opportunities. If someone is skilled in a particular area and another person wants to learn that skill, pair them up. The motivation to learn can help relationships grow. And note that it might be a teenager teaching an adult a skill!

Got an adult who's struggling to interact with teens on the team? *Share these tips to help them reflect with students as they serve together:*

- **Encourage humility and openness** to what students are experiencing by gently challenging assumptions with phrases like, *I wonder why that is?* or *What's another way to look at it?*
- **Communicate safety** by offering support as students stretch and even fail during the learning process.
- **Affirm frequently**, being specific about what character traits you observe in students' behaviors and what you appreciate about who they are (not just what they do).
- **Resist the temptation to immediately problem-solve** when students face a challenging moment, a cultural conundrum, or the consequences of a poor decision.
- **Equalize power** as much as possible, ensuring leaders and students share in the same kinds of basic labor and including teenagers in decision-making.

Meaningful meals

Mealtimes offer great opportunities for processing the day so far, building team connections, and getting to know hosts. Here are a few suggestions to make the most of meals:

- Involve all students and adults in preparing, serving, and cleaning up after each meal.
- Circle up and pray before meals. While this may seem simple, the symbol of the circle itself is important imagery of unity in Christ. Try different ways of connecting each time: holding hands, linking arms, or standing shoulder to shoulder.
- Occasionally assign seats or ask participants to sit next to someone new at a meal. If possible, plan at least a few (if not all) meals for participants to intentionally eat with those they're serving, or with those they're serving with.
- Try introducing new meal rules from time to time—like each person can only use the hand that is opposite their normal preference, or everyone has to serve someone else.
- Consider going to a local restaurant or another place where you can eat with others in the community.
- Find a way to make and serve food for the church or ministry you are working with as an expression of gratitude and solidarity.

Intergenerational reflection questions for teams on the go:



Choose a few of the questions below to help spark faith conversations between teens and adults as they serve together.

- **What are you most thankful for right now?**
- **Where did you see or experience growth today?**
- **How did you experience God's presence today?**
- **Where did you see God at work today?**
- **When did you feel overwhelmed or frustrated today?**
- **How are you being stretched?**
- **What person or experience was most significant for you today? Why?**



Look for little wins

When you see adults and young people serving side by side, celebrate! Look for every little win you can find. A smile, a conversation, an approving nod, a teenager choosing to sit by an adult for lunch without being asked—treasure these moments, and ideally capture some photos so you can talk up these stories in your congregation later.

4

AFTER YOU SERVE:

Practice strategies for ongoing connection

If you've been able to get adults and young people serving together once, that's a great start. Don't stop now!

During any debrief or reflection time after your trip or project, make sure both adults and students participate. Listen for insights that are both similar and different across generational perspectives. Gather input from all age groups who participated, and start planning your next shared experience.

Here are helpful ideas for ongoing connection from ministry leaders like you:

Report back to the committees and groups who helped plan and raise support for the project. Be sure to include:

- Financial cost analysis
- Hours of work served
- A few stories of transformation
- Lessons learned
- Hopes for the future
- Photos

Connect the congregation with your students' experience through a post-trip service or celebration. Your team might share:

- Insights into the work God did in and through participants
- Lessons and practices learned from the people in the community where you served
- Stories of growth and transformation
- A worship song or ritual you learned from your hosts
- A meal or food item your team enjoyed as they experienced the host culture

Invite your students and congregation into ongoing transformation. Follow-up conversations you might set up to help your whole church continue processing and participating in the project's work include:

- A video call or recorded video from the host community sharing how God is working in their community and how your group participated in God's work.
- Conversations with adults who can help your students become justice advocates at home. (For example, a city council member, community organizer, or someone who works at a local nonprofit.)
- A meeting for trip participants to discuss the experience with your church missions committee and brainstorm next steps for the church's participation in this or other justice work.
- A follow-up gathering with students and adult volunteers to empower continued mentoring or discipling relationships.
- A student-led presentation to the children's ministry sharing about the trip and what students learned.
- A list of celebrated answers to prayer and continued prayer requests for the church newsletter.



Need a tool to help teens tell their testimonies? Find **Praying for Courage and Clarity to Tell our Ministry Stories**, an On-the-Go Prayer Activity, [available in the FYI store.](#)

Small steps for big transformation

Creating rhythms of intergenerational ministry can feel daunting, especially if youth and adult mission and service projects in your church have always been separate. Hear these encouraging words shared by a youth leader who has been leading intergenerational trips for many years:

“We began experimenting by mixing our traditional youth summer mission trip with an equally traditional adult summer mission trip. This was a huge change, and one important component of those trips was being intentional about intergenerational connections. I did not realize how difficult this would be for us.

Our church had become so accustomed to separation by ages that we didn’t know how to engage relationally with one another. People tend to think that if all ages are in the same space together, it’s an intergenerational gathering. But more often than not, none of the different age groups are actually talking with one another.

In the months leading up to the trips, I’d remind the adults, “We are in this together.” I’d even point out that they might get work done faster without the teenagers, but taking the time to teach and be present with the teens would be offering them more than just skills.

After two months of our pre-trip meetings, I finally got our team to split up and sit in mixed groups. We offered specific questions to get conversations going. Slowly, the walls began to come down.

After our first intergenerational trip, life on Sunday mornings at church began to change. Students would call out to adults from across the patio and run for a hug.

By the third year, Vic, the general contractor on our mission sites, couldn’t wait to go on our summer trip again. Students were excited to serve with Vic, too. He’d become known as the guy who would buy them ice cream every day after work. Eventually, I asked students what they thought about Vic joining our weekly youth ministry volunteer staff. They thought it was the best idea! The coolest part? Vic was sixty-six years old.

Sitting down with him and inviting him to share his life with students wasn’t that hard because he already knew how great they were. Vic became an amazing ministry volunteer.

Getting adults and teenagers to learn to serve together—and to like each other—was hard work. But our church is less fragmented today than it was before we started this journey. That’s another step in the right direction.

AFTER YOU SERVE:

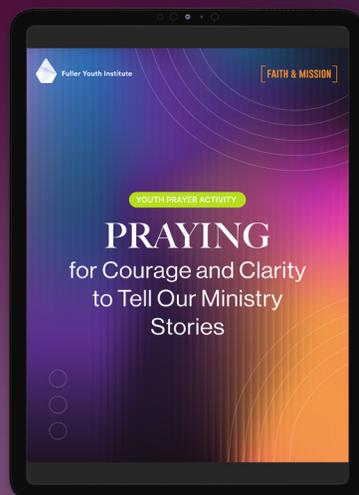
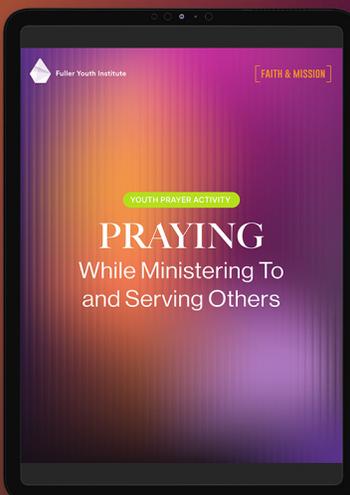
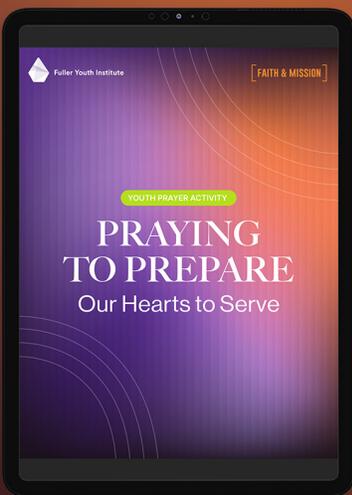
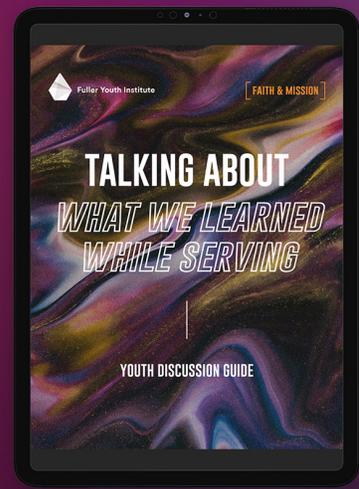
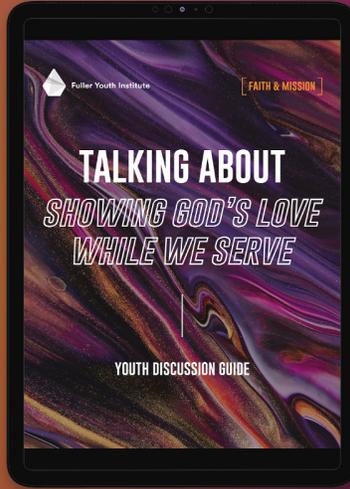
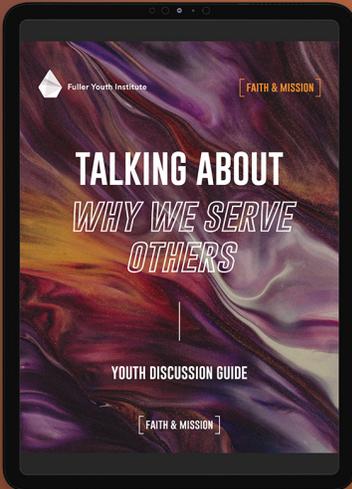
Intergenerational prayer partner questions



Choose a few of the questions below to help spark faith conversations between teens and adults in your church.

- **What one word or phrase would you use to describe your experience?**
- **When were you most overwhelmed? What did you do about that, or how did you respond to that feeling?**
- **What surprised, encouraged, or helped you as you served this community?**
- **How was life in the community you visited different from what you thought it would be?**
- **Where did you sense God at work in your life and in the lives of others during this experience?**
- **What do you think other people saw in you during your time serving?**
- **What's one takeaway from this experience that you hope will change how you relate to others, serve, and live the rest of the year?**
- **How do you hope our church changes as a result of your team's experience?**

LOW-PREP TOOLS FOR MEANINGFUL MISSION MOMENTS



Designed for mission trips and local service projects, our **Faith & Mission** collection gives you ready-to-use resources to guide teens in meaningful reflection and faith-filled conversation. Find them in the FYI store at shop.fulleryouthinstitute.org.

SHOP NOW