

SHORT-TERM MISSIONS SOCIAL MEDIA GUIDELINES

Adapted and expanded from *Helping Without Hurting in Short-Term Missions*, by Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert with Katie Casselberry (Moody Publishers)

We live in a culture where *every* latte, sunset, or family gathering is fair game for a photo-op and social media post. But we have to be aware of how our love for photography and social media can play out on a short-term mission trip or any ministry interaction with others.

Reflect on the following guidelines to ensure that your photography and social media use affirms the dignity of those struggling in material poverty:

1. GIVE YOURSELF BOUNDARIES:

When we enter another community, we need to set boundaries to help us remember that we are guests. The stories we hear and the scenes we see aren't ours to share with the rest of the world by default. We have to respect the dignity and privacy of the people we encounter. That means we should operate deliberately and willingly by a different set of rules in our photography and social media than we use at home.

2. RESPECT YOUR HOSTS:

Before your trip, ask your hosts about their preferences and policies for social media and photography. Some hosts may ask you to refrain from all social media use, while others may request that you don't post or photograph certain events. In particular, hosts in closed countries or areas experiencing hostility toward Christians may request that you don't post or photograph anything at all. Submit to whatever

guidelines and policies they provide and enforce them with your team while on the field.

3. AVOID SPECTACLE MODE:

When entering low-income communities, if not careful, our use of photography and social media can be exploitive. We can unintentionally act as tourists, capturing and consuming the images and stories of people in material poverty as if they were a show to be observed. This dynamic dishonors the image of God in low-income people, and can contribute to feelings of shame and powerlessness that they might already feel.

4. BE PRESENT:

Even if your host allows social media, consider taking a break during your trip. Be fully present with those around you, and be aware of the Holy Spirit's movement. You will learn more, engage more deeply, and bless the people you visit more fully if you set aside the urge to document your experience for an Online audience. You can share about your trip when you return. While on the field, simply *be*.



5. HONOR CERTAIN SPACES:

Don't post or photograph during worship services or when in people's homes. Put all devices away during those times, ensuring that you don't distract yourself or others from entering into worship and fellowship together. Further, pulling out a phone or camera in church might be seen as rude or sacrilegious. Similarly, when in people's homes, focus all your attention on engaging with them.

6. DO UNTO OTHERS:

Before photographing or posting, ask yourself how you would feel if your roles were reversed: How would you feel if people drove down the street photographing your daughter or niece without your permission? What if they then posted the images on Instagram? How would you feel if your son or nephew randomly appeared on a church's Facebook cover image? Pause before shooting or posting, considering whether you are "doing unto others" well. Ask permission before posting pictures of or with people, and be extremely cautious of posting pictures of or with children.

7. AVOID THE SAVIOR SYNDROME:

Does what you are posting imply that you are *saving* people in material poverty? Does it paint you as the hero and them as helpless victim(s)? Does it establish a provider-receiver dynamic where you have the answer to their poverty? Be especially careful of cliché phrases like "the least of these" or "bringing light and hope" in your posts. Use any social media updates to highlight the dignity of the community and what God is already doing over the long haul, rather than elevating your own role and impact.

8. TELL THE WHOLE STORY:

Do the pictures or posts you are crafting tell the whole story about the community? Are they highlighting the beautiful and redemptive things God is doing in a community, or only the heavy and painful brokenness of poverty? Don't reduce people or communities in material poverty to a caricature of desperation. At the same time, don't ignore the reality of poverty. Avoid statements like, "They have absolutely nothing," or, "They are so happy all the time." You wouldn't like your life and identity reduced to a single slice of your wide spectrum of experiences. Don't do it to others!

9. DELAY YOUR POSTS:

Mentally running your posts through these filters requires diligence and hard work. It takes effort to retrain our brains to consider others' realities in our social media use, especially when in communities struggling in material poverty. If you are unsure about a draft post, walk away from it for an hour and then look at it again. Or, consider showing your draft to other team members to see if it strikes them as appropriate and dignity-affirming. Ultimately, if in doubt, don't post.

10. SHARE WHAT YOU LEARN:

There is a place for sharing what you experience on a short-term mission trip. When crafted with the above guidelines in mind, social media and photography can be a powerful way to advocate for the work and community you visited—especially after you return home. You have an opportunity to share with your friends what you learned during your trip, encouraging and challenging your peers to engage in the work God is doing in the world.

