

Social Media Recommendations

What is Social Media?

Social Media are websites and applications based online that enable people to create and share content (photos, comments, updates, articles, videos etc) or to participate in social networking.

Why is it important?

When discussing the nature of social media, facebook, twitter, instagram etc it is a wonderful and complex tool. When we use it correctly, we depend on it to stay connected, follow our friends from afar and send messages. When we use it incorrectly, it can lead to questionable relationships, confusion, broken promises and hurt ministry. As we know we can use our social media as a powerful tool, we also need some guidelines to help make sure we do not hurt ourselves, others and the ministry that God has called us to do.

We have put together some helpful recommendations when working with Merge as a Merge trip mission participant.

What are our recommendations for Mission Teams?

Social media is an element present in our lives more and more every day. When teams leave it can be a good tool to help team members cope with coming home and facilitating them to maintain the new relationships they just made. However, we all know there are many dangers to these communications that can lead to misunderstanding, hurt feelings, frustration, and unresolved expectations.

Here are some suggestions to make a healthy use of Social Media:

- Usually right after the trip everyone is very motivated to keep in touch. After a while the desire fades a bit or people just get busy going back to their routines. Teenagers especially might experience some guilt. It is important to let them know that this is normal. It would be good to encourage them to focus on sustainable relationships.
- Avoid romantic relationships. And be aware to realize when someone might be inclined toward you. These things may build up sometimes because one person misinterprets what the other person is saying or how is acting.
- Don't make promises. Some cultures take promises as facts. Avoid saying "I plan to" "I promise" "I hope to" etc. It is easy for

people of other cultures to interpret these as something going to happen for sure.

- Avoid any conversation about money or needs. Sometimes we unintentionally open the door to dependency without meaning to. If you are ever in doubt about what you should do or uncomfortable with any requests, feel free to contact our Merge staff to assist in this situation.
- Don't talk about ministry that is designated for both church leaders and Merge staff. Direct communication about ministry may hurt our work. Also, our Merge staff is trained, experienced and knowledgeable of both cultures to mediate the projects.
- Don't invite your new social media friends to visit you, unless you are prepared for them to show up at your door unexpected and ready to stay for three months. Only make a formal invitation for a visit which include dates and length of stay.
- **We strongly recommend mission leaders to create a closed group for team members and host people on Facebook, yahoo groups, group chats and messages. This would be monitored by your church or mission leaders. Once you arrive in your country of service you can add local community members and new friends to the group to share stories and photos regarding the mission trip. It may be a good tool for everyone to keep sharing the development of the projects and encouraging one another.**

Examples of what type of social media situations can arise before, during or after a mission trip:

Situation 1-Posting the worst, not the best

A youth group has just returned home from their amazing mission trip! While on their trip, several of their youth and leaders became friends with other youth and members from the host Church. They returned home excited and started posting pictures of their trip, which included children sitting on the street, of peoples homes built out of scavenged materials and dirt floors, kids with smudges on their faces, etc. After many people from the host Church saw these pictures they became upset, hurt and angry. They asked why did they show these pictures? Why not show the smiling faces, beautiful flowers and when we all got dressed up in Church? Is this what they want the world and their friends to think about us?

While we are so caught up in the moment and want to show everything we saw that was different, we need to be respectful of the families and people we are showcasing to the world. It may seem hurtful to someone if you return home and show pictures of (what you feel is) hardship. Most people appreciate you showing them off to your friends and family at their best! Ask yourself "why am I posting this picture, and if this person saw it, would they be proud to see it and show their own friends and family?"

Situation 2-The Inappropriate Photo:

The host pastor's son, 14 years old, sent a picture of himself in his underwear to a teenage girl from the mission team. He then asked for her to send a nude photo of herself. She went to her US youth pastor with the message and photo. The youth pastor asked her about their conversations prior to this picture, wanting to make sure of what had happened and what led him to do so. After finding out the details from the young girl and of their relationship on social media, the host pastor called Merge staff to address the situation. After speaking with the Merge staff, the youth pastor expressed that he was not upset and he understood that this type of thing happens all the time among US teenagers. He would address the situation with his youth himself. However, The US pastor became concerned for the relationship that they have with the host Church. He was worried how the pastor from the host Church would react and what would happen to the host pastor's son?

Not every pastor is as forgiving and understanding. We can't control every relationship on social media, or what gets sent. In this situation it was neither the pastors', churches or teams fault. However we can ask all relationships, friendships that are created during a mission trip are done so in a group setting with a pastor or team leaders overseeing and monitoring the groups activities, photos and messages. Whether it be a facebook, yahoo, public group or a group chat message. This will help prevent private messages and photos being sent inappropriately.

Situation 3-Helping or Hurting?

A couple goes on a mission trip and meets an extraordinary family from another country. When they had met, the family had expressed their trials and hardship with the couple, introduced them to everyone in their family and shared meals together. It felt nice that the family was so open with their needs and trusted them into their home! The couple returned home and continued their friendship chatting on social media with the family. After some conversations, some of the family

members from the host country starting asking the couple to send them money to help with medical bills, school payments, food and clothes. The couple does not know what to do. How do they respond? They shared their hearts and families with us! Are we obligated to help?

This is a common situation for many people that return home from mission trips. Sometimes by what we have seen, team members can feel guilty and feel pressure to give more in order to minister. We ask that you under no circumstances give promises of sending money or items to anyone that you met during your mission trip. This creates a dependency problem, and will be an expectation if you or other mission teams return. This is damaging to the people you came to serve and causes more harm than good. An excellent book that dives deeper into giving money or material items to those 'in need'- When Helping Hurts, by Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert.

Situation 4-I thought what we said was very clear!

A Pastor and the leader's from the host Church become friends on social media after having an amazing week in their country of service. However, in order to communicate, they needed to use Google Translate. As stories are swapped of the current construction the host church is doing, plans are made unintentionally, things are mistranslated and both Churches grow frustrated. Why do they keep misunderstanding our mission intentions? Why do they keep asking what do we mean? I thought what we said was very clear?

Unfortunately, Google translate is not a good form of translating your thoughts, stories or to get your point across to people speaking another language. It often gets misinterpreted. Google translate does not understand cultural sayings or slang, leaves the reader frustrated, and ends in many misunderstandings. If you intend to have a conversation with someone that you don't want misinterpreted, do not use Google translate, or other online versions of translation, to convey your point. Contact your Merge Trip leader or a translator and ask them to help you convey your message in a thoughtful and Godly way.

Situation 5-Who are those men?

“Who are those men? And why do they have their arms around my 13 year old daughter!!!” Declared a mother. The mother is just now seeing the pictures that were taken from social media and then added to a video montage the youth group presented at Church after they returned from their mission trip.

While the picture was taken in a Church with the ministry choir, with the church members in the background, the mother only saw the men's arms around her daughter. Pictures can say a thousand words, especially to those who were not there. The picture may be innocent but what does it tell people that were not on the mission with you? If you need to explain the context of the picture, it is probable it is best to leave it off social media.

Situation 6:-I thought you were Christians!

A church from the states had a memorable time in their country of service. The host Church was honored to have the team lead VBS, go on prayer walks together, teach in the local Christian school, share testimonies and preach in the Church. They passed out fliers on the foreigners behalf recommending that the community get involved. The Church from the states really connected with the host Church. Before leaving they became friends with members of the community on Facebook to continue following each other until the next time they were to meet again the following year. As the host Church members, community and leaders scrolled through some of the US team members social media pages, they found many what they felt were inappropriate photos that the members had posted or shared. These photos included the team members drinking, wearing immodest clothing, sharing memes or culturally insensitive pages or articles. The host church was shocked that these 'supposed' Christians came and ministered to their children, preached in their Church and shared their testimonies. They questioned the foreigners faith and if they should return to minister and continue to partner with them in their community.

Every Church and culture has different ideas of what is appropriate and what is not for a Christ-centered life. This is also based on your personal relationship with the Lord and how He has convicted you and where you are in your spiritual journey. Before befriending someone, stop and think, if they see my social media profile pages, will they see Christ throughout the pages? Would Jesus be proud of my social media pages? If you have any doubts, don't.

Situation 7-Underage/overage friendship

A teenager has gone away on her very first trip away from her parents. During this trip she experiences God in a new way and feels blessed to be meeting all of these incredible people in the community. The experience is new and she wants to be friends with everyone she meets. One of the older men at the school she is teaching at during the week has noticed her outgoing personality and has asked to be friends with her on her social media accounts. Feeling a bit pressured

and wanting to not seem rude, she does. She immediately starts receiving messages from this man telling her how fond he is of her. She tries to be nice by thanking him but now the messages will not stop and she is afraid she has given him the wrong impression.

Unfortunately, we cannot control who you do and do not give your social media information to. However it is Merge Policy that no one under the age of 18 is to be friends on social media with an adult. It is dangerous to everyone involved and what can start as innocent friend request can sometimes lead the wrong way fast. If you truly would like to keep in contact with someone that is under the age of 18 years old we suggest that you be friends or keep in contact with their parents on social media. This will protect you and keep people from questioning your intent.

In Conclusion:

It is up to you on what you decide to post and what you feel is appropriate behavior regarding social media. However, many countries are very strict in what a Christian does and looks like. Please know that if you decide to become a friend with someone on social media, everything that you post is a reflection of yourself and the Church or group that you are representing. These photos or comments can be very damaging to your relationship with this community and Church. If you have any doubts about what the host community or Church might think about your personal profile. Please do not add them.

As we all navigate these waters of social media together, we each have a common goal and questions in mind. How do we further the kingdom of God? How can we do ministry in a helpful and not hurtful way? How can this new family in Christ stay connected? We highly recommend that you seriously think could this (photo, message, article, tweet) be damaging the relationship we are trying to create? Does this message on social media reflect Christ?

By adhering to and applying these principles to our social media conduct, we hope to further the Kingdom and have a transparency that Jesus would be proud of.