



WHAT TO EXPECT SERVING IN American Indian Communities

Thank you for signing up your youth to come to an American Indian community this summer! We've been preparing for your group over the last year with the hope that your students' experience in a reservation setting will change the way they think about God, their neighbors and themselves.

As you consider student expectations, heart-preparation, prayer concerns and much more, know that we are too. We're thinking about those things as we organize trip logistics, plan evening activities and set up service opportunities. As we set the stage logistically, we are asking, "How can we *also* create positive expectations about the community for your group?" You see, each community has a distinctive story. And as you know, each of your students and leaders also has a unique story. As we bring these stories together, our desire is to successfully connect students to the places they serve and dispel any stereotypes or fears.

Life in an American Indian Community

Beauty and pain... Even the most seasoned traveler can be overwhelmed by both in the American Indian community. You will probably encounter evidence of a people and culture that have been systematically oppressed for over 100 years. But you will also encounter men, women and children who are passionate about their culture, their sense of identity, and their grasp of the relationships and space around them. You will be overwhelmed by the beauty of the landscape and humbled by those who are willing to share their culture and history with you.

Life in American Indian communities may feel slower but to simply say it's slow misses the bigger picture. The focus of life in these communities is always about relationships. Schedules and plans are secondary to friendships. Getting to the next thing is less important than being present now. YouthWorks has been facilitating mission trips in American Indian communities for 20 years now, and we are continually confronted with the fact that real service cannot happen outside the context of relationships. We desire for students, adult leaders and staff to learn that people matter, attitudes are important, and the posture of our hearts determines how we connect with others. The reality is that every community has its struggles. Our hope is that your time in this community will not only raise awareness of life on the reservation, but also move you to reflect on the impact that you can have in your own community using the knowledge you will gain throughout your week.

As you serve in the community, you may encounter various levels of poverty and the challenges remaining from the oppression Native Americans have endured. Don't become distracted by the poverty. Look through it and listen to those you meet in the community. You'll find that the stereotypes you've held about people – or certain kinds of people – may not hold true. We invite you to join us as we continue to let go of preconceptions and interact with people as they are and not as we expect them to be.

As you prepare, ask your group these questions:

- What are some ways culture or ethnicity impact our faith, ministry and relationships?
- How can the views from our culture impact your week in a different culture?
- What are some stereotypes we might have about the community we are visiting? How might these be untrue?

¹ Muriu, O. (2009, December 29). Pace and place of missions today. *Urbana Conference 2009*. Retrieved on January 28, 2011, from <http://www.intervarsity.org/page/urbana-09-audio>

Serving in an American Indian Community

At YouthWorks, we have learned that there are a number of typical reactions you and your group may experience as you step into this type of community. Understanding key aspects of a community before entering it will help your leaders and youth respond appropriately. Here are a few we'd like to highlight for you.

Time Sensitivity. Spending time with people is valued more than being on time. As a result, things don't always run on schedule; community members may show up "late" to an event. This is not a sign of disrespect. When you meet someone for the first time, think about "visiting" instead of "meeting." Spend time with people before you try to get things done.

Quietness/Listening. American Indian communities tend to be quiet places. The culture values quietness and listening. Please be mindful that in large groups we can be very loud. When in public places or service sites, try to be mindful of volume. You might find that conversations feel awkward. This may be because American Indian culture values listening. Don't be afraid of silent times in a conversation, sit in the silence, enjoy the beauty around you and wait for someone to speak.

Handshakes / Eye Contact. You may notice that people in the community don't look you in the eye when you are visiting with them. Some cultures don't value eye contact; this is normal. Handshakes may also be different, as some American Indian cultures don't value a "hard" handshake. Come with a soft grip.

Photographs. Each tribe is different when it comes to photographing. Some people do not want to be photographed while others do not mind. Some places or events should not be photographed because they are sacred for the tribe. Be respectful and ask permission.

We hope that this information helps as you continue to prepare for your trip. Please take time to talk with your group about expectations and the type of community you will be traveling to. Groups who have intentionally taken time to process and prepare before they begin their trip have more meaningful individual growth, team solidarity and community relationships.

Being Like Jesus in this Community

American Indian communities are complex places built on a difficult history. It's easy for all of us to label a community and its people with all sorts of stereotypes. These labels feed our perceptions and influence how we approach people, situations and relationships. As you prepare, think about how you will approach each person and situation with the kind of grace that Jesus demonstrated to each person he met along the way. The following characteristics¹ are great examples of how your students and adult leaders can prepare their hearts for their mission week.

Serve with Humility

Jesus came to earth with the attitude of a servant. If you want to serve others, have a humble attitude. Become a servant focused on listening instead of speaking and learning instead of teaching. Come with a humble heart that is ready to jump in and serve wherever needed, whether it's cleaning a bathroom or listening to a life story.

Embrace Powerlessness

Jesus did not come as a powerful king, but as a powerless infant and, later in life, a carpenter. Do the same. Don't seek positions of power or wealth. Come ready to put the needs of those you serve above your own.

Don't Depend on Privilege

Jesus had access to privilege and wealth, but he voluntarily chose poverty instead. Your time on site may feel like poverty. The sleeping arrangements are probably less comfortable than you have at home, the food may not be what you prefer, and there might not be air conditioning. Our hope is that this week of service will remind you to depend more on Jesus by living outside convenience and, sometimes, going without.

Encounter Brokenness

Jesus stepped out of the order and harmony of heaven into the disorder and brokenness of Earth. You are called to do the same. You will encounter brokenness during your time in the community. God is calling you to be present among the broken, not to draw conclusions or judge. Instead, open your eyes wide to the needs around you, both in your YouthWorks community and back home.