



Mustard Seed Communities

CARING FOR THE MOST VULNERABLE

Mission Volunteer Handbook



Begin Your Journey By Reading A Message from Monsignor Gregory:

For reasons unbeknownst to you and me, God has chosen you to begin this journey. Thank you for answering His call and choosing to humbly serve our children and staff. It is our prayer that God will continue to reveal Himself in the time of your preparation for your trip and of course during your stay in our homes. I thank you for sharing your time, talents and discipleship with us and look forward to meeting you.



Msgr. Gregory Ramkissoon
Founder of Mustard Seed Communities

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Frequently Asked Questions

Who are the children of Mustard Seed Communities?

MSC cares for several hundred children with special needs. A majority of them cannot speak, so you will need to learn to communicate by other means. Some children are mobile and others are confined to a bed or wheelchair. Many have twisted and tiny limbs, but some are VERY mobile and will run up to greet you with a hug. The sooner you reach out to a child, the sooner your heart will begin to open to them. *All of them are made in the image and likeness of God and are a gift to us and to MSC.* If anyone on the team has questions about how to hold a child, if it's okay to move them or help feed them, the caregivers will be more than happy to help. Please just don't be afraid to ask. The caregivers work with the children on a daily basis and will be able to give advice pertinent to each specific child. They know their tendencies and give great advice. For more information on ways to interact with Mustard Seed residents, [read the guide here](#).

What projects will my group work on?

First and foremost, all groups will have scheduled time to interact and play with the children. Interaction with the children is more important than finishing a project. Each group will also have a work project that may include light construction, painting, farming or landscaping. The Mission Program Coordinator will be able to give you an idea of the project(s) your group will be doing as your trip approaches. While we all like to feel as though we've accomplished something tangible on a mission trip, we ask you to always be open and flexible when it comes to your group's work projects. We will do our best to coordinate a meaningful project that you will feel great about when your week is over. If you have someone on your team with specific skills that you think may be useful to MSC, tell us and we will take that into consideration when planning your projects.

What is life like on a mission trip with MSC?

Every day brings an opportunity to rise early and spend time with the children whether it is to feed them, play with them, or simply be in their presence. Throughout your trip, you will build community within your team and with the staff and children of Mustard Seed Communities. Each day is filled with time to reflect, share, and pray. You will also get the opportunity to experience the culture and enjoy a "day out" in the local community. Keep your mind and heart open. That is the best way to ensure that you have a fulfilling mission experience. Be present and willing to learn from the children and those you meet. For a detailed sample of an MSC mission trip schedule, please visit the [trip locations page](#).

What is expected of an MSC mission volunteer?

We hope that while you're on a mission trip, you will think of the experience as a retreat – you are getting away from the convenience of home, hot showers, electronics and your everyday life so that you can care for the MSC children. Be present for them, the staff and your fellow mission volunteers.

What Should I Bring?

For a detailed list of what to bring, see the packing list on page 5. We recommend that you pack lightly- **plan to live simply for the entire week**. You may be surprised to see what you are able to live without! If each mission volunteer packs their personal items in a carry-on bag, then checked bags can be used for donations. Some airlines charge a fee for the second checked bag.

Please keep in mind that the needs at Mustard Seed are constantly changing when collecting donations to bring in your luggage. If you have any questions about in kind needs, you can either check with the MSC USA Office or visit our [Mission Trips](#) tab on the website to view the Wish List for each location. Your group will need to submit an itemized list of all donations and their values to the Mission Program Coordinator via email (missiontrips@mustardseed.com).

How will we get to our destination?

All travel arrangements from and back to the United States will need to be coordinated by you and your group. Your group will purchase the airline tickets on your own. We recommend that you research flights and purchase your airfare as soon as possible. Once you arrive in country, MSC will meet you at the airport and handle all local travel accommodations, including your day out.

Will there be any out of pocket expenses?

Before and during your trip you will want to have some money to cover small additional expenses such as souvenirs, your day out and other miscellaneous items. We caution missionaries from bringing large amounts of cash. For further clarification on your day out expenses and what you can expect, please be in contact with the Mission Program Coordinator (missiontrips@mustardseed.com)

What safety measures are in place to protect mission volunteers?

The safety and security of our mission volunteers is MSC's first priority. All MSC locations are secured and gated and have security 24 hours a day. As with any international destination, you need to exercise common sense and use caution when outside the MSC facilities. Each mission group is accompanied by an experienced driver and a Mustard Seed Communities mission representative when traveling outside of MSC properties.

The mission representatives, who are employees of MSC, supervise all volunteer activities and stay with the mission group throughout the day and evening. Mustard Seed Communities has been operating mission trips for over twenty years. Our groups are primarily teen and college age and continue to grow every year. We have an average of 1000 mission volunteers participate in mission trips each year.

Does MSC provide insurance for mission volunteers?

To protect our mission volunteers while traveling internationally, MSC has engaged the services of ACE American Insurance Company to provide emergency travel assistance, accident and sickness insurance, medical evaluation security evacuation and repatriation coverage. Prior to your departure, the mission leader will receive a Certificate of Insurance, ID card, and FAQs page which should address any questions you might have. This coverage is valid for the days you are traveling and is included in the cost of your trip.

When do you need to pay for the trip?

We need to have full payment for the trip 30 days before you leave. We are responsible first to our children and homes therefore MSC reserves the right to cancel a trip if the final payment is not received.

What happens if we have to cancel?

All deposits and donations are non-refundable. If an individual mission volunteer has collected funds and does not go on the trip, those funds are added to the group funds.

MSC Rules & Guidelines

Thank you for choosing to spend this time with us at Mustard Seed Communities. We welcome you and pray that your time with us is fruitful and blessed by God. Please keep in mind you are visiting a foreign country and you are representing your country and Mustard Seed Communities. Remember that this trip is about immersion into a culture. Although you may want to go out and buy things, the people you are serving don't have that option. This is a time to be patient and think of the group's best interest before your own. We thank you in advance for your service, dedication, and cooperation.

Culture – We ask that you act respectfully toward all locals and their ways of doing things no matter what you may think of them. We especially ask that you be sensitive to all employees of MSC. In private, it may be natural to talk amongst yourselves about the differences you experience, but to comment when and where you can be seen or heard by locals can be insulting and demeaning.

Staff Policy – We request that no money, gifts, or addresses be given directly to any MSC staff or children. At the end of your trip, you may request that certain items that you leave be given to specific people. If you leave them at MSC, they will be distributed fairly so that more children can benefit from your generosity. Sometimes, the children and staff that have the most interaction with the groups get lots of things and any others are overlooked. MSC asks that we allow them the discretion to distribute items more evenly.

Meals – We encourage teams to experience the culture of the location and embrace the food that is offered. Please know that food options are limited at Mustard Seed Communities (MSC) mission locations. Three meals per day are provided for mission volunteers. If a team would like to supplement meals with snacks or other food items, volunteers are responsible for bringing needed supplies with them. A grocery stop is not guaranteed when in Jamaica, Nicaragua, or Dominican Republic.

We do not have access to specialty foods for those with particular diets, such as vegetarians, vegans, gluten intolerances, lactose intolerances, or other allergies. Due to the limitations of food in many of our locations, we cannot guarantee the trip will be free of peanuts or tree nuts. Most volunteers find that there is always something they can eat, like rice and beans or vegetable side dishes. The food is simple, typically relying on rice, proteins, fresh fruit, and vegetables. Clean filtered water is always available. Mission volunteers should bring any medicine required (EpiPens, Lactaid, etc.) and inform the rest of their team about their food restriction or allergy.

Safety – While traveling internationally, you should always be aware of your surroundings. In urban or crowded areas, pay particular attention to your belongings, as crime and petty theft are a more common occurrence in those environments. In general, locals know why you are in their country and respect the fact that you are there to help. MSC provides security personnel during transports at MSC sites, and there is security where you are staying.

To ensure a safe mission trip experience:

- Do not carry excess cash or wear unnecessary jewelry or valuables.
- On arrival at MSC, give all valuables (tickets, passports, large sums of money) to your group leader who will put them in a lockbox for the duration of the trip.
- Stay with your group at all times and don't leave the MSC compound unless it is absolutely necessary.
- **If you need to leave in an EMERGENCY:**
 - Inform your group leader
 - Go in groups of at least three or four
 - An MSC security guard or local staff member must accompany you.
- When traveling on the bus, please keep hands and arms inside the bus at all times.

- Beat the heat – wear a hat and sunscreen and drink more water than you would ever think possible – dehydration and excessive exposure to the sun and heat can lead to headaches, nausea and other undesirable conditions.
- Take care of yourself for the group’s sake.

Alcohol/Tobacco/Drug Policies –

- **Alcohol:** No alcohol is allowed while participating in any Mustard Seed Communities mission trip.
- **Smoking:** No smoking is allowed at any of the Mustard Seed Communities properties.
- **Drugs:** Use or possession of illegal drugs is prohibited.
- **Open Flames:** Any time you are on MSC property, you are not allowed to have an open flame.
 - This includes candles.

Alcohol/Tobacco/Drug Policies (cont.) –

We are home for children, and as such, we fall under the government’s policy for protecting children. If use of alcohol, drugs, cigarettes, or open flames is discovered on MSC property, the local government could close the facility.

Guidelines for Group Living – Think of your group first. Whenever you are thinking of asking to do something, first consider what would happen if the entire group did what you wanted to do. Be respectful of your community by being on time and following the guidelines for working, praying, and playing. The rules are there to allow you more fun and freedom.

- **Participate, don’t anticipate –** Be flexible and patient. Remember that your schedule may be altered at the discretion of MSC staff members. Try not to complain and keep in mind that you may not get everything you want, but MSC will provide you with everything you need.
- **Personal accountability –** Please remember that you are staying in a home for children and treat them as you would any other child.
- **Be respectful** of one another and MSC properties.
- **Jump right in –** Reach out to someone & learn new names each day
- Toilet paper and water are in limited supply – **please use sparingly**
- **Showers –** When showering, be considerate of the quantity of water you are using. In most of the cities MSC is located in, the city tends to shut off the water for most of the day. Therefore, a tank with water will be filled for showering and drinking. Please take **military showers**. In other words, get wet, turn the water off, shampoo and lather up, then turn the water back on to rinse off.
- **Sleeping Quarters –** Groups will divide up male and female. There are to be no males in the females’ room and/or bathrooms and vice versa.
- **Waste –** Please do not waste food. Only take what you know you will be able to eat. When serving yourself, please be considerate of others who have not yet eaten.
- **Dishes –** All groups are responsible for cleaning the dining area and kitchen after each meal. The group leader should assign a person or team to take turns washing the dishes each day.
- **Quiet Hours –** After 11:00pm, lights are to be out in the designated sleeping areas and the rooms should be quiet for those who want to sleep. Others may stay up longer in the common areas provided that you respect those who are trying to sleep.

Photo and Video Policy – We love getting amazing photos and video from mission volunteers and encourage you to send us your best photos from your trip when you get home! The following policy applies to photographing residents when at Mustard Seed Communities.

- 1. The residents need you to be present while you are spending time with them.** Take photographs during group activities like Circle Time or during certain events. Your experience and memories are most important. ***Before taking a photograph, kindly secure permission from the Matron or Administrator or a senior representative of the Apostolate.***
- 2. Be respectful of the person/people who you are photographing.** Group shots are recommended. Make sure that the individuals are comfortable with their photo being taken. Before taking a photo, ask the people who you are about to photograph if they consent to getting their picture taken. Some residents at MSC may not respond verbally and, in this case, it is important to establish a connection with them before simply taking a photo. If you take a photo of an individual, shots should be longshots and angled.
- 3. Be conscious of who you can and cannot photograph when visiting MSC.** Some residents cannot be photographed for their own safety. If you are unsure whether you are allowed to take photographs, ask your Mission Rep or a MSC staff member if there are any restrictions concerning photography. **Residents in the Dare to Care program at Martha's House and Dare to Care in Jerusalem and residents at Matthew 25:40 and Mary's Child cannot be photographed for their safety.**
- 4. Put yourself in the place of the subject you are photographing and think about whether you would like your picture to be taken in that situation.** Photograph people in a positive light rather than taking photos of those who may be uncomfortable or in a bad mood.

Social Media

When sharing on your social account, always tag Mustard Seed Communities on the platform. If the photo does not follow the policy outlined here, we may ask you to take it down.

Mustard Seed Social Accounts

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/MustardSeedCommunities>

Twitter: @MustardSeedComm

Instagram: @mustardseedcommunities

How to share your photos with MSC:

Please add your photos to the Mustard Seed Google drive here:

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1KtxMlzAtCZRvAl5a109ZvKnoeyBOM62X?usp=sharing>

When you share your photos with Mustard Seed, you agree to allow us to share it on Mustard Seed social media channels or for other marketing uses at our discretion.

Personal and Group Packing List

WHAT TO BRING

- Old work clothes
- T-shirts, shorts, pants (no tank tops)
- Closed toe shoes
- 1 nice outfit for outings and Mass (women should wear dresses & men should wear long pants)
- Swimsuit (one-piece for females, please)
- Beach towel
- Towel for the shower
- Shower shoes
- Twin bed sheets
- Snack foods to share (optional, meals are provided by MSC)
- Spending money in small denominations
- Camera (use discretion if bringing an expensive camera)
- Work gloves
- One or two water bottles
- Hats/Bandanas
- Sunglasses
- Shampoo
- Soap
- Sunscreen
- Bug Spray
- Toothpaste
- Rain coat/umbrella (if rainy season)
- Set of warm layers (evenings can be cool)
- Personal Toiletries
- Antibacterial hand gel
- Bible, journal or other reading material for quiet time
- Any medicine you need
- Ear plugs
- Bubbles/Stickers for sharing with the kids
- Two rolls of toilet paper
- Safety glasses optional

*Carry a photocopy of your passport with you at all times.

*Many mission volunteers choose to leave their personal items at MSC as a donation. Please consider this when packing.

GROUP SUPPLIES

- Pens
- Paper
- Gatorade
- Garbage bags
- Medical Kit
- Schedule