

Before You Go

Preparing Your Heart for Cross-Cultural Mission

A conversation for people who want to serve well across cultures.



The trip begins before the flight.

Not with a packing list. With posture.

Maybe you are preparing for your first mission experience. Maybe you have traveled many times and still find yourself asking whether there is a better way to enter another community. Either way, we understand the desire beneath the question: you want your presence to matter.

So do we. And over the years, Rwanda has taught us that meaningful service begins long before we decide what we will do.

A PLACE TO BEGIN

You want the trip to matter. We understand.

There is something beautiful about saying yes to a mission experience. You make the time. You raise the money. You step onto a plane carrying hope, expectation, and a genuine desire to help.

And somewhere in all of that goodness, another feeling can sneak in: pressure.

Pressure to make the trip count. Pressure to come home with a powerful story. Pressure to find the need, meet it, and know your presence made a difference.

We understand that impulse because we have felt versions of it too.

Maybe this sounds familiar.

You arrive ready to serve and immediately begin noticing what could be fixed, funded, improved, or changed. None of that makes you a bad traveler. It makes you human. But it can also make it easy to miss what is already strong.

The longer we work across cultures, the more we learn to ask a different question.

What if the first thing we bring is not an answer—but attention?

Attention changes the way we enter a place. We notice the woman who already knows how to organize her neighbors. The young person with an idea no one has funded yet. The pastor who has been carrying his community for years. The local professional who understands both the challenge and the context.

Suddenly, the story is no longer about what we came to bring. It is also about what was already there.

LISTENING

What if listening is part of the mission?

It can be uncomfortable to enter a room where you are not the expert—especially when you have traveled a long way to be useful.

But people who live in a community know things a visitor cannot learn from a briefing. They know the history behind a request. They know which relationships matter. They know what has been tried before. They know which idea sounds wonderful on paper and will never work on that road, with that family, or in that season.

That kind of knowledge deserves more than a polite hearing. It deserves weight.

Imagine this.

A visiting team sees an obvious problem and quickly designs a solution. A local leader hesitates. The visitor may hear resistance. The local leader may be seeing consequences the visitor cannot yet see. The wiser response is not to push harder. It is to get curious.

Listening does not mean arriving timid or empty-handed. It means holding what you know with enough humility to make room for what someone else knows.

Local leadership is not something to work around. It is something to honor.

One of the best things a cross-cultural traveler can learn is how to follow well. Sometimes leadership looks like taking initiative. Sometimes it looks like recognizing whose voice should carry the most weight in that moment.

GENEROSITY

When helping gets complicated.

If you have a generous heart, this may be one of the hardest parts of cross-cultural service.

Someone shares a need. You know you could help. Maybe the amount feels small to you. Maybe the answer seems obvious. Why not simply give?

Sometimes giving is exactly the right response.

And sometimes a gift can solve one problem while quietly creating another.

The tension is real.

An immediate gift may bring genuine relief. It may also change expectations, create tension between people, bypass someone who has been carrying responsibility locally, or begin a relationship the visitor cannot sustain after going home.

That is why wise generosity asks one more question after, “Can I help?”

What will my help set in motion?

That question slows us down just enough to consider dignity, relationships, local leadership, and what happens after we leave.

We have a phrase at HSA that keeps us grounded:

God gave us the vision. We are His vessels.

Compassion matters. So does humility about our role.

You do not have to become less generous. You learn to let wisdom travel with your generosity.

STORYTELLING

The story you bring home matters.

After a cross-cultural experience, people will ask what you saw.

You will probably have photographs. Stories. Names you do not want to forget. Moments that moved you deeply.

And now you hold something important: another person's story.

How we tell those stories matters just as much as why we traveled in the first place.

A small shift can change everything.

There is a difference between saying, “Look how little they had,” and saying, “Let me tell you about the woman who welcomed us into her home, prayed over us, and taught me something about faith I am still carrying.” The circumstances may be the same. The story is not.

Dignity does not require us to pretend hardship is not real. It asks us not to make hardship the only thing we see.

People are more than the circumstances in which we meet them.

Tell the story of need when it needs to be told. But also tell the story of leadership. Ingenuity. Humor. Hospitality. Faith. Work. Beauty. The person who taught you something. The person who challenged what you thought you knew.

Sometimes the most powerful story you bring home is not what you did for someone. It is what someone revealed to you.

FAITH

God was there before you arrived.

For those of us who travel because of faith, mission can carry another kind of pressure: the desire to do something meaningful for God.

That desire can be beautiful. But it can also make us forget something wonderfully freeing.

God did not begin working in a community when your plane landed.

There were prayers before yours. Acts of obedience before yours. Local believers served, led, grieved, gave, and trusted God before anyone knew you were coming.

You are not bringing God into the room.

You are entering a room where He is already present.

This changes the posture.

Instead of asking only, “What did God send me here to do?” we can also ask, “Lord, what are You already doing here—and how should I join You?”

That question makes room for receiving as well as giving.

And sometimes, that becomes one of the greatest surprises of cross-cultural mission: the person you thought you came to encourage becomes the person who encourages you.

BEFORE YOU GO

A few questions to sit with.

You do not need perfect answers. These are simply questions worth carrying for a while before you leave home.

- What am I hoping this experience will give me?
- What assumptions might I be carrying about the people or place I am entering?
- Am I willing to listen even when I think I already understand?
- How do I respond when I am not in control?
- Can I recognize leadership that looks different from mine?
- Am I as willing to receive as I am eager to give?
- What would it look like to come home changed—not simply impressed?

You do not have to manufacture a life-changing moment.

Prepare your heart. Show up with humility. Pay attention.

Cross-cultural mission is not about shrinking yourself or pretending you have nothing to offer. Bring your gifts. Bring your experience. Bring your faith. Bring your willingness to work.

Just bring them with open hands.

There is room to serve and to learn. To give and to receive. To speak and to listen. To arrive with purpose and still be surprised.

How we show up matters.

What is one thing you want to carry forward from this Field Note?

If your church, school, nonprofit, mission team, or organization is preparing for cross-cultural service and would value a deeper conversation, Hope Springs Africa would be glad to continue it with you.

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