

SPRING CONNECTION BASIC STUDENT PACKET

What is Spring Connection?

Spring Connection, a short-term missions program sponsored by EFC-MAYM in cooperation with Coahuila, Mexico Friends Churches, has been hosting Friends Church Sr. High student missions teams in Mexico since 1993. Spring Connection allows students to serve the foreign mission field for one-week, experiencing ministry in a cross-cultural community and observing God's action in the context of Coahuila, Mexico Friends Churches. Connection also provides a place for youth groups to be challenged and stretched together, finding sacrifice and service as pleasures in God's Kingdom. Furthermore, Connection not only helps students develop a mission-minded world-view, but also allows them to take a beginners-level peek at exploring missionary life and ministry Calling. Connection gives all participants a tremendous blessing as they plunge themselves right into the middle God's work!

Participating Spring Connection Youth Groups, are divided (by youth group/churches) into teams of 10 – 20 members per team. Then each team is assigned to work with a Friends Church in various sites within the state of Coahuila, under supervision of a local Pastor, Connection Directors and Youth Group Leaders. There are at least 7 potential locations available for Connection Teams to be placed. Towns include: Nueva Rosita, Allende, Agujita, Nacimiento, Monterrey, Saltillo and Palau.

Spring Connection Directors

Jesse Penna, EFC-MAYM Director of Student Ministries, will serve as Spring Connection Director and the primary contact person for registration and program coordination. You can contact Jesse anytime: 316-641-9961 or jesse@efcmaym.org.

Marco Martinez and Gene Stratton will be our Spring Connection liaisons for construction projects. Both have been involved with Spring Connection in various ways over the years. Their primary focus is on any construction or work projects youth groups might be involved with as the liaison between the Coahuila project directors and our groups. Marco and Gene have a great relationship with this Mexican Friends Church community and will help us know how to prepare for the projects that the Friends Churches in Coahuila will be directing.

Samuel Vasquez is one of several pastors and a leader among the pastors that Marco, Jesse, and all of us look to for leadership in our work with the churches in Mexico. Samuel and the Mexican pastors are our bosses. Show great respect to them. They will be very busy hosting us and will be interested in what we do in their churches and communities. When we leave, they will still be there, so we must follow their leading, welcome their participation and seek their opinions in what we do. We hope to help them minister to the community, not hurt it. Our witness may affect their witness.

Spring Connection guidelines for student team members:

- Sr. High Student (college, adults, families welcome)
- ***Must have Passport or Passport Card***
- Active participant in local church and/or youth program
- Respectful to authority and peers
- Willing to be stretched and follow all Spring Connection guidelines
- Has been accepted as a team member of a participating EFC-MAYM Church Youth Group

Spring Connection Sample Schedule:

Each Group's schedule will vary somewhat.

Saturday

Travel to Eagle Pass or San Antonio, Texas

Stay in a hotel. EFC-MAYM will coordinate a group block of hotel rooms that you can use if you want.

Sunday

8:00 a.m. Head across the border

12:00 noon Eat lunch at Agujita, Mexico or the border depending on time crossing the border
Travel to missions site

6:00 p.m. Sunday evening worship service at Mexican Friends Churches
Supper with your host church or mission

10:00 p.m. Sleep

Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday:

Ministry work at each site! Each team's schedule will be unique according to church community's needs. Teams should be able to make time for debriefing and sharing on a daily basis, as well as making time for personal 'quiet time.'

Thursday

A more flexible day used to wrap projects and ministry

All groups travel back to central location in Agujita after breakfast or after lunch.

Afternoon Free Time (shopping?)

Evening Whatever God and Samuel leads for a celebration or evangelistic service – this may be a chance for teams to share something about the week.

Later JUGOS! All you can eat up to 3 drinks and 3 items on Spring Connection!

11:00 p.m. Sleep - teams that come in from remote locations will be on a church floor.

Friday

9:00 a.m. Final Good-byes and pictures, then Head for the Border - Best souvenir shopping at border

Most Groups travel to available motel in San Antonio for a late-afternoon hot shower before hitting the Riverwalk for a good celebration meal and laugh.

Saturday

Travel Home.

Housing

Depending where your team is located, some teams will get the blessing and privilege of staying in homes. No one will ever be sent out to a Mexican home alone. All Mexican host homes will be suited for a small group from our team. Very trusted pastors of Mexican Friends Churches will arrange all homes that host us. Every measure is taken for safety. We have had great experiences in the past years in safety and health.

If you stay in a host home, you are welcome to bring along a small gift (like a souvenir from your home state) to leave with a thank you note. Your registration fees includes a financial gift that will be left by the Connection directors and pastors as appropriate, so do not leave any money with your hosts. Your hosts will be happy to have you in their homes and out of humility may not want to accept your gift when offered. The gift and a thank you note can be left on your bed the last morning you leave and the host will be blessed to find it after you have left.

In more remote Churches and Missions, the teams may stay in larger groups on floors in a house or the church.

Meals

Each Team will eat most meals together, prepared by local church people at your site. All meals are provided with your registration fee. The host churches and meal providers will be compensated well through the Connection directors. All food served to you by the host churches will be safe and prepared properly. Hand sanitizer should be used before meals.

You will be expected to acclimate to the culture you are serving. This may mean eating food you are unfamiliar with or don't particularly like, or participating in foreign customs. Spring Connection's policy is that you will be required to try all foods that are served to you and do your very best to clean your plate. You bless the cooks by eating their food, you bless the people by enjoying their culture, and you get blessed yourself because Mexican food is good!

Attending Church

You will be attending church at least once, if not several times. It is hard to know what we might be asked to do "on the spot" in a service. In the past, we have at times been asked for team members to introduce themselves ("Hi, my name is _____ and I'm glad to be here" or a brief testimony). Many times they request some testimonies from team members. Sometimes they ask if a team member might bring the message. They almost always welcome some singing or special music from their visitors. If you have team members that play an instrument and would like to bring it in case they have a chance to share a song or two, please do (if it will fit in your vehicle). Before each service, it is best to have a few students prepared to give testimonies or sermons, possibly making arrangements with the pastor before the service. Also, all adults should realize the possibility of being asked to share some words or at least make introductions.

Church Service Advice - Participating in regular Church Services is a highlight! Observe God's movement amongst others and in your own heart during the service.

Worship - music in some of the Mexican Friends Churches gets to rockin' pretty good and some dancing might come with it. When the Mexican Christians dance in any way – they are focused on worship. A common mistake from visiting Spring Connection members is to try to show off to fellow team members, looking for their response and laugh. Church is not a rock concert, and it is offensive for anyone to behave in any way other than worship-focused. A good rule is to observe what the local Christians are doing, and not do anything too different than what they are doing. A better rule is to focus on the movement of God within your own heart in worship, and be obedient to his leading, with your own actions being led out of authentic worship.

Talking – Do not talk to each other during the service at any time. You'll just have to wait until after the service to discuss observations. You won't see the Mexican Christians visiting freely in the middle of church! Have your body posture, eye contact and facial expressions communicate your desire to listen and participate in worship – whether you understand what's being said or not. If you listen close enough, you'll hear God speaking to you even if you don't know Spanish!

Offering - Usually, team members will not only feel a need to give of their ability, time, and talents on these trips, but will also feel compelled to give an offering. This is sometimes given in church offerings. A small donation (\$1 to \$5) is appropriate. Your Connection registration already will provide appropriate host gifts and pay for our expenses. Many problems can be caused on the mission field when team members give too much or don't give it properly – NEVER make donations to anyone without having the blessing and insight of Connection Directors or your Primary Youth Leader first!

Telling Your Story - Your Testimony

Having your salvation testimony and a daily testimony prepared will help you minister more effectively in Mexico and will also aid you in your witness here in the States among your family and friends. You will be amazed at the impact you can have on your friends and others and on your own spiritual walk when you share your personal testimony.

Every Spring Connection participant should prepare a testimony to be given. You may or may not have the opportunity to give your testimony. No one will be forced to give their testimony in Mexico, but you will be required to have one prepared and ready to give to at least a fellow team member.

Team Guidelines

Be flexible - The schedule may change. Our ministry may change. We might think we are doing one thing in the morning and find out by noon that the plan has changed drastically. Our experience as a missions team will be a great blessing to the Mexicans and to ourselves if we remain flexible, maintain a positive attitude, and embrace spontaneity where God needs it. Don't ever say "But the schedule said" or "But I thought we were doing/going..." The leaders will do their best to keep you informed. Sometimes what they think we are doing changes quickly under leadership of Mexican Pastors. Be obedient to the leaders as they cater our schedule to what is best for the big-picture of ministry to the Mexican Friends community.

Stay with the team - No individual or group is allowed to leave the ministry site or activity at any time without permission from adult leaders. You need to be where you are supposed to be at all times for effective ministry and safety. At no time should ladies go anywhere without male chaperones. Stay in groups of at least 4 or 5 at all times. Each student must be responsible to check-in with adult leaders before they leave the group at any time.

Be reverent - Church buildings and grounds in Mexico must be treated with the utmost respect. No food or drink is to go in the Sanctuaries without permission. We must refrain from recreating in the sanctuary or in any way appearing irreverent. If your group happens to sleep in a church, check with the Pastor about where to keep your things during the day. Keep in mind that some Christians may be offended if you use an altar as a shelf or bench.

It is critical that we discipline ourselves to be Christ-like in our actions and ministry. We don't always think of it, but some of our American ways are offensive to some of the Mexican Christians. Be careful not to be loud and boisterous when inappropriate - especially in the homes and churches. Maintain a humble spirit. You are a guest and if you appear arrogant or act like you can to anywhere and do anything you want, people can be offended and ministry can be damaged.

Be a servant - Remember that we are there to help build ministries and churches, not to take over. We will serve the Friends Pastors, the church people, the community people and their needs as high priority over our own needs. Always think of the people - you are to show love as we are instructed to do:

"Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers a multitude of sins. Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen." (1 Peter 4:8-11)

Being a servant to the church and its people is top priority! Even when we do community ministry, do not carelessly apply whatever philosophy of ministry we might use for community ministry in the U.S. if we sense or know that it might be offensive to the Mexican Christians. We are not there to teach the Mexican Christians how to do ministry, we are there to support them (to be a blessing, to help create a big event and work on facilities) in the ministry they are already doing within their own cultural context. Keep in mind, too, that good missions wisdom in 'teaching' any ministry methods must fit the culture and must be reproducible by the local church and Christians without our help or money. Don't even think about criticizing the Mexican Church ways; in fact, we usually learn quite a bit that can be applied to our own churches!

Be Spiritual - Pray much and let God talk with you about His plan for your life. You'll be amazed at how He will talk to you if you are listening for His voice. Take spiritual practices (prayer, Bible reading, journaling, serving, etc.) seriously and God can set the tone for your experience and God's reflection through you.

Whether your attitude and motivation is struggling or thriving, you can turn to God continually and ask Him to make His goals and His accomplishments and His attitude and His spiritual fruit and gifts to become revealed through you.

Be Mission-Minded - This experience of serving others in missions is only practice for the way God has called us to view the world and local community around us all the time. Always be curious how God would lead you to reflect His image in every situation. Practice being mission-minded right now and during Spring Connection and see how you might lift-up Jesus Christ every minute of every day for the rest of your life!

Be Positive - Don't complain about anything! Make the best of every situation. The drive down and back can be fun or it can be miserable. Your attitude will affect the whole van. Put other's needs above your own!

Be Supportive - Keep a good attitude, especially about other - team members. Serve others above yourself. Be eager to obey leaders cheerfully.

Be Punctual - Be at your appointed places on time; don't make the group wait. For instance, if your group has some shopping time, do not drag behind the group and shop past the appointed time.

Be Responsible - Keep up with your belongings at the place you are staying, at the work site, and especially when traveling. Be careful to leave your "bedroom" in your host home clean and neat every day. We had hosts offended in the past from boys who didn't clean up after themselves and left the house a mess each day.

Be Wise - Keep Godly behavior, a careful tongue and safety in mind with every decision you make.

Be Lighthearted - Smile a lot! Have fun with your group and the nationals. Don't take the work project so seriously that you lose sight of the aspect of witnessing or forget to respect each other.

Mingle - Be sure to make every effort to spend as much time as possible with the Mexican people while we are there. Avoid the temptation to "huddle up" with the Americans only.

Public Display of Affection - PDA is strictly forbidden on this trip. If you are dating another team member before this trip, you are not dating them during the trip. Connection is not an acceptable time to look for a date.

Bedtime - All team members must go to bed on time and get proper sleep. Rest is key to good attitudes and good health. Staying up too late may inconvenience host families. If your host family is keeping you up late, just politely excuse yourself and get to bed. You will be allowed time for journaling, devotions, and prayer before bedtime. Use your time wisely. It would be a terrible, mistake to have lack of rest become a road block to effective ministry with all the preparation and church support that will be invested in this mission trip.

Dress Code - All team members must adhere to the dress code at all times while in Mexico unless given permission by Connection leaders. This tends to be a sensitive subject for some, but it's part of the life of a missionary. At times, Connection leaders have thought it'd be okay to be less strict, and then we've found out from Mexican Pastors that someone was offended, so just legalistically follow the guidelines we've been given!

No shorts or sleeveless shirts are to be worn at any time by either males or females. The only possible exception to shorts might be during athletic activities; but only if Pastors and Connection leaders give you permission (and pants will be on over shorts to and from activity). Don't plan to wear shorts.

During work projects men and women may wear slacks or jeans with a T-shirt (not sleeveless or cutoff).

During ministry times (church, children's ministry, evangelistic services), ladies are to wear dresses or skirts below the knee and have their shoulders covered. Remember that children's ministry can require some running around (games) and you'll need to be comfortable for that. Sandals or tennis shoes are fine even with a dress/skirt. It is usually hot and dusty in this area of Mexico.

Men are to wear button down, collared shirts during ministry times along with either slacks or jeans. Please do not wear any kind of t-shirts to church.

Groups crossing the border on Sunday need to remember that you will need your church clothes on before you cross the border as you will be arriving for church that evening.

Just because you see Mexicans behaving in a certain way or dressing different than we have instructed doesn't necessarily mean that it is acceptable for you to behave or dress that way. There will be higher expectations of our dress and behavior, simply because we are a visiting group – and missionaries! Christians in Mexico have more conservative standards than the general public in Mexico. Our hope is not to offend the most conservative, even legalistic Mexican Christian. Wouldn't it be a joke for us to make all the preparations for this mission trip and have someone not receive the message we desire to give because of what we are wearing!?

Cell Phones, Tablets, and Computers are not allowed for students at any point on the Connection trip. Do not bring them at all! Be ready to stretch yourself and get away from the usual distractions. Plan to visit with others and avoid secluding yourself through music or in any other way for this one week.

Of course, don't even think of bringing weapons, alcohol, tobacco, illegal drugs, or fireworks.
Disobedience to adult leaders in any form is grounds for sending you home immediately at you and your parents' expense.

Miscellaneous

Gifts - If you feel led to leave a financial gift with anyone in Mexico, do not ever give it to the individual. Any gifts can be given through Connection Directors, Pastors, or Samuel Vasquez and it will be put to proper ministry use. Remember to lean on the advice and wisdom of the church leaders. Also, keep in mind that missionaries more often warn about giving too much than under giving, or to the wrong people, or in the wrong way on the mission field. Be cautious about giving spontaneously; rather, give it prayer and careful thought as you ask for advice from Connection directors.

Water - Do not drink tap water while in Mexico. Bottled water and pop purchased at the store along the street is fine for drinking. The Connection directors will keep plenty of bottled water available at your ministry site. It is important that you bring a squeeze bottle to take some of the bottled water back to your home with you or to your work/ministry site. If you are blessed to have a shower, showering in the water (probably won't be heated) and brushing your teeth is safe as long as you do not swallow any.

Restrooms - Mexican plumbing is run with 2" pipe (as compared with 4" in the U.S.) So they have sewage problems frequently. Stay clear of any liquids flowing freely down the streets. Also, because of the 2" pipes you must not flush anything but human excrement down the toilets. This includes toilet paper and sanitary napkins. There will be a small trashcan next to the toilets and this should be used for discarding soiled paper. It's not near as gross as it may sound. Also, at some sites, an outhouse may be utilized. Toilet paper will be provided for groups as necessary.

Interpreters - Notice the advice on working with interpreters in this packet. If you know some Spanish, please review and be prepared to learn even more in Mexico. The language barrier adds an interesting twist to this short-term missions experience. Don't be frustrated if you don't know Spanish; rather, practice communicating in others ways while we are there. You will probably know some phrases and songs in Spanish before the week is over. We'll need to use every caution not to abuse the language difference and damage our witness, as some Mexicans know English and they'll know if you are talking trash.

Exchanging Money - The exchange rate in Mexico has been around 9 pesos to one dollar. The rate in Mexico may vary depending on where you are. If you have small U.S. bills, there is never a problem with making change in pesos. Be sure to have at least \$10 in one dollar bills and don't expect anyone to be able to make change for large bills. Shops in Mexico will take U.S. money, so it's not necessary exchange money before you cross the border.

Return Bottles – When you buy a Coke or pop in Mexico, it will come in a reusable glass bottle. Make sure you always return your empty bottle to the same vendor where you purchased your drink, as the vendor will be penalized for bottles that are not returned. In remote, tiny villages, a vendor's business could be ruined over non-returned bottles.

Phone – In Mexico, you will not have access to a phone to call home with other than for emergencies. Setting up a phone tree is one good method to communicate to your team's families as appropriate. Adults who carry smart phones should remember to shut off their data before they cross the border to avoid racking large data roaming fees. Students should leave their cell phones as home anyway.

Shopping/souvenirs – As time allows, your team may get to work-in a shopping trip in the local area. The best place to get souvenirs is at the border on the way back. Bartering is another experience you will enjoy in getting to know the Mexican culture.

Photos - Be careful not to take pictures of people or private homes unless you have permission. Use some common sense in snapping pictures. Don't take pictures of extremes and misrepresent Mexico or the people (We've seen students take pictures of the nastiest toilet or the worst roads and imply that those are the standard). It might be wise to have a couple of designated photographers.

What to Bring for the Connection

Pack lightly with only what you need:

Bible

Journal Notebook

Safety Glasses or Goggles

Water Bottle (squeeze bottle that you can carry everywhere for yourself)

Cash in small bills (only what you need – at least \$10 in ones)

Sleeping bag & pillow

Alarm clock (battery or wind-up)

All necessary toiletries including toothpaste, deodorant, soap, shampoo, etc.

Bath towel or two

1 pair of work shoes and 1 pair of good shoes

Work clothes and church clothes

Light weight jacket

Work gloves

Hat and sunscreen

Small bottle of hand sanitizer

Wet wipes (what if you don't have access to a bath?)

Hard candy (to be passed out only during VBS or the last day as you are leaving)

Other:

Tools – If applicable to your team's mission work, your leaders will tell you what tools to bring.

Cultural Tidbits

Greeting - Greeting everyone you meet is very important. The Mexican culture is a handshaking culture. They shake hands in greeting, coming, leaving and any other time. Males should extend the hand of friendship consistently. Ladies should not be forward or show eagerness to shake hands with a man. If a man reaches out to shake a lady's hand, feel free to shake hands and offer a smile.

Attitudes toward Americans - The Mexican people are friendly, warm and courteous. They can also be suspicious of foreigners and strangers and act withdrawn. Mexican girls are expected to maintain a strong reserve in public. Our girls must do the same, **especially when it comes to Mexican boys.**

Religion - The Roman Catholic Church has been the dominant church in Mexico for four hundred years. Even though many Mexicans may not attend Mass, they still adhere to the traditions of Catholicism. In order to avoid conflict, do not criticize the Catholic Church. Don't assume the average Mexican knows much about the Bible.

Family - The father is the dominant person in the family. Parents appear to be stricter with older children because more is expected of them. Often, the girls are heavily chaperoned when in mixed company. The boys tend to be more bold.

Work Site Guidelines

1. **Safety First.** If in doubt, don't. Don't take any chances. You are better off to take a little longer at the job and not get hurt.
2. **Pace Yourself.** Do not overdo it in the heat. Get in out of the sun and rest with the team when breaks are called. Take a nap during lunch break if appropriate.
3. **Drink a lot of liquids.** However, don't drink too many soft drinks. Water is better for you.
4. **Work together as a team.** Don't worry about who gets credit for a job well-done. Remember that no job is more important than another. All workers are necessary.
5. **Keep up with your tools at all times.** Theft is sometimes a problem. Gather up and clean your tools at the end of the day. Don't leave the work site until everything is cleaned up and put away.
6. **Keep your head covered when in the sun and apply suntan lotion liberally.**
7. **Trade off jobs every few hours.** Don't do the same thing all day if you can avoid it.
8. **Don't try to pick up too much and strain your back.**
9. **Enjoy yourself!** Both "work" and "witness" in all you do throughout the day.

Speaking Through an Interpreter

The art of speaking through an interpreter is a very important one to master on a mission trip. Speaking through an interpreter is quite different than regular speaking, and completely different than holding a normal conversation with your friends. To make the best use of the interpreters while in Mexico, please keep the following suggestions in mind.

1. **Be conscious to use common simple language.** It is easier for the interpreter to translate your ideas if you are direct and to the point. Most slang words such as “cool”, “awesome”, and “sweet” are next to if not impossible to translate. Therefore, avoid them!
2. **When speaking, communicate ideas through full sentences,** then pause to let the interpreter translate. Do NOT speak in short choppy fragments. A translator cannot properly translate short sentence fragments from one language into another. Instead, it is better to communicate an entire idea and then to allow it to be translated in whole.
3. **Your presentation to the congregation/audience is NOT a conversation between you and the interpreter.** You are simply speaking through the translator to the group. Make eye contact with the audience and speak directly to them. Speak loudly and clearly and as if those who are listening to you can understand. They will pay close attention to your facial expressions and your voice intonations and then wait to hear the translation. Do not make eye contact with the interpreter while you speak. You should maintain eye contact with the audience even while the interpreter translates.
4. **Remember, it will take twice as long to give a message through an interpreter** as it would for you to give it in your native tongue at home. Plan what you are going to say and how long, all together, it will take to say it.
5. **It is not necessary for your audience to hear a long passage of scripture in English before they hear it in Spanish.** If you were reading only a verse or two, then it would be appropriate to read it in English because your vocal inflection is very important to your presentation. *If you are going to quote from a longer passage or from multiple passages write them down on a piece of paper to give to the interpreter before you speak. Then they can prepare by marking their Bible to the right place before they are put on the spot.
6. When possible and appropriate, **pray together with your interpreter asking God to use you as a team.**
7. **Trust your interpreter!** Trust them to translate your words and to get the point across. If you say a long sentence or two and the interpreter uses more or less words in Spanish, you do not need to be startled or act unnatural about it.
8. **Appreciate your interpreter and be patient with him/her!** Be respectful and heed their advice.