

The Parish Paper

Ideas and Insights for Active Congregations
Herb Miller and Cynthia Woolever, CoEditors
www.TheParishPaper.com
Provided by the Presbytery of Carlisle



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October 2017 Vol. 25, No. 10

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Short-Term Mission Trips that Yield Long-Term Success

Reporting on the popularity of short-term mission trips, sociologist Robert Wuthnow estimates that in the US, 32 percent of congregations sponsor short-term overseas volunteer trips every year. About a quarter of the US population has taken part in a short-term mission experience at some point in their lifetime.¹ In fact, the prospect of embarking on a short-term mission trip, fueled by well-resourced, energetic people of faith, can be exhilarating for both participants and the community being served. Still, despite the best intentions, such trips often fall short of expectations for all involved.

Worst Mission Trip Ever: A Case Study

Moments after the ten-passenger van arrived in the Central American village of San Valente, Jenna pulled out her camera to photograph the dozens of patchwork buildings made of corrugated metal, plastic, and wood. Matt said, "Wow! This reminds me of last year, when we were in Mexico." Scott, the trip's coordinator, asked the group to help hand out the goods to community residents that would arrive via truck that afternoon.

This mission trip's purpose was to lay the foundation for a new community church. The mission trip leader sent money in advance to hire someone to dig the foundation trenches. However, when the group arrived at the work site, they were shocked because the trenches were only half-finished. Miguel, their host, explained the reason: They preferred to hire local workers with hand tools, not a single person with heavy machinery, so that more people would be employed. "Looks like it's going to be a long week!" Jenna exclaimed.

While this story is fictional, it contains instructive examples of misguided actions.²

- Before Jenna reaches for her camera, she and the other missionaries should be advised to get to know their hosts, and gain an understanding of what it is like to live there. Otherwise, the trip—whether to El Salvador or inner city Detroit—becomes voyeuristic or like a tourist destination.
- Matt's memory of last year's Mexican mission trip

highlights that, while changing destinations every year can be enjoyable, the best way to develop a lasting relationship is to make a long-term commitment to one community and return each year.

- The coordinator's plan to hand out supplies from the back of a pickup truck can be an offensive practice, as it reinforces a pattern of top-down paternalism. Instead, give the items to a local service agency or congregation to distribute.
- The expressions of shock over a half-finished trench remind us that missionaries need to respect that they have now entered their hosts' world. Logistics and timelines need to proceed under local direction.

Best Practices for Effective Mission Trips

Laurie Occhipinti, an anthropologist, who researches economic development, has spoken with missionaries, read scholarly articles and religious leaders' accounts, and participated in trips herself. With this background, she offers best practices to ensure that short-term mission efforts are effective.³



Establish Long-Term Relationships. The here today, gone tomorrow quality of many short-term mission trips begs the question: How are we not simply religious tourists? Long-term connection through repeated visits can change the relationship quality between sender and host, assisting team members in deepening their local cultural understanding and allowing those who have made multiple trips to help newcomers learn what to expect and how to behave. Repeated visits also increase the likelihood that local community members will have input into the projects undertaken.

Reflect on the Experience. Orientation and debriefing sessions should be mandatory for groups undertaking short-term projects. These sessions work, if everyone provides input. Newcomers should be encouraged to talk aloud about their preconceptions about the trip and the culture. At the final debriefing, group discussions provide an important opportunity to frame the social, cultural, and political contextualization of the encounter.

Work to Ensure the Project Benefits the Community. Good mission trips often resemble successful community development projects undertaken closer to home. This involves practicing good listening skills with local leaders; focusing on resources, not deficits; and considering how the project could enhance community sustainability five or more years down the road. Such steps ensure that the host community, and not just the mission team, receives lasting benefits.

Understand the Role of Culture. Occhipinti notes that mission participants often “collapse cultural differences” by lumping the poor in other countries with the poor everywhere else, disregarding cultural variances. Time invested in learning about the local culture, perhaps even learning language basics, is time well spent.

Work in Partnership. “The question is not whether we travel and work with others; the question is how.” In other words, the process of working with others matters as much as the project’s material output. Unfortunately, Christian mission history is tainted by missionaries’ collusion with colonial governments and institutions seeking to extract resource wealth from colonial territories. Only by continually stressing partnership in the project’s planning and execution can both sides of the mission equation—missioners and hosts—learn from each other.

Where Should We Go?

When initiating a short-term mission trip, the most important decision may be the first: where should we go? Here are two possibilities for finding that answer.⁴

Personal Connection. This occurs because a church leader learns about the host community through a friend or business colleague. In one case, a professional woman started a nonprofit agency after learning about the poor living near a Nicaraguan landfill while on vacation. Her home church stepped up to support her with funds and additional support through mission trips. If you choose to rely on a personal contact, do your homework. Contact a nonprofit development organization with contacts in the region you plan to visit, or talk with someone in your denominational mission office.

Institutional Connection. If your congregation is part of a larger denomination with global reach, denominational staff may have institutional ties with nongovernmental agencies in the host region or country. One advantage: the denominational office may be able to help with logistical arrangements as well.

So which is better? Personal connections may appear more direct and less bureaucratic, yet a potential downside is the “side-of-the-road syndrome.” Occhipinti describes it this way: Everybody loves the mission site that lies on the beaten path, while the greater need may lie just inland from there. For example, Juarez, Mexico, located just across the border from El Paso, Texas, receives many American mission teams, while more remote locations receive hardly any at all.

Reflecting on Meaningful Mission

Do mission trips do any good, or are they simply faithbased tourism masquerading as meaningful engagement? When handled effectively, such trips can help missioners from a dominant culture challenge long-held assumptions. Immersion in another culture, especially in a less developed country, cracks open cultural assumptions, as if a fish, always accustomed to immersion in water, suddenly became aware of its surroundings. Such experiences can be transformative.⁵

1. Laurie Occhipinti, *Making a Difference in A Globalized World: Short-term Missions that Work* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014), 13-14.
2. Mark Radecke, “Misguided Missions: Ten Worst Practices,” *Christian Century*, May 18, 2010, 22-23, 25.
3. Occhipinti, 117-21.
4. *Ibid.*, 95-96.
5. *Ibid.*, 34-38.