

Go Missions to Mexico

Why Many Short-term Mission Trips Are a Waste of Time (And how to make sure yours isn't)

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"We're going to Ecuador!" The words ring out in a dimly-lit sanctuary. As music pulses, more lights come on and more voices ring out: "We'll be working with our denominational missionaries!" "We're going to repair the roof of their mission house!" "We're going to put on a Bible club for the village children!" The voices? Members of a youth group in a large church in the Pacific Northwest. They were presenting their upcoming mission trip to members of their congregation. Me? I was the guest speaker, brought in to inspire the adults to support their students' summer mission plans. No problem, except that I was in a quandary. What can I honestly say to these people, I thought, when I know that this trip is mostly a waste of everyone's time and money?

Say What? Those words may read strangely, coming from the keyboard of someone who is dedicated to advancing short-term mission and service opportunities for young people and adults. But I'm concerned that many (if not most) of our well-intentioned mission and service efforts are misguided. And as the world of youth-ministry mission and service continues to grow (and time, energy, and financial costs continue to rise), it's imperative that we make the most of the precious resources that God has given to us to work with since the key to solving any dilemma is to first identify the root causes, let's take a look at how we get ourselves off course.

The Root of the Problem (Mirror, Please)

"We have met the enemy," the saying goes, "and it is us." Afraid so--the first place to look when trying to figure out why we're wasting our time is in the mirror (me too, so don't feel too bad). There are three common errors we North-American, Western-Culture types make that can torpedo our best efforts: We want to control the situation. This is understandable, given the responsibility we carry in taking a group of kids into a strange and potentially dangerous location. The problem is, missions by its very nature is a cross-cultural experience. We're choosing to go into a situation where the values, norms, cultural rules, and methods are radically different from ours. If we continue to

insist on control--which means imposing our cultural and methodological framework onto our ministry partners--we create two wasteful byproducts:

Our ministry partners divert us to meaningless (in their framework) tasks that fit our control grid. A friend of mine has coordinated mission and service trips into northern Mexico for years. One of his sites is an orphanage, full of boys and girls dying for love and attention. And The Wall. "I've got this wall," he told me. "When a group comes that can't handle what's required to build relationships with Mexican kids, or insists on completing a task so they can 'accomplish' something, I put them to work on The Wall. They feel like they're a big help, and it keeps them out of everyone's hair so the ministry isn't compromised."

We pull our ministry partners away from more meaningful work. "People need to remember," an inner-city friend from Chicago told me recently, "that a ministry pays a price to accommodate volunteers. It takes a lot of time and energy to set up an environment that can effectively handle volunteer help." While there are a number of legitimate reasons why a ministry partner may choose to allow volunteer groups to come in on a "make-work" basis (expose kids to the mission field, build awareness of the ministry, generate financial support), it's a waste of their distinctive gifts and skills to force them to accommodate our control issues.

Remember the high school group headed for Ecuador? The missionaries really didn't need their roof repaired; they figured that it was what the kids could handle. But for two weeks, it took them away from their core ministry--an outreach to the adult men of their village. We want to define what is 'ministry'. The 'ministry' that God calls our mission partners to pursue may be (and often is) the exact opposite of what we would do. The point isn't to decide whose definition of ministry is "right"; the point is that as we insist on defining what ministry is in a context we know little about, we head down the garden path. Ever wonder why so many other cultures don't maintain their homes and buildings up to our standards? Maybe other things are more important to them.

One of the most common cultural collisions occurs between linear cultures (like ours) and nonlinear cultures (like Latin). Our culture is task-oriented; Latin culture is people-oriented. Our culture is time-sensitive; Latin culture is situation-sensitive. Glen Kehrein, co-author (with Raleigh Washington) of a terrific book on racial reconciliation entitled *Breaking Down Walls* (1993, Moody Press), relates an incident that illustrates how these basic differences can collide:

"While visiting missionary friends in Mexico City, [his wife] Lonni and I decided to go sight-seeing. On the way to the pyramids outside the city, our friends dropped off a

package for a friend of theirs. In the U.S. the encounter would have lasted thirty seconds--tops. In Mexico, it involved extended conversation and refreshments. Our friends, Rick and Diane, had never met the recipient and would, most likely, never see him again. Two hours later we were back on the road."

"As Americans, we often see such encounters as a 'waste of time', rushing to judgment rather than attempting to understand the culture. The Mexican value of relationships is often viewed as laziness."

When we give in to our task orientation and define "doing" as ministry (one of our most common mistakes), we create more wasteful repercussions: We spend an inordinate amount of time, energy and money to do 'ministry' that is a low priority to those we're attempting to serve. A few years ago, a friend of mine went with a group of other adult men from his church to a jungle village in Brazil. They were there to build a new meeting room for the mission compound. "The only problem was," he told me, "the weather was horrible the whole time--driving rain 24 hours a day. It was the worst possible time to build a building; but we'd come to accomplish a task, and by George, we were going to do it!" He went on: "It got to be ludicrous. The villagers were laughing their heads off. They couldn't figure out why the gringos were so loco that they'd slop around in the rain and mud when anyone with half a brain was inside."

We tempt our ministry partners to tell us only what we want to hear. I've got another friend who also works in northern Mexico. He's built a network of relationships with Mexican pastors all over the region. There's just one problem, he says: "Some of the pastors have learned how to make a good living telling Americans what they want to hear. They'll tug their heartstrings with some cute children, then tell them how, if they could only build a new wing on their church, they could do so much more for the kids. It's not that these pastors have such bad intentions; they've been overwhelmed by the amount of money and material resources that Americans can pour into a situation."

Buildings are not automatically bad. But these Mexican pastors have become sidetracked from the ministry that is most effective in their culture (relationships) because of the overwhelming influence (and its attending temptations) of well-meaning but ignorant groups.

We want to see certain kinds of results. After all, we're investing a lot of time, energy, and money into this mission trip. Surely God (not to mention the church board) wants to see some results from our efforts! True enough--but in rural Ecuador or inner-city Cleveland, "results" can be tough to pin down.

This pitfall can be especially treacherous when we're ministering in difficult, complicated situations. It would be great if homeless crack addicts could meet Jesus, get clean, and land a job in a week; unfortunately, it rarely happens that way. Results like "We got to know some homeless men and women and told them that God loves them", or "We helped the missionaries hand out information for an upcoming service to the village men as they came out of the cantina" can be tough to quantify. But insisting on attaining results that fit our criterion for effective use of resources creates still more wasteful ripple effects:

We run the risk of seeing 'results' that aren't really there. "What a great day!" one group leader told me after his group spent the afternoon at a Washington D.C. homeless shelter. "We handed out tracts and witnessed to dozens of guys. At least ten men accepted Christ!" Well, maybe...but homeless shelter residents are (unfortunately) familiar with evangelistic blitzkriegs and know how to go through the motions so they can get some peace and quiet.

We could do real damage to our ministry partners' long-term work. When the Iron Curtain fell, there was an explosion of evangelistic outreach from the West into the countries of the former Soviet bloc. Huge stadium rallies brought together thousands of people, virtually all whom, it seemed, raised their hands to accept Jesus. Unfortunately, the organizers of most of these events forgot to consider how they were going to follow up these respondents. Guess who absorbed the blow created by this phenomenon? The men and women who had patiently worked over the years to smuggle in Bibles and Christian literature, connect with believers behind the Iron Curtain, and support clandestine youth camps and other outreaches.

One friend of mine who has worked in the Eastern Bloc for more than a quarter-century recounted how he was approached by an American group that had held a crusade in Romania. "We've got over 2,000 decision cards that were filled out by people who attended our crusade," they told him. "Can you follow them up?" His ministry was staggering under the weight of trying to meet such needs while continuing the work he'd been called to for decades. (In 1993, the head of a respected mission agency reaching a former Iron Curtain country concluded that the results achieved from all the evangelistic efforts made into his country were essentially zilch.)

Waste Not, Want Not

Take heart - your mission and service trip can be a wise and effective investment of your time, energy, and resources. All you've got to do is keep three principles in mind as you prepare yourself and your students:

Let Go and Let God. Several years ago, a friend of mine and I were able to gain an invitation from the Romanian government to bring a group of baseball coaches to their country to conduct instructional clinics for their youth baseball program. (We were also given complete freedom to share with the kids about our faith.) I was in charge of the previsit; so, in the dead of winter, I headed over to Bucharest for my first meeting with Cristian Costescu, the Secretary-General of the Romanian Baseball Federation.

Romania is a Latin culture. It's people-centered, situation-sensitive, and they don't sweat the details. As Cristian, my taxi-driver/translator friend, and I sat in a Bucharest restaurant for the first of what were many hours-long meals together, sweat began to pour down my forehead as I realized that there was no way that we could nail down the logistics of our trip ahead of time. Where we would stay, what the schedule would be, who we'd interface with--every query was met with the reply, "You will be our guests. It is not a problem." I had two options: I could pull the plug on the trip, or I could place our group in Cristian and his associates' hands and trust them to do right by us. I decided on the latter. The orientation meeting with my guys when I returned home was, let's say, brief. "How's it look?" they asked. "It's going to be great," I replied. "How are things going to work?" They asked. "I have no idea," I replied. "But we can trust them - they'll work it all out."

Which they did--in Romanian, roundabout, by-our-standards-last-minute fashion. It was a fantastic trip. The clinics went great; the kids were responsive; God put us in touch with local Romanian Christians who were willing to follow up with interested players after we departed. Most importantly, my wife and I established friendships that we've maintained over the years, friends we've gone back to see several times since then. And interestingly (and appropriately) enough, we've 'done' more ministry just sitting around visiting with our Romanian friends than we ever accomplished during our mission trip.

Most of the control issues that hover around a mission and service trip concern method rather than goal. We're all after the same things; it's in considering how to get there that our differences emerge. As we allow our methods to be adjusted to fit the situation we're entering, we communicate a powerful message of trust and respect to our ministry partners that will ensure our time will be well spent. A ministry by any other name would smell as sweet. In 1992, my wife Kyle and I started the Chicago branch of the Center for Student Missions. As we began to learn our way around, we made friends with a number of African-American Christians who attended a church on Chicago's South Side.

One Saturday, I headed down to their church to get my car hand-washed at the facility they'd set up in a warehouse next door to their sanctuary. Kirk Bell, one of my new friends, came by. As we chatted, I looked across the street to the new sanctuary they were building out of what had been a burned-out grocery store. "Kirk, we could bring all kinds of work groups to help you with your church building," I said (in a dazzling display of Anglo task-oriented linear brilliance). "That would be great," Kirk (diplomatically) replied, "but what we'd really like to do is to train teams of Christians to go back with us into the projects where we grew up and share Jesus with the folks who live there." Their ministry goals looked nothing like mine - and, as I was to discover, it took some real selling to convince our groups that traipsing into housing projects (where 100% of the residents were African-American) with a team of black evangelists was a good idea. But sharing Jesus with people in the Stateway Gardens housing project with Kirk and his friends has become one of the most powerful ministries our groups experience during their times in Chicago. By deep-sixing our focus on task and redefining our understanding of ministry, we were able to see God work in ways we couldn't have otherwise imagined.

Leave the driving to Him. Have you read Matthew 25:31-40 lately? It's one of Jesus' most significant discourses. After all, he's articulating the actions by which God decides who's going to heaven and who's headed You Know Where. What fascinates me in this passage is what he doesn't say. Do you notice what he leaves out in his charge to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and minister to the sick? He says nothing about what results are supposed to be achieved through these actions. There's no talk about ending hunger, defeating poverty, or seeing the prisoner go straight. He says simply to Do It, because when we do, we're somehow ministering directly to Our Lord.

Jesus gives us the freedom to go into our mission and service trips with the goal of just plain ministering. We don't have to achieve certain "results" to justify our investment. Frankly, we might not recognize some of God's divine results when we see them! But as we can remove our cultural blinders, discard the limitations we place on God's definition of ministry, and "leave the driving" to Him, we can begin to understand what it means to be Jesus' hands and feet to a hurting world.

Just Call Me Chicken

So what did I say to the congregation that was sending their students to Ecuador? To be honest, I wasn't very bold. I played it safe and affirmed what was praiseworthy about their trip--their willingness to move out of their comfort zone, their desire to serve God, their heart for the children they were looking forward to meeting. But I took comfort in the knowledge that they were under the guidance of a solid youth leader whom I knew

would learn from the experience (he did) and approach future mission and service trips with more flexibility and sensitivity (he has). The "result" has been healthy relationships with ministry partners all over the world, and students whose lives have been changed forever.

That's what we want our kids to experience. And that's mission and service that's worth anyone's time.