

63-14-10-08



we didn't wait

for someone else to storm the beaches at Normandy.

**USA
TODAY**

 **PRINT THIS**

Powered by  **Clickability**

On a mission — a short-term mission

By G. Jeffrey MacDonald, Special for USA TODAY

As a single mother and elementary-school music teacher in Alamogordo, N.M., Cheryl Dockray usually umpires all the summer softball games she can to make ends meet.

But in early June, she took a rare week off — and worked even harder than usual. With eight other adults and 13 young people from Alamogordo's Grace United Methodist Church, she helped gut a New Orleans home that had been rotting in floodwaters for nine months.

"I can't give huge monetary donations, but I can give of myself and my time," Dockray says from Kenner, La., where the group was sleeping on air mattresses at a church.

Short-term mission trips (less than two weeks) are enjoying a wave of popularity with Americans eager to put faith into action and make vacations meaningful. About 1.6 million Americans took such trips abroad last year, according to a survey by Robert Wuthnow, Princeton University sociologist of religion. Domestic trips, which peak in the summer, are even more popular.

Popular as they are, critics say, short-term mission trips can be counterproductive — or worse. Concerns surface especially with international trips.

Judd Birdsall, former managing editor of *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, a Christian journal, grew up in Japan in an evangelical missionary home. Too often these days, he says, untrained short-term missionaries — or "vacationaries" — offend indigenous populations and undermine hard-earned relationships cultivated by long-term missionaries over many years.

"At this point, it really is an out-of-control phenomenon," Birdsall says. "Americans come in with good intentions, but they couple zeal with ignorance, and that can be a deadly combination for the folks who are on the ground slogging it out year after year."

All too often, groups set off with scant foreign-language skills and minimal cross-cultural training, says David Livermore, author of *Serving with Eyes Wide Open*. Their construction projects sometimes take work away from locals or come at the expense of more pressing needs, Livermore says, but impoverished hosts dare not protest.

"Often there's too high a price for them to say no to this because often (hosting a group) is the means to getting the check that will help support them."

Volunteers also run the risk of duplicating efforts in today's decentralized mission environment, says Mark Oestreicher of Youth Specialties, an El Cajon, Calif.-based training firm for church youth leaders. One slum in Tijuana, Mexico, for example, now expects regular visits from mission-driven groups from Southern California.

"Each of these groups will come in, do a vacation Bible school and lead the same kids to Christ over and over again," Oestreicher says.

Others concede that the trips aren't perfect but say they do a lot of good. Dana Robert of the Center for Global Christianity and Mission at Boston University points to improved standards of living and broadened perspectives of those who travel, interact and serve.

Advertisement



"A lot of people come back from these trips humbled," Robert says. "I think, on balance, it's more worthwhile than not."

This year, short-term missions are getting a prominent stage as thousands of teams focus on hurricane-damaged regions of the USA. For the first time since Katrina hit last August, volunteers this month are using every bed available from the Louisiana United Methodist Storm Recovery Center as 2,400 teams arrive in the New Orleans area.

Whether the destination is the Gulf Coast or the Persian Gulf, the Internet has made short-term mission trips relatively easy to arrange, says Todd Johnson of the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in South Hamilton, Mass. He says fast-growing independent churches have "absolutely transformed" short-term missions over the past decade into an arena where congregations, rather than established agencies with a long-term presence in a region, define trips' goals and parameters.

Pamela Brown of Richmond, Va., says unmediated connections between religious communities help relationships flourish. When her Presbyterian (U.S.A.) church first established a direct tie with a local church and orphanage in Morelia, Mexico, in the late 1990s, "everything we did was fine with them because we left it a better place than we found it."

Based on this model, with "no red tape involved," her church now sends teams quarterly to Kazakhstan to help with dental care, management consulting and other humanitarian ministries.

Proponents of short-term missions generally agree that missionaries need cultural training to be effective, whether their goal is to alleviate physical suffering, win converts or both. The Alamogordo group opted to work within Methodist channels, which provide an orientation and prohibit proselytizing, because no one in the group knew the landscape or needs of New Orleans, says group leader Heath Husted.

For others, the days of seeking guidance from denominations or established agencies are a distant memory.

At the 4,000-member Word of Grace Church in Mesa, Ariz., regular mission trips to Central America, Africa and the Middle East rely on the church's own local connections and in-house training.

"We're not dependent on an agency. ... We don't have a middleman," says the Rev. Andy Jackson, pastor of discipleship and leadership development. "Just because a group calls itself a mission agency, that doesn't mean it provides good quality control."

Find this article at:

http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2006-06-18-mission-vacations_x.htm

... Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

Copyright 2008 USA TODAY, a division of Gannett Co. Inc.