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Churches Retool Mission Trips

Work Abroad Criticized for High Cost and Lack of Value

By Jacqueline L. Salmon
Washington Post Staff Writer
Saturday, July 5, 2008; B01

Not long ago, the families of Fairfax Presbyterian Church spent thousands of dollars to fly their teens to Mexico for eight days of doing good. They helped build homes and refurbish churches as part of an army of more than 1 million mostly Christians who annually go on short-term international mission trips to work and evangelize in poverty-stricken lands.



Yet even as those trips have increased in popularity, they have come under increased scrutiny. A growing body of research questions the value of the trips abroad, which are supposed to bring hope and Christianity to the needy of the world, while offering American participants an opportunity to work in disadvantaged communities, develop relationships and charge up their faith.

Critics scornfully call such trips "religious tourism" undertaken by "vacationaries." Some blunders include a wall built on the children's soccer field at an orphanage in Brazil that had to be torn down after the visitors left. In Mexico, a church was painted six times during one summer by six different groups. In Ecuador, a church was built but never used because the community said it was not needed.

To make missionary work more meaningful, some churches are taking a different approach. In response to the criticism, a growing number of churches and agencies that put together short-term trips are revamping their programs and establishing new standards.

For the past four years, for example, the Fairfax Presbyterian youths have stayed closer to home, in places such as Welch, West Va.; Lansing, Mich., and Philadelphia. Last week, a team of 44 were in St. Petersburg, Fla., to clean and paint low-income homes, assist the homeless and volunteer at a free health clinic.

Senior Pastor Henry G. Brinton said the church realized that the teens could do just as much good working close by as far away.

"It became too hard to justify the expense of flying the kids overseas," Brinton said. "If you're going to paint a church, you can do that in Florida as easily as you can in Mexico."

Fairfax Community Church is repositioning its mission trips "to get away from the vacation-with-a-purpose, large groups going somewhere to build something" focus, said Alan MacDonald, the church's pastor of global engagement.

The church is sending out smaller teams of experts to work on projects with partner churches. For example, it is sending information technology professionals who are fluent in Spanish to a church in the Dominican Republic to train members in computer skills so they can get better jobs, MacDonald said.

McLean Bible Church, which sends about 35 short-term mission teams out each year, is training its team leaders to approach short-term missions with a "learner's mentality," to be respectful of the culture or group the

team will be serving, said Kailea Hunt, director of global impact for the church.

Christianity Today, an evangelical magazine, is adopting much the same approach in a curriculum for short-term missionaries and their host organizations. Andy Crouch, an editor who is working on the project, said it came about as the result of complaints he heard from churches and nonprofit groups in foreign countries that host American short-term missionaries.

"We hope that when they land on the ground, they will be more prepared to listen well to their hosts and learn from their hosts what is really helpful to be doing," Crouch said.

The curriculum, for example, warns missionaries to think about their attire in conservative countries and what kind of message they're sending when they bring expensive cameras and other electronics to poverty-stricken villages.

Despite the concerns with trips abroad, their popularity is soaring. Some groups go as far away as China, Thailand and Russia. From a few hundred in the 1960s, the trips have proliferated in recent years. A Princeton University study found that 1.6 million people took short-term mission trips -- an average of eight days -- in 2005. Estimates of the money spent on these trips is upward of \$2.4 billion a year. Vacation destinations are especially popular: Recent research has found that the Bahamas receives one short-term missionary for every 15 residents.

At the same time, the number of long-term American missionaries, who go abroad from several years to a lifetime, has fallen, according to a Wheaton College study done last year.

The short-term mission trip is a "huge phenomenon that seems to be gaining in momentum rather than waning," said David Livermore, executive director of the Global Learning Center at Grand Rapids Theological Seminary, who studies the trend.

Participants care for orphans, hold Bible classes, evangelize, paint homes and churches, and help AIDS patients, among other tasks.

But research has found that the trips tend to have few long-term effects on the local people or on the mission travelers. Some projects take away work from local people, are unnecessary and sometimes dangerous.

"I really don't think that most people are trying to be ugly Americans," said Glenn Schwartz, executive director of World Mission Associates and author of "When Charity Destroys Dignity." "But they're misinformed and don't realize how their good intentions can go awry."

Mission groups also often bring their own experts and ignore local authorities on the ground.

In Monrovia, Liberia, three years ago, tragedy occurred when visitors built a school to their standards instead of Liberian standards. During the monsoon season, the building collapsed, killing two children, Livermore said.

Critics also question the expense involved in sending people long distances. Short-term missionaries pay \$1,000 each, or far more, in plane fare and other expenses to get to remote destinations.

A 2006 study in Honduras found that short-term mission groups spent an average of \$30,000 on their trips to build one home that a local group could construct for \$2,000.

"To spend \$30,000 to paint a church or build a house that costs \$2,000 doesn't make a whole lot of sense," said Kurt Ver Beek, a professor of sociology at Calvin College who conducted the research.

A coalition that organizes mission trips has also set up standards that call for consultations with local organizations during planning, cultural training for participants and qualified leaders to be sent with the group.

"If [the trips] are only about ourselves, then we're doing nothing more than using another culture . . . to get some benefit at their expense," said the Rev. Roger Peterson, chairman of the Alliance for Excellence in Short-Term Mission, who helped set up the standards. "I don't care what verse of the Bible you read, it's wrong, it's wrong, it's wrong."

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COMMENTS/DEBATE on the Washington Post article: Churches Retool Mission Trips

vermontague wrote:

From long years of experience on the "mission field", one suggestion I would make to these well-meaning folk who want to make a difference is, work with people/missionaries who are already in the situation. In this way, with their guidance and counsel, you'll more easily avoid causing offense in the location you're going to and also learn more about what mission really is in that situation. Diane Montague

7/9/2008 6:14:22 AM

HaeringerK wrote:

Mother Teresa once said, "Let us not be satisfied with just giving money. Money is not enough, money can be got, but they need your hearts to love them."

This article removes the human element from mission trips, in effect, de-humanizing both missionaries and recipients.

"Religious tourism" is an interesting term most likely dubbed by an armchair critic who has never been on a mission trip.

As a missionary taking young teenagers to war-torn Liberia which has a destroyed national infrastructure, no running water and no electricity, I would ask the author to reconsider. We travel to Africa as friends bringing love and, in our case, solar power to orphanages and schools housing children who have never experienced 24-hour electricity in their lifetime. We arrive as equals, not superiors, and our youth benefit equally, if not more than the children in Liberia. Through life-long friendships and connections, the givers also become the receivers.

Yes, these trips are costly, but what should we do then? Turn our backs? Dehumanize the suffering people worldwide?

Deprive people of that most basic understanding that we all need each other?

We have seen careers and college majors changed because of these missions. Just as the concentric circles of a pebble dropped into a pond, an act of kindness truly has no measure. Because of our mission trips, one of our youth may decide to become a nurse or a social worker or enter another humanitarian profession, bringing hope and help to people in our own backyards and possibly all over the world.

At our church we divide our mission work into three areas: local, national and international, believing that we, as privileged Americans, have been blessed with a responsibility to help those living in poverty and crisis both in our own back yard and around the world.

Mission trips do not "use" people. They reach out a helping hand to find that connection, that common thread that binds us all. We are not meant to live in a vacuum, but rather in community and compassion. We are all people who need to feel loved.

7/7/2008 4:52:22 PM

AnnsThought wrote:

People need God more than food, water or anything else. Of course missionaries teach about God. We have secular governments to send foreign aid, and these governments refrain from teaching religion. Why would we need private citizens to replace that?

7/5/2008 11:51:47 PM

freeparking wrote:

Gilbert: The very constitution declares; we hold these truths self evident that all men are "created"...stating as a whole all Americans will conclude there is a God. Being honest Gilbert...it is very rare in this day and age to find someone proselytizing on their job, including a church pastor.

I'd be more afraid of the beer and liquor industry and the unending commercializing of it on TV and Bill boards if I were you.

7/5/2008 9:33:04 PM

Channah wrote:

Churches should retool to help the people, wherever they go-----they should help-NOT preach! Missions have gone into foreign lands where the people have their own faiths, ways of living and are happy with their lives. Missionaries come in-help them at first and then start saying things such as, "We will give you this needed shot, this medicine, help rebuild your houses, etc., if you accept Jesus. Of course, for the help they will say they do. Then, these missions leave and the people do not really understand and accept this Jesus, and their whole culture and way of living is gone-leaving the people in turmoil. Leave the people to their own religions and ways. There are many doors to salvation. I have seen it happen too often.

7/5/2008 6:16:08 PM

gcan1 wrote:

This promotion of religion, any particular religion, is the main reason why church people involve themselves in their so-called charitable work. It's called proselytizing.

While it is true that many perform these good works inspired by their religious principles and only for the good or the need of others, the vast majority of that activity would not be considered without a companion hope for the conversion of the "unfaithful".

That is exactly what must be carefully overseen and prevented in any faith-based activity that Barack Obama might wish to continue from the abused system George W. Bush has promoted for votes.

To remain faithful to our Constitution, its Amendments, and our laws there must be a change of provisions to absolutely prevent proselytizing and job discrimination that the Bush gang have promoted.

Ours is a secular government for a secular society. If religionists want to practice their charities in order to win converts, let them do it without any public funding--no matter what those charities are.

For those who think we are dependent on church charities, take another look. We have a long history of public activities

for the good of our citizens. That can be expanded if necessary in order to preserve the "sacred" separation of church and state.

That separation is for the benefit of both church and state. If you don't understand that, take advantage of your library--or Amazon.com--and learn much more than you know about the history of religion and its churches, all of them.

You will shudder at the atrocities that were regularly committed when the two functioned as one or in tandem.

Gilbert Cantlin

7/5/2008 5:49:23 PM

brainsprain wrote:

There are the horror stories, but most occur because the trip planners fail to plan adequately or have goals that lead to the paternalistic attitudes mentioned in another post. However, mission trip can be a vehicle for teaching and learning about other cultures. They can also be a deeply spiritual experience that leads people to understand the importance of social justice, fair trade practices, and the impact of their lifestyles on the lives of others. All the trips I led and all those I have participated in were designed to do just that. I for one deplore mission tourism which is why I sought to help people understand the importance of returning to the same community and building relationship by assisting the partner community to come to the U.S. to experience our life.

7/5/2008 3:46:37 PM

BennyFactor wrote:

Not unlike mission work historically, Americans, christian included, tend to be paternalistic - needing to set the agenda and call the shots, irregardless of the needs of the people the claim to want to help. It becomes selfish giving. It would be better if the indigenous people set the priorities and direct the volunteers. It would produce a better result and show that servanthood as a virtue. The cliché of the "ugly American" with the entitlement mentality is real.

7/5/2008 2:49:31 PM

AnnsThought wrote:

Whoa! The article is informative, yet one sided. There are people who do the wrong thing in every part of life. The majority do the right thing, and we should not say a few bad apples spoil the whole barrel. There are many missions that do so much good. My neighbor is a nurse who has gone to Honduras twice on medical missions. The medical volunteers have brought much needed essential care for people who cannot afford to see a doctor. Christians remember what Jesus said, "I was sick, and you healed me."

7/5/2008 12:46:41 PM

vickest wrote:

I'm discerning a "holier than thou" attitude in this country of great opportunity that if a person is poor and in need, that that person is lazy and has not taken the opportunities available to succeed. There is a real prejudice against people who are at the poverty level. It's not so much fun to brag about painting a house in an impoverished neighborhood as it is to travel to exotic places. Bragging rights. Yep. Charity begins at home. Kyprios928 is 100% correct.

7/5/2008 12:23:25 PM

blasmaic wrote:

The wastefulness of expensive trips abroad... just in time for the recession.

7/5/2008 12:11:44 PM

jethro1 wrote:

There's a seeker born every minute.

7/5/2008 12:00:00 PM

ScottBlaubach wrote:

We don't think twice about spending \$10 on a movie that cost Hollywood sometimes hundreds of millions to produce so that we can have "fun". While I'm sure there are some short term mission trips that are unjustified, my sense is that not only do these mission opportunities minister to people who have FAR less than we have in our overindulged society but they provide a global perspective of what it means to reach out and realize that we in the US are not the center of the universe.

7/5/2008 11:32:45 AM

miller51550 wrote:

Why send kids out of the country to do good for humanity.

Looks like a nice way to get a 'free' trip to foreign countries to me.

Charity begins at HOME. By taking that 'expense' money could double or triple the 'good' that these churches could do to the poor and needy here in the United States.

But it would not be as glamorous as being sent out of the country.

7/5/2008 10:25:24 AM

JohnAdams1 wrote:

I am glad someone spoke up about this shocking practice. and I am glad that others have the same concern.

How did this happen? These teens and young adults actually put such trips on resumes as proof of ?. Then go and then want points on their resume? Some groups and practices are beginning to add up to a dehumanized society that sold everything or am I crazy

7/5/2008 10:03:43 AM

freeparking wrote:

The world is paved with good intentions...but 10% of those involved have the Judas mentality...pretending to care and give and actually doing the opposite. Tele-evangelism is key example of Take...take...take. And they know all too well; "there's a sucker born every minute."

7/5/2008 9:22:56 AM

DGSPAMMAIL wrote:

Why don't they start being Christians and help people where they have a need? Haven't these 'Christians' read about the Good Samaritan?

I think they could start with helping out at soup kitchens or Habitat for Humanity in their own communities. I can't imagine Christ flying several hundred miles to paint a church or build a wall, when there were hungry and poor people right in his own neighborhood! He didn't get on a 737 with a few fish and a couple of loaves of bread, did he? I think he would have even paid his fair share of taxes, had he been rich.

And haven't they heard of Global Warming? These mission trips sound like they are nothing but pretentious boondoggles.

7/5/2008 8:28:37 AM

faithfuleservant3 wrote:

I'm sure mistakes were made and that on occasion these mission trips are more vacation than work. However, MANY trips encompass incredible amounts of selfless sweat equity, not to mention gifts that include cash for impoverished communities abroad.

Many people witness a reality that they never before perceived, some later become long-term missionaries.

The most important thing to remember is that you do not have to go with a church or large organization. One person who has faith and a big heart can conceive of and implement a trip involving random acts of kindness. Person to person contact is a blessing. Sometimes giving your time is the most valuable thing. You don't have to even leave your neighborhood.

The problem with the world is not that there is too little money but that too few are willing to give until it hurts.

7/5/2008 8:14:10 AM

burtonpaul wrote:

Religious missionaries are responsible for the destruction of more indigenous culture than any other form of coercion or violence used to control local populations. These self-serving hypocritical fruitcakes should be forever banned from ever setting foot inside another country. Religious missions should be stopped. Period.

7/5/2008 8:13:51 AM

Casey1 wrote:

I've always wondered about these religious, do-good trips abroad when there is so much need right here. Now I know. It's a vacation! Christians never cease to amaze me ...

Channah wrote:

Going near or far to help people is great! But, leave the missionary work out of it. These people have their religions-----let them be. Do not mess up their minds in the process. Just help and get out. They will remember your kindness. That is what is important.

7/5/2008 7:37:39 AM

lpeine wrote:

I like many have made mission trips to other parts of the world--most recently to Uganda. The point that we are spending \$30,000 to build something that costs \$2,000 is correct and needs to be taken into account to see whether such a trip is "worth it" or not. There is--with proper pre-trip preparation real value in forming partnerships with congregations, communities and institutions so that we may continue to provide what they need and for us to be more informed and in touch with the people there. Part of the legitimate cost of going is the good that comes to those who have made the trip--that needs to be assessed as well when deciding whether a mission trip is worth it or not. Rev Les Peine Massillon, Ohio

7/5/2008 7:28:22 AM

cpmondello wrote:

Christian Fundamentalists have ruined the world.

Will continue to ruin the world.

Until another powerful religion becomes more powerful and takes the lead.

Corey Mondello

Boston, Massachusetts

www.CoreyMondello.com

7-5-08 - 7/5/2008 7:20:43 AM

youngj1 wrote:

I'm of the school that believes that charity begins at home. Providing for the least of us in our own neighborhoods, in my view, should be of the greatest concern.

7/5/2008 6:59:33 AM

JohnAdams1 wrote:

There is no grace from God for showy gestures of so called giving. Maybe that truth has not caught up with many religionistas. Everything even the gospel has been 'defined, marketed and sold to the media for attention'.

jack824 wrote:

The good intent of these trips and the lessons they teach younger participants about the value of charity are not too be overlooked. That said, they can be fabulously inefficient; it can cost \$500 per day to put an untrained 14 year old on site. The local approach makes far more sense.

7/5/2008 6:24:28 AM

rhedrick wrote:

I've come to the same conclusion this article presents. If the vast sums of money spent to send out the "vacationaries" was simply donated to the churches, hospitals, ministries, etc. it would have a far greater impact.

There are plenty of needs for young and old alike within their own communities if they would just look around. Local involvement, however doesn't seem to present sufficient adventure or fulfill a narcissistic need.

7/5/2008 2:06:17 AM

kyprios928 wrote:

Giving money to a church of your faith is the Christian way. Giving money to the present televangelists is a sin. Using the excuse that the money is needed to spread the gospel, by making up false stories, fear mongering and hypocrisy, is not the way to spread the word of Jesus Christ. Some missionaries who are trained to act within the spirit of Jesus's teachings, that sacrifice of themselves, in order to enlighten people, must always follow the mantra do as I preach and live. It is imperative that those who want to enter the ministry and devote their lives to God's teaching are worthy of respect and help. Unfortunately, the modern time televangelists, according to their preachings, they should know that they will burn in hell. These televangelists are not believers themselves. They use the gift of story telling and fast talk to fatten their bellies and their pockets.

7/5/2008 1:17:36 AM

gonfrmtm wrote:

As the father of a woman who has spent her last few years in the medical mission area I would have to agree that many of the untrained who lack any knowledge of the cultures they are "trying to help" are doing nothing to help anything but themselves.

7/5/2008 12:53:14 AM

majorteddy wrote:

Let the atheists run the country and we'll cut out all this B.S.

7/4/2008 11:58:08 PM

tnthinker wrote:

This article says what I've been saying for years. The cost of the trips alone, if given to responsible people to spend in responsible ways, could do far more good than the vacationaries (great coining of a word, by the way). I know young kids who skip school, way too young to be of help and more likely to be a hindrance (unskilled and immature) to go on church mission trips and come back talking about how much fun they had on the beach. They come back much more ignorant than when they went, because now they think that in seven days they truly experienced what life is like there and don't have any clue about the intricacies of life in the culture they just visited. This article makes many good points that churches, especially in the South (which seems to be the center of such "missionary" zeal, need to consider. Taking away work from locals, going in with high tech equipment when it is inappropriate, treating these areas like zoos almost -- something to look at and photograph. The direct and indirect expense of hosting these groups sometimes can also be very hard for these communities. I also don't like the implicit requirement to be or become a member of X church to receive aid. And I certainly don't like it when kids send out letters essentially begging for money so they can go on a "mission" trip -- letters sanctioned and encouraged by the groups organizing the trips. With their misguided, ignorant and/or narrow-minded attempts to "help," they can actually cause more harm than good and work at cross-purposes with organizations which are better equipped to know the bigger implications involved. The Lutheran Church is notorious for this in Mexico and Central America.

7/4/2008 11:08:46 PM

ldsw wrote:

I suspected that, in some cases, purpose of the trips was about spreading the word. There's so much that can be done at home for the suffering and needy, too. It's too bad that many churches choose to start overseas rather than at home.

7/4/2008 8:01:23 PM

mikie44 wrote:

unpretentious giving starts within a block of home base.

Jon Carroll, of the SF Chronicle, calls it the "Untied Way"