

What about mission trips?

In Shenango Presbytery in 2003 over 700 youth and adults went on mission trips. Some large churches have several trips with scores of participants. Others only have one or two mission enthusiasts who hook-up with another church so that they can have this experience. Some members go to remote areas of the Sudan and others go into the hills of West Virginia or inner city Pittsburgh. It is estimated that as many as 2 million youth and adults participate in mission trips every year.

There are many excellent resources to help in planning mission trips. (See list at the end of this essay and contact the Shenango Presbytery Resource Center.) You can also get help from experienced leaders in churches near you. You don't even have to invent your own destination. You can simply join in with another church that has extensive experience going to a particular place. So I am not going to deal with any of the details or logistics of such trips. I would be happy to connect you with people who can help.

What I want to do in this essay is to address some broad issues in mission trips so that we know what we are doing and what our purpose is in this very important dimension of a church's missionary calling.

Church mission trips have exploded in numbers and destinations in the past twenty years. People want to have a personal relationship with their mission work. This is wonderful and essential if a congregation is to grow in mission understanding. However, there are some ways that a church can mess this up and cause themselves and the mission project all kinds of headaches. I will list some here:

Making it out to be more than it is

I you go on a one week trip to Mexico to build a house, are you a "missionary?" Yes and no, but mostly no!

This is not to belittle what you are doing, but if we are not clear on this issue, the whole thing will be a farce. You will simply be flitting from place to place to add "experiences" to your resume, like notches to your gun. Slipping into this pattern of "doing mission" would not be worthy of our Lord.

There is a sense in which all of us who strive to be followers of Jesus are "missionaries." Jesus said, "As the Father sent (the Latin word is *missio*) me so I send you." (John 20:21) In the final words of Matthew 28 he told us to go and make disciples. The essential nature of the church is to worship God and be sent into the world to join in what God is doing. So, truly, everyone is a "missionary."

But, as the great mission leader, Stephen Neill put it, “If everything is mission, nothing is mission.” So let’s be a little more modest about our self-identification as a missionary. After all, how does your week in Mexico compare with a person who spends forty years in another culture where he has thoroughly learned another language or where she has immersed herself in every aspect of the culture?

Putting a roof on a church in the Third World does not fulfill the Great Commission. Let’s maintain something of the historic meaning of the word “missionary.” Let’s be careful about what we are claiming for ourselves.

Name it what it is

Mark Nikkel, an Episcopalian missionary in the Sudan, committed his whole life to closely identifying with the Dinka people of the south Sudan. He wrote a book on Dinka culture. He was considered a true brother by the Dinka.

When describing what he was doing in the Sudan, he likened himself to an acolyte. In the Roman Catholic tradition the acolyte is a child who, through no credit to herself, stands beside the priest as he consecrates the bread and wine as the body and blood of Christ. In other words, this child has the least claim on a place of honor in the Mass, but is privileged to stand in the most holy place. Mark Nikkel felt that he had no claim on privilege (even though he knew more about the Dinka than any other outsider), yet he was permitted to stand next to a holy thing that God was doing.

Maybe all mission trips should have this attitude and begin with the admonition: “Don’t just do something, sit there!”

I am often asked what we will “do” on our next trips to the Sudan. I usually respond, “We’re going there to see what God is doing and then we are going to tell that story.” “Do” usually means build a church, fix up a school, teach a class or some other American-oriented approach to problem-solving. But remember, we are talking about the *missio Dei* (mission of God). We are talking about what God is doing. We have to be careful that our American approach to “fixing things” does not overwhelm what God is doing. Be an acolyte!

Remember that it is not our community

Mission is always done in partnership with someone. Most mission trips connect to someone in another community, whether in the United States or around the world. We are with them to observe what God is doing and then we join in. This is called “partnership.” Any other kind of mission is not worthy of the name.

A brief aside: You might ask, “Who is the partner if the work is among a people group that has not church?” I would still contend that even those who do not

claim Christian identity must be treated as partners. Obviously that partnership is different than when we are working with another Christian church, but if we believe that no culture is without a witness (Acts 14:17; 17:27; Romans 1:20)...or put positively, if we believe that the Holy Spirit always precedes us and has long been at work in that culture, then those to whom we go are authentically our “partners.”

We are guests when we cross cultural lines into another’s home. We should always do that with humility. God has given them the witness of the Holy Spirit and that witness is not dependent upon us. We must always begin by listening, which is not a strong suit for us Americans!

We tend to look down our noses at people of other cultures. Somehow we think that what is American is the most civilized and the best of what the world has to offer. Mission trips begin with humility and a healthy dose of respect. Once we have lived in another culture for ten years, we may have something useful to say about its strengths and weaknesses. Would we accept otherwise from someone who commented on America after a ten day visit?

You are not an evangelist

If you are going to tell me that the God I worship is no true god and that you have some significant understanding of God that I need to embrace, you better be willing to invest some serious time getting to know me first.

How would you feel about that? If I want to witness to you and ask you to change your most basic beliefs about God and life and purpose, what would I have to do for you to take me seriously? Is there a price to pay?

A TV commercial says, “They don’t care what you know until they know that you care.” It is trite, but only in the sense of simplistic understatement.

I have seen numerous examples of youth and adults asking for support so that they can “do evangelism in India.” Don’t believe it for a minute! In fact, if anyone tried to sell me on that, I doubt that I would trust their wisdom on much of anything about mission.

No Christian can do evangelism in India (or even in a neighboring community) during a brief visit. To think otherwise is to demean evangelism. If God calls us to be evangelists, he expects a much more serious response to the call. You can not evangelize anyone whose language you do not know, whose life you do not understand, whose joys and sorrows you have never felt. It would be insulting to hand them a tract and then claim to have evangelized them or even assisted in evangelizing them.

Wait until they are ready

Have you ever been to a kindergarten graduation where they dress up the five-year olds in a miniature cap and gown and march them down the aisle like the big kids? If you have, then you have seen an example of trying to be cute by making kids look like they are grown up. Then we wonder why they have no interest in attending college commencement!

The same thing can happen with mission trips. We can send them on ventures that are meant for older and more mature youth and adults. Personally I believe that there is no reason to send anyone outside North America before they are in college. Even most college-age young adults are not ready for a Third World country. They need serious cross-cultural preparation.

Some people are going to say that I am much too conservative on this, but I would contend that the exception to what I have said is rare. Cultural shock (disorientation caused by trying to function in a culture for which you have not been prepared and one which is too different from your own) is not my main concern. Most people, when they are thrown into a situation for which they are not prepared, will circle the wagons and shut down and put up a wall to protect themselves from an unwanted experience. Rarely is any real “damage” accomplished in that person. But they will miss 99% of what is going on around them. And they will deepen their prejudices because they are blinded to most of what they are seeing.

So I would argue that it is a waste of time and money to send them and it could turn someone off to mission if they go to a place for which they are not culturally prepared. Furthermore they will learn little (except to fear differences) and probably do harm to those with whom they are expected to interact.

So introduce young people slowly to cultures of greater differences from their own. Help them learn to reflect seriously and deeply on “near cross-cultural” experiences. Make sure that they have multiple experiences with a culture before moving them on to something else. I have seen adults who have wasted their time in a situation for which they were not prepared. They are easy to spot because they usually come back talking about the food and the toilets!

Prepare, prepare, prepare

A good rule of thumb is to spend as much time in preparation as you do in the location to which you are traveling. Again, that may seem excessive, but there is so much to learn about cross-cultural experiences. It is dramatically counter-cultural for American teenagers to cope constructively with people who are different. They have enough of a challenge dealing with their parents!!

There are materials listed below that can help with orientation. There are simulation games and videos and websites and much more that can help. Set the

bar high and demand that those who participate get serious about learning. This is too important for them to treat it lightly. Be sure that they “make an investment,” not just in terms of helping to pay for the trip, but by buying into the purpose for such an experience.

Debrief, debrief, debrief

This is even more important! Sometimes it is touch to spend time each evening to talk about what happened that day, but this must be a priority, otherwise the “learning” will be much more limited.

Ask an educator and someone with mission trip experience to help with this. Mission trips often become the most significant experience that teenagers have in the church. Consider how often they are the subject of “what I did last summer” reports at school or essays for college applications. These events are among the most important occasions in Christian formation and understanding the faith. They will surely shape a young person’s attitudes about mission for their entire adult life. It’s just really important.

Conclusion

I have expressed some strong positions on mission trips, but I think that this is justified given the extensive growth in this model of connecting to mission. Mission trips provide an outstanding opportunity for raising the mission understanding and commitment of youth and adults. This makes “doing it well” all the more important.

In addition to the more general bibliography above, the following is a list of some of the items that you will find in the Shenango Presbytery Resource Center. They may be helpful to you on the subject of mission trips:

- Nuts and Bolts: Planning a Mission Trip (BK8A1013)
- When God’s People Travel Together (BK8A1014)
- Mission Trips (BK8A1038 and 1040)
- Get Dirty for Jesus: A Handbook for Organizing Work Trips (BK8A1042)
- Planning an Excellent Adventure (with Guide) (VT8A1018)
- There are Varieties of Service (VT6H1048)
- Go Prepared (VT8A1023)
- Discipleship Curriculum: Young Adult Volunteer Program (CU5H1017)
- Bridges to Understanding: Video cross-cultural training (KT8A1001)

Former Worldwide Ministries Division director Marian McClure wrote an excellent brief article on the issue of short term trips. <http://www.pres-outlook.com/HTML/editorial20050829.html> She refers to articles by *Christianity Today* <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/127/22.0.html>

If you want to have a taste of some very serious research, further bibliography and guidelines on short-term mission, consider the following:

- www.stmstandards.org for short-term mission standards
- Douglas W. Terry, "Assessing Missional Effectiveness of Midterm Missionaries," *Missiology*, April, 2004, pp. 173 – 186.
- Robert Priest and Kurt Ver Beek, "Are Short-Term Missions Good Stewardship?" *Christianity Today*, July 5, 2005 online.
- The entire October, 2006 issue of *Missiology*