
The Cost of Short – Term Missions

North Americans spend millions of dollars each year on mission – related trips to developing nations. Many of these efforts do more harm than good.

By Jo Ann Van Engen

A missionary friend just called to see if we would house a short – term mission group she was coordinating here in Honduras. While on the phone, I asked her what she thought of these groups. Her answer might surprise you: “Everyone knows,” she said, “that short - term missions benefit the people who come, not the people here.”

Is that true? If so, then thousands of people are raising millions of dollars each year to do something not for others, but for themselves. Are we fooling ourselves by pretending these trips help people when they are really just an excuse to see a foreign country? If our good works are not doing good, why do them?

Take this example. A group of 18 students raised \$25,000 to fly to Honduras for spring break. They painted an orphanage, cleaned the playground, and played with the children. Everyone had a great time, and the children loved the extra attention. One student commented, “My trip to Honduras was such a blessing! It was amazing the way staff cared for those children. I really grew as a Christian there.”

The Honduran orphanage’s yearly budget is \$45,000. That covers the staff’s salaries, building maintenance, and food and clothes for the children. One staff member there confided, “The amount the students raised for their week here is more than half our working budget. We could have done so much with that money.”

Times have changed. Missionaries used to raise small fortunes to sail to Africa and Asia, often never returning home. The decision to become a missionary was life changing and usually permanent.

Today, air travel makes even the farthest corners of the earth accessible to anyone with money for a ticket and a few days to spare. Thousands of people – students, retirees, busy professionals – go all over the world on short – term mission trips, building schools, running medical brigades and doing street evangelism.

Don’t misunderstand me. I’m not saying that everyone goes on short – term missions to get a free vacation. People usually sign up for very good reasons – a successful doctor wants to use her skills to help needy people, a young person seeks to share his faith with others, a construction worker knows that cement floors will keep poor children healthier.

Benefits are personal

But maybe you’ve noticed the same thing I have. When people return from their trip, they don’t talk about what they did, as much as what they saw and how it changed them. They describe how amazing it was to worship with Christians in another language, or how humbling it was to encounter people who live with less than they could ever imagine. They don’t often talk about what they accomplished, but about how much they learned about themselves.

Certainly short – term mission trips can go beyond religious tourism and provide memorable experiences. My husband and I led a semester abroad program in Honduras. The college students who study with us often have been on previous international mission trips. They say these trips awakened their interest in the third world and the poor. For most, seeing a world outside North America that they had never imagined shook their reality and made them question their own lifestyles.

Our students call those experiences, “life changing.” But often that “life changing” experience is based on an emotional response to a situation they do not really understand. Too often the students return home simply counting the blessings they have as North Americans, having gained little insight into the causes of poverty and what can be done to alleviate them.

I think out students’ experiences are typical. Most short – term missions are extremely expensive. Each member of the spring – break group I mentioned raised over \$1,000 to spend two weeks in Honduras/ That’s a lot of money anywhere, but in the third world, it’s more than people make in an entire year.

Second, short – term mission groups almost always do work that could be done (and usually done better) by the people of the country they visit. The spring – break group spent their time and money painting and cleaning the orphanage in Honduras. That money could have paid two Honduran painters who desperately needed the work, with enough left over to hire four new teachers, build a new dormitory, and provide each child with new clothes.

Even medical brigades are difficult to justify. The millions of dollars spent to send North American physicians to third – world countries could cover the salaries of thousands of underemployed doctors in those countries – doctors who need work and already understand the culture and language of the people they would serve.

Short – term groups are usually unable to do effective evangelism, which is the main goal of many trips. Since most group members do not speak the language or understand the culture, their attempts at evangelism are almost limited. I know of one group that traveled all the way to Senegal to distribute copies of a Christian video to people on the street, but could not even hold the most basic conversation with these people.

Getting to know you?

How would we feel if visitors came to Canada or the United States to spend a week volunteering at the Salvation Army, ate only the food they brought from home, talked only with each other (because they couldn’t speak English), and never left the building? Most of us would feel offended and bewildered that our visitors were not interested in learning about our country.

But I have met many short – term groups in Honduras that do just that. They take along food they are used to (or eat every night at McDonald’s or Pizza Hut), stay in the best hotels, and spend all their time together. They are willing to serve as long as it’s not too uncomfortable. Often, they leave without having spent any meaningful time getting to know the country’s people.

Short – term missions also require a great deal of time and coordination by their hosts. A Nicaraguan doctor I know runs a health clinic for poor families. He trains community workers to promote better health, and treats serious illnesses at almost no charge. The clinic can barely keep up with the demands. But the doctor spends three months each year preparing for and hosting U.S. medical brigades. He admits that the brigades accomplish very little (visiting doctors

mostly hand out aspirin for headaches and back pain), but hesitates to complain since the U.S. organization that promotes the brigades also funds his clinic.

Short – term groups can also send wrong messages to third – world people. A Honduran friend is a bricklayer and was excited to help a work team build two houses in his neighborhood. After the group left, I asked him about his experience. “I found out soon enough that I was in the way. The group wanted to do things their way and made me feel like I didn’t know what I was doing. I only helped the first day,” he said.

Because short – term groups often want to solve problems quickly, they can make third – world Christians feel incapable of doing things on their own. Instead of working together with local Christians, many groups come with a let-the-North-Americans-do-it attitude that leaves nationals feeling frustrated and underappreciated. Since the groups are only around for about a week, the nationals end up having to pick up where they left off – but without a sense of continuity and competence they might have had if they were in charge from the beginning.

What’s the real purpose?

These problems are not just pesky details. They raise serious questions about the value of short – term mission trips.

So, what do we do? Declare a moratorium on all short – term missions and only support full-time workers? Refuse to give money to any group planning to visit a developing country?

I don’t think that is the answer. Our world is becoming smaller, and global business has made us all neighbors. Our lives in North America have become inextricably linked with our brothers and sisters in the third – world. Now, more than ever, Christians need to share one another’s problems and support one another.

But short – term missions as they stand are not the answer. Third – world people do not need more rich Christians coming to paint their church and make them feel inadequate. They *do* need more humble people who are open and willing to share in their lives and struggles.

I believe North American Christians need to start taking seriously our responsibility to the people of the third world – and visiting another country can be an appropriate place to begin. But we need to ask each other: What is the purpose of the trip? Are we going through the motions of helping the poor so we can congratulate ourselves? Or are we seeking to understand the lives of third world people – to recognize and support their strengths and try to appreciate the problems they face and our role in them? Are we ethnocentrically treating the people of the third world as tragic objects to be rescued – or as equals to walk with and learn from?

Forget about serving – but learning

I suggest we stop thinking about short – term missions as a service to perform, and start thinking about them as a responsibility to learn. Let’s raise money to send representatives to find out what our brothers and sisters are facing, what we can do to help, and how we can build long – term relationships.

Groups like The Christ Commission for Development (CCD) in Honduras intentionally provide these kinds of learning experiences to short – term groups. CCD accepts North

Americans only if they are serious about learning. Their groups can visit Christian development projects, speak with rural and urban poor, and dialogue with Honduran leaders.

The groups often spend some time working, but only on CCD's facilities, not in rural villages or poor neighborhoods. CCD recognizes that outside groups can unintentionally destroy a community's cohesion and sense of empowerment. Groups return to North America with a better understanding of the injustice sin that oppresses people in developing nations, and what they can do to make a difference.

It is possible to change traditional short – term missions from religious tourism into genuine service, but it requires a better understanding of how God calls each of us to serve. Preparing for your trip means more than packing your suitcase and getting your shots. Read as much as you can about the people and culture. Find out what some of the problems are. Learn a little of the language you will be hearing. Find someone from the country you will be visiting who can speak to your group about its culture. Show respect for people by knowing something about their lives before you arrive.

Spend time with the locals. Make sure nationals re fully involved in your visit and follow their lead. If you are working on a project together, ask your national co-workers to teach you. If you have a skill they could use, ask if they would like to learn it. Ask questions about the lives and the problems of the people you meet. Learning from the people of the country you visit will give you an understanding of the country that a foreigner cannot give.

Finally, get involved as a global Christian when you return. Find out how the actions rich countries affect those in the third world. Support organizations working to fight injustice and poverty. Write letters to your government representatives telling them what you learned and what you believe your government should do. Speak to churches, schools and other groups and encourage them to act.

Short – term missions are expensive. They spend money that third – world Christians could desperately use. But short – term missions can be worth every penny if they mark the beginning of a long-term relationship. Money invested in learning about the causes of poverty in developing nations – and what can be done – is money well spent.

What Can You Learn?

If you go on a short – term mission trip, focus on learning, not doing. Most Christians don't like sitting on their hands. We like to serve by doing. But in a third world high unemployment and low wages, it makes little sense to spend our time painting a wall when we could be learning about the country, its people and problems.

Ask your contact person to set up visits and speakers who will help you understand questions like these:

- Why is this country so poor?
- What problems do the people face?
- What has our own country done to help or harm this country?
- What can we do to help?

These are not questions with pat answers. Struggling with them is a learning experience that can have an impact long after the trip has ended.

Double Your Investment

One good rule of thumb for short-term missions is to invest at least as much money in the projects you visit as you spend on your trip. Direct your money toward people and organizations working on long-term solutions. If you are interested in evangelism, support programs that are seeking to address those problems. Better yet, find programs that minister to people holistically by meeting their spiritual, physical, social, emotional and economic needs.