

Although committed to their partnership with a congregation in Mexico, one Covenant church felt something was missing. | DEREK MUELLER

Reversing the Mission Experience



I'll be honest. I've always been a bit conflicted about cross-cultural short-term mission trips. Sometimes it seems as if they are simply an item to check off our Christian "bucket list." Mission trips are expensive, time intensive, and it seems rare to see long-term change or spiritual fruit from short trips. Do we actually make a difference? Are people's lives actually being changed and helped? Aren't the people that benefit the most from short-term trips the people themselves who go on the

trips? Wouldn't the people we are going to minister to be better served if we just sent a check to help them meet their needs? Isn't there a better way to spend our time and money?

Every three years, through Covenant Merge Ministries, our youth group at Rochester Covenant Church goes to inner-city Cancun to partner with Messiah Baptist Church to help reach their city for Christ. As we participated in that trip during the summer of 2010, I began to wonder if there was a way to change our model.

What if we included a "reverse mission trip" in our church practice? In addition to traveling to Cancun, what if our students raised money to bring Messiah Baptist students to us in Rochester, Minnesota?

There were three things we wanted to accomplish. First, we wanted to strengthen our relationship with Messiah Baptist. It's hard to do that when we only see each other every three years—and only in their homes. In 2010, only two people on our team of twenty-five had been to Messiah

Baptist before, although we have been partnering with them for many years. Every time we go there, it feels in some ways as if we are starting over. We spend a lot of time and energy just learning names and faces and figuring each other out. *There has to be a better way of doing this!* we thought. Perhaps if we saw each other more often, in our homes as well as theirs, we would be more effective at doing ministry together.

Second, we wanted to help our own students to see our city as a mission field. Because we are not simply called to go to *other* nations to proclaim Jesus, we wanted our students to develop a heart for our city, to see Rochester transformed by the gospel. They struggle to comprehend how to translate a mission trip to Mexico to their day-to-day lives in Rochester, so we wanted to help them picture what missions can look like every day. Our goal was to help them see that missions isn't just a far-off idea for other people in other parts of the world. Inviting the students from Cancun to join us helped our students see that this was actually a mission trip—not just another youth activity.

Third, we often hear stories of students who return from short-term mission trips feeling a call to missions from God. We wanted to help open up that possibility to the students

Opposite and below: The students from Cancun teach children in Rochester new soccer moves during Sports Camp.

from Messiah Baptist so they could see that missions is something greater than youth groups from the United States coming to help them. In every relationship there is give and take. We give a lot to the people in Mexico and we are happy to do that. But we need them too. We need their help reaching our city. We wanted to empower them to help us and then to go back to their cities as missionaries. We wanted to bless them with a life-changing opportunity and be blessed by having them help us.

After talking with Merge Ministries, we continued the conversation with our own church staff and con-

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Finally it was time for the Messiah Baptist group to come. In July 2011 seven students between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine (we learned that “stu-

dent” is a relative term!), arrived with two adults, including a staff member from Merge Ministries, Mario Valdes. They stayed with families in our church in groups of two and three. About thirty of our students participated.

Our week together consisted of three different aspects. First, every year our church hosts Sports Camp,



Students from Mexico and Minnesota read to children at the Friendship Place.

gregation. Once we all agreed to the idea, we started making plans. Last May I went to Cancun to meet with the students there who were interested in coming. I spent most of my time talking with the students about the wealth differences between our two cultures. As Americans, we are wealthy materially, but poor spiritually and relationally. As a culture, many Mexicans are poor materially, but wealthy spiritually and relationally. We did much of the same training for our students as well.

which is similar to vacation Bible school. Our mission team helped lead, coach, register, and make snacks for the campers every morning. The Messiah students were up on stage singing songs and being silly. We taught the campers simple Spanish phrases they could say to the Messiah students. One camper mentioned to her mom how glad she was that the Messiah students were with us this week. The Messiah students appreciated the time

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Team members from Messiah and Redeemer make friendship bracelets between snack times at Sports Camp.

to play soccer, learn basketball, and interact with the campers.

In the afternoons, we helped at a local after-school program called Friendship Place that works with elementary age students in a low-income housing area in town. There are many Spanish-speaking students at Friendship Place so the Messiah students were able to converse with them in their own language. It was fun to see Messiah students reading on couches with Hispanic, African American, and Sudanese students. At the end of the week, one Messiah student shared how encouraged she was that we spent time at Friendship Place. She saw it as a motivation to do something similar in Cancun. Messiah Baptist is located in a low-income area in downtown Cancun, where many children need a place like Friendship Place where they could find adults who care for them.

We also spent three nights ministering to people in the city of Rochester. We handed out water, prayed for dozens and dozens of people, and held a worship service on a main stage downtown. After spending time praying for people in our city, students began asking if we could do this more often. They wondered why we haven't done this before and what was keeping us from doing this every week. Our students realized that missions can be a part of their everyday life at home and in their schools.

We ended the week sharing stories

of how we saw God move and impact our city. One of the chaprones from Messiah shared, with tears in her eyes, how grateful she was for the opportunity to come and spend a week with us. Another student from Messiah

told us how he was ministered to while spending the week at Friendship Place. He realized how God was using him to encourage a child who came from a troubled life, very similar to his own. One of our students shared how easy it was to pray for people. He thought it would be difficult and that he would be afraid, but the more he prayed for people the easier it got. He realized that he doesn't have to let fear get in the way of having spiritual conversations with people.

Finally it was time to say goodbye to our friends. Some were "old" friends whom we had met the previous year, and some were brand-new friends that we had just met six days earlier. We are looking forward to seeing our friends in two years when we return to their homes, doing ministry their way, in order to advance God's kingdom in Cancun. At the end of our reverse mission trip, a student asked me if, when we go back in two years, they could go back with us even though they won't be in high school anymore. Missions are all about relationships—and our students are getting that.

The trip was a success for many reasons, but two stand out. First, our church was totally behind this endeavor. They committed financially as well as their homes, time, vehicles, and meals. Our church body was amazing! And second, we couldn't have pulled this off without the expertise and involvement of Covenant

Merge Ministries. They answered all of our questions and worked closely with Messiah Baptist. They helped the Messiah students with visas, passports, and transportation. This simply wouldn't have worked without a local presence.

Going forward, the successes that came out of this were numerous. Our students are excited to go back in two years. We have a greater heart for the Messiah students. I think seeing them in our church and in our homes gives greater credibility to the idea of our going there every three years. It is no small task—of time or finances—to take a group to Mexico. Now our church body is behind this relationship a little bit more. Because of that, I think we'll get more people from the congregation, not just students, to go to Cancun next time. Also, when we are in Cancun, it will be like seeing old friends. There will be less awkwardness of being in a new culture, and there will be greater camaraderie.

Missions is not about building houses and going to new countries. It's about relationships—it's about God putting people on our hearts to love and care and pray for. It's about God using people to bring his message of love and reconciliation, advancing his kingdom of light into dark places. This happens in the context of relationships—relationships that are built between two different cultures that now get to do ministry together twice as much as before.

Two months after the trip, I received a letter from parents of two brothers who came to Rochester for the reverse mission trip. They wrote, "You wouldn't believe how happy they returned, talking about the activities they were involved in. They were more excited than before, with so much excitement shared how they were embraced by you. Every single story is wonderful. At present time fire still in their hearts. Sharing with locals is a great thing...my wife and I are truly grateful for all you did." ■