



WHY MISSION TRIPS *are a* WASTE *of* TIME

*(and how to make
sure yours is not)*

NOEL BECCHETTI

We're going to Paraguay!" The words rang out in a dimly lit sanctuary. As music pulsed, more lights came on and more voices rang out: "We'll be working with our denominational missionaries!" "We're going to repair the roof of their mission house!" "We're going to put on a Bible club for the village children!"

Members of a youth group in a large church in the Pacific Northwest were presenting their upcoming mission trip to members of their congregation. I was the guest speaker, brought in to inspire the adults to support their students' summer mission plans.

"What can I honestly say to these people," I thought, "when I know that this trip is mostly a waste of everyone's time and money?"

Those words may sound strange, coming from someone who runs a ministry that provides short-term mission and service opportunities for young people and adults. But I'm concerned that most of our well-intentioned mission and service efforts are misguided. And as the world of youth-ministry mission and service continues to grow (and time, energy, and financial costs continue to rise), it's imperative that we make the most of the resources that God has given to us.

Since the key to solving any dilemma is to first identify the root causes, let's take a look at how we get ourselves off course.

COMMON PITFALLS

"We have met the enemy," the saying goes, "and it is us." Afraid so—the first place to look when trying to figure out why we're wasting our time is in the mirror. Here are some of the common mission-trip errors.

We want to control the situation. This is understandable, given the responsibility we carry in taking a group of kids into a strange and potentially dangerous location. The problem is, missions by its very nature is a cross-cultural experience. We're going into

a situation where the values, norms, cultural rules, and methods are radically different than ours. If we continue to insist on control—which means imposing our cultural and methodological framework onto our ministry partners—we create two wasteful byproducts.

First, our ministry partners divert us to meaningless (in their framework) tasks that fit our control grid. A friend of mine has coordinated mission and service trips into northern Mexico for years. One of his sites is an orphanage full of boys and girls craving love and attention. The other is "the wall." "I've got this wall," he says. "When a group comes that can't handle what's required to build relationships with Mexican

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kids, or insists on completing a task so they can accomplish something, I put them to work on the wall. They feel like they're a big help, and it keeps them out of everyone's hair so the ministry isn't compromised."

Second, we pull our ministry partners away from more meaningful work. "People need to remember," an inner-city friend from Chicago told me recently, "that a ministry pays a price to accommodate volunteers. It takes a lot of time and energy to set up an environment that can effectively handle volunteer help."

While there are a number of legitimate reasons why a ministry partner may allow volunteer groups to come in on a "make-work" basis (expose kids to the mission field, build awareness of the ministry, generate financial support), it's a waste of their distinctive gifts and skills to force them to accommodate our control issues.

Remember the high-school group headed for Paraguay? The missionar-

ies really didn't need their roof repaired. They figured that it was what the kids could handle. But for two weeks it took them away from their core ministry—an outreach to the adult men of their village.

We want to define the ministry.

The ministry that God calls our mission partners to pursue often is the exact opposite of what we would do. The problem isn't whose definition of ministry is right; the problem comes when we insist on defining what ministry is in a context we know little about. Ever wonder why so many other cultures don't maintain their homes and buildings up to our standards? Maybe other things are more important to them.

One of the most common cultural

collisions occurs between linear cultures (like ours) and nonlinear cultures (like Latin). Our culture is task oriented; Latin culture is people oriented. Our culture is time sensitive; Latin culture is situation sensitive. Glen Kehrein, co-author (with Raleigh Washington) of a terrific book on racial reconciliation entitled *Breaking Down Walls*, relates an incident that occurred during a trip he and his wife took to visit friends in Mexico City.

"On the way to the pyramids outside the city," Kehrein writes, "our friends dropped off a package for a friend of theirs. In the U.S. the encounter would have lasted thirty seconds—tops. In Mexico it involved extended conversation and refreshments. Our friends, Rick and Diane, had never met the recipient and would, most likely, never see him again. Two

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hours later we were back on the road. As whites we often see such encounters as a ‘waste of time,’ rushing to judgment rather than attempting to understand the culture. The Mexican value of relationships is often viewed as laziness.”

When we give in to our task orientation and define “doing” as ministry (one of our most common mistakes), we create more wasteful repercussions.

We spend an inordinate amount of time, energy, and money to do



“ministry” that is a low priority to those we’re attempting to serve.

A few years ago, a friend of mine went with a group of other adult men from his church to a jungle village in Brazil. They were there to build a new meeting room for the mission compound.

“The only problem was,” he says, “the weather was horrible the whole time—driving rain twenty-four hours a day. It was the worst possible time to build a building; but we’d come to accomplish a task, and by George, we were going to do it!” He went on: “It got to be ludicrous. The villagers were laughing their heads off. They could not figure out why the gringos were so loco that they’d slop around in the rain and mud when anyone with half a brain was inside.”

We tempt our ministry partners to tell us only what we want to hear. I’ve got another friend who also works in northern Mexico. He’s built a network of relationships with Mexican pastors all over the region. There’s just one problem. “Some of the pas-

tors have learned how to make a good living telling Americans what they want to hear,” he says. “They’ll tug their heartstrings with some cute children, then tell them how, if they could only build a new wing on their church, they could do so much more for the kids. It’s not that these pastors have such bad intentions; they’ve been overwhelmed by the amount of money and material resources that Americans can pour into a situation.”

Buildings are not automatically bad. But these Mexican pastors have become sidetracked from the ministry that is most effective in their culture (relationships) because of the overwhelm-

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ing influence (and its attending temptations) of well-meaning but ignorant groups.

We want to see certain kinds of results. After all, we’re investing a lot of time, energy, and money into this mission trip. Surely God (not to mention the church board) wants to see some results from our efforts! True enough—but in rural Paraguay or inner-city Cleveland, “results” can be tough to pin down.

This pitfall can be especially treacherous when we’re ministering in difficult, complicated situations. It would be great if homeless crack addicts could meet Jesus, get clean, and land a job in a week; unfortunately, it rarely happens that way. Results like “We got to know some homeless men and women and told them that God loves them,” or “We helped the missionaries hand out information for an upcoming service to the village men as they came out of the cantina,” can be tough to quantify. But insisting on attaining results that fit our criterion for effective use of resources creates still more wasteful ripple effects.

We run the risk of seeing results

that aren’t really there. “What a great day!” one group leader told me after his group spent the afternoon at a Washington D.C. homeless shelter. “We handed out tracts and witnessed to dozens of guys. At least ten men accepted Christ!” Well, maybe, but homeless shelter residents are (unfortunately) familiar with evangelistic blitzkriegs and know how to go through the motions so they can get some peace and quiet.

We could do real damage to our ministry partners’ long-term work. When the Iron Curtain fell, there was an explosion of evangelistic outreach from the West into the countries of the

former Soviet bloc. Huge stadium rallies brought together thousands of people, virtually all whom, it seemed, raised their hands to accept Jesus. Unfortunately, the organizers of most of these events forgot to consider how they were going to follow up with these respondents. Guess who absorbed the blow created by this phenomenon? The men and women who had patiently worked over the years to smuggle in Bibles and Christian literature, connect with believers behind the Iron Curtain, and support clandestine youth camps and other outreaches.

One friend of mine who has worked in Eastern Europe for more than a quarter-century recounted how he was approached by an American group that had held a crusade in Romania. “We’ve got over 2,000 decision cards that were filled out by people who attended our crusade,” they told him. “Can you follow them up?”

His ministry was staggering under the weight of trying to meet such needs while continuing the work he’d been called to for decades. (In 1993, the head of a respected mission agency reaching a former Iron Curtain country con-

MISSION TRIP RULES

cluded that the results achieved from all the evangelistic efforts made into his country were essentially zilch.)

WASTE NOT, WANT NOT

Take heart—your mission and service trip can be a wise and effective investment of your time, energy, and resources. All you've got to do is keep three principles in mind as you prepare yourself and your group.

Let go and let God. Several years ago, a friend of mine and I got an invitation from the Romanian government to bring a group of baseball coaches to their country to conduct instructional clinics for their youth baseball program. (We were also given complete freedom to share with the kids about our faith.) I was in charge of the pre-visit; so, in the dead of winter, I headed over to Bucharest for my first meeting with Cristian Costescu, the secretary-general of the Romanian Baseball Federation.

Romania is a Latin culture. It is people centered, situation sensitive, and they don't sweat the details. As Cristian, my taxi-driver/translator friend, and I sat in a Bucharest restaurant, sweat began to pour down my forehead as I realized that there was no way that we could nail down the logistics of our trip ahead of time. Where we would stay, what the schedule would be, who we'd meet—every query was met with the reply, "You will be our guests. It is not a problem."

I had two options: I could pull the plug on the trip, or I could place our group in Cristian and his associates' hands and trust them. I decided on the latter. The orientation meeting with my group when I returned home was, let's say, brief.

"How's it look?" they asked.

"It's going to be great," I replied.

"How are things going to work?" they asked.

"I have no idea. But we can trust them—they'll work it all out."

Which they did—in Romanian,

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Be flexible.

Flexibility is key, says Kyle Becchetti, vice-president of operations for the Center for Student Missions. The needs of the ministry or the missionaries you are working with may change, and groups need to be prepared to change directions in order to serve effectively. "Be sensitive to what your mission partners need," Becchetti says, "not what you need to do. If it's not what you prepared to do, then it may not be what God wants you to do."

Or, as Barbara Johnson, director of Covenant Mission Connection (CMC), says, "He or she that is flexible will not be bent out of shape."

Go as servants.

The primary motivation for a mission team has to be to go and serve God, says Johnson. "If you want an adventure, go to Disneyland."

Serving may mean that your group will have to make a lot of adjustments. "They are not going to have all the kinds of food they want, the best place to sleep, all the comforts—they might not even have a hot shower, but it's a wonderful opportunity to experience life that most of the world has to deal with most of the time."

Leave your agenda behind.

Let your ministry partner set the goals for your group, not your own need to accomplish things. Remember, they are the ones left behind to deal with any mistakes your group makes. Becchetti tells the story about one group leader who was told by missionaries not to bring tracts to hand out during their trip. When he got back from the trip, he told Kyle that they had handed out 2,000 tracts, all with the missionaries' names and numbers printed on them. "He bragged about it," Becchetti says, "saying, 'I wish we had brought more.'"

Be a team.

Make sure all of the team members have the same goals, and are committed to serving. This is crucial with youth groups. "If you get kids headed in the right direction," says Becchetti, "they will be fine. Adults have a lot more agendas, and that can be a problem."

Johnson has seen some teams where group members are not speaking to one another because they haven't been able to resolve their own conflicts. "The worst kind of witness to the people we go to is a team that can't get along among themselves," she says. "We are going on mis-

sion trips to model the life of Christ and you can't do that if you can't be a team."

Get help.

Unless you have connections with a particular ministry, it's best to set up your mission trip through a group like Covenant Mission Connection or Center for Student Missions. They can help with logistics—travel, meals, housing, and a translator, if needed. They also have the on-site contacts and can help plan programs that will serve the needs of people and ministries.

Evangelism takes time.

Be realistic, says Johnson. Mission trips are very limited in terms of evangelism. "You need long-term relationships in order to do evangelism and lead people to the Lord," she says. "I hear about a lot of groups that send mission teams out to do street evangelism in a European city (in English) and come back and rave about all the people they led to the Lord—but how do they know what happened to those people, and who did the follow up?"

Be prepared.

Have someone in charge of the details, who can keep track of paperwork, travel documents, tickets, insurance information, maps, keys, and medical information. And prepare by learning as much as possible about the place you are going to beforehand—about the culture, the language, and the people.

Travel with a first-aid kit. And make sure the clothes that you wear are appropriate for both the work and the culture.

"Go well-prepared cross-culturally," Johnson says, "so that you don't go in and say, 'This is not acceptable,' when a plate of food is put before you."

Open yourself to the world.

Going on a mission trip can change your life. Be open to learning more about the world and about that possibility that you can serve. And be open to learning what other people and cultures can teach you.

"When people get back from a mission trip, they may not have accomplished a lot, but they have changed," Johnson says, "They are different people, they come back and they are excited about serving in the local church, excited about prayer, and excited about being part of what God is doing in the world. But you don't get that unless you get out of your comfortable surroundings and get out and see the world." □

Mission Trips

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roundabout, by-our-standards-last-minute fashion. It was a fantastic trip. The clinics went great, the kids were responsive, God put us in touch with local Romanian Christians who were willing to follow up with interested players after we departed. Most importantly, my wife and I established friendships that we've maintained over the years, friends we've gone back to see several times since then. And interestingly enough, we've done more ministry just sitting around visiting with our Romanian friends than we ever accomplished during our mission trip.

Most of the control issues that hover around a mission and service trip con-

church building," I said (in a dazzling display of Anglo task-oriented linear brilliance). "That would be great," Kirk (diplomatically) replied, "but what we'd really like to do is to train teams of Christians to go back with us into the projects where we grew up and share Jesus with the folks who live there."

Their ministry goals looked nothing like mine. It took some real selling on our part to convince groups that traipsing into housing projects (where 100 percent of the residents were African American) with a team of black evangelists was a good idea. But sharing Jesus with people in the Stateway Gardens housing project with Kirk and

no talk about ending hunger, defeating poverty, or seeing the prisoner go straight. He says simply to do it, because when we do, we're somehow ministering directly to our Lord.

Jesus gives us the freedom to go into our mission and service trips with the goal of just plain ministering. We don't have to achieve certain "results" to justify our investment. Frankly, we might not recognize some of God's divine results when we see them. But as we can remove our cultural blinders, discard the limitations we place on God's definition of ministry, and leave the driving to him, we can begin to understand what it means to be Jesus' hands and feet to a hurting world.

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cern method rather than goal. We're all after the same things; it's in considering how to get there that our differences emerge. As we allow our methods to be adjusted to fit the situation we're entering, we communicate a powerful message of trust and respect to our ministry partners that will ensure our time will be well spent.

A ministry by any other name would smell as sweet. In 1992, my wife, Kyle, and I started the Chicago branch of the Center for Student Missions. As we began to learn our way around, we made friends with a number of African-American Christians who attended a church on Chicago's South Side.

One Saturday, I headed down to their church to get my car hand-washed at the facility they had set up in a warehouse next door to their sanctuary. Kirk Bell, one of my new friends, came by. As we chatted, I looked across the street to the new sanctuary they were building out of what had been a burned-out grocery store.

"Kirk, we could bring all kinds of work groups to help you with your

his friends has become one of the most powerful ministries our groups experience during their times in Chicago. By moving away from our focus on task and redefining our understanding of ministry, we were able to see God work in ways we couldn't have otherwise imagined.

Leave the driving to Jesus.

Matthew 25:31-40 is one of Jesus' most significant discourses. He articulates the actions by which God decides who's going to heaven and who's not. Notice what he leaves out in his charge to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and minister to the sick. He says nothing about what results are supposed to be achieved through these actions. There's

JUST CALL ME CHICKEN

So what did I say to the congregation that was sending their students to Paraguay? To be honest, I wasn't very bold. I played it safe and affirmed what was praiseworthy about their trip—their willingness to move out of their comfort zone, their desire to serve God, their heart for the children they were looking forward to meeting. But I took comfort in the knowledge that they were under the guidance of a solid youth leader who I knew would learn from the experience and approach future mission and service trips with more flexibility and sensitivity. The result has been healthy relationships with ministry partners all over the world, and students whose lives have been changed forever.

That's what we want our kids to experience. And that is mission and service worth anyone's time. □

