

Churches Retool Mission Trips

Work Abroad Criticized for High Cost and Lack of Value

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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

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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.”