

Short-Term Mission Experiences

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It was great!” This was all I could articulate after my first mission trip back in 1981. Years later, and with more than sixty mission trips behind me, my quote would change to, “God changed my life in ways that I could never imagine!” So, yes, I am dating myself a bit, but the message is still the same. God changed my life so much that years later, when our senior pastor invited me to prayerfully consider leaving corporate America to become the Director of Outreach, I said “yes” with very little hesitation.

Over the last twenty years, churches across the country have seen a significant growth in mission trip experiences. People of all ages have said “yes” to travel to a destination that is often not a normal vacation location. Why? Some people want to see the world. Some people want to go on a mission trip to check it off the bucket list. But, most of them are looking for a way to connect with God, connect with members of their church community, and connect with a culture that is so radically different from anything they have ever experienced.

A trip has to start with good preparation, guided by the trip leader. This preparation can be divided into three major areas. The first is the heart. I believe that every person that chooses to go on a mission trip is there for a reason. In many cases, the attendee believes they are answering God’s call to be on this experience. My job as trip leader is to challenge each person to figure out why they are on the trip. They may or may not find the answer during the trip, but the challenge is to continue to ask the why questions as they return home. God has something for each person. Each person’s job is to figure out what it is, and how they should apply it to life back home.

The second is all about what can be learned in the mission “country.” When travelling to a developing-world country, there are a number of challenges. Transportation companies may be late or substandard, the food may not be as tasty as we expect, and the lodging may be less than 5-star. As part of the trip preparation, it is important to share these possibilities so the traveler has appropriate expectations during their time. Our challenge with each member of the group is to take our first world expectations and Type A behaviors, check them in at the door, and become a Type B-. Things will go wrong in a developing world. When these things go wrong, it is time to pray.

The third area is how the trips connect with the mission community. At Prince of Peace, one of our international mission partners, Doulos Discovery

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When anyone says “I am going on a mission trip with my church,” the first question one is asked is, “And what are you going to do, or build?” Mission trips can be defined in different ways. In our experience as missionaries in the Lutheran church in Guatemala¹ we defined these trips based on *Confessio Augustana* VII: “the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel.”² We need to remember that the church is made by Christ, the church does not make itself, therefore the mission of the church anywhere is the proclamation of the gospel, that is, the forgiveness of sins (John 20:21–23). Hence, the mission of the church, including mission trips, is meant to be just that—to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ, specifically, the forgiveness of sins. However, the mission of the church has been made into a social justice goal that seeks to help the forgotten, the needy, and the lowly, especially in places that “need our help.”

When speaking of mission, we use the teaching of the priesthood of all believers (1 Peter 2:9). So often our impulse when working with the poor or people outside our culture is to either be in solidarity with their suffering or become their savior. This solidarity can be to lower oneself to the level of poverty or circumstance of the “other” to the point of glorifying poverty. It can be as simple as removing one’s shoes because our hosts lack them—the end result is getting parasites, not the best practice of solidarity! The priesthood of all believers is not about lowering all to the same base poverty and want but about recognizing the value in what we have, being good stewards, and helping others in their every need.³ This of course is not only about material possessions, but in mission, that seems to be the focus, fixing poverty and people. This is when one’s first reaction is to become people’s savior and confusing ourselves with Christ. We would much rather have people “confuse” themselves with John the Baptist, always pointing to Christ (John 1:29).

Our mission, as the priesthood of all believers, is not an unbearable burden precisely because it is a gift, as “these are the riches of the boundless mercy of God, which we have received by no merit but by pure grace. Therefore she sings: ‘He has remembered His mercy.’ She does not say: ‘He has remembered our merit and worthiness.’”⁴

¹The Iglesia Luterana Agustina de Guatemala – ILAG (Augustinian Lutheran Church in Guatemala).

²*Augsburg Confession* (Ger.) 7:1, in *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 42 (hereafter, BC).

³*Large Catechism* 1:251 in BC, 419–420.

⁴Martin Luther, *The Sermon on the Mount and the Magnificat*, in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 21, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1956) 350.

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School, is located in the Dominican Republic. We have been visiting the school since it opened its doors in 2003. Every year since then, we have brought at least one group on a weeklong mission trip. Doulos Discovery School is a Christian, bilingual school that has 50% of its student population supported by a sponsor from the United States. Each travel group spends time serving at the school or in the community during the day, but evenings are spent in group time and meeting Dominican families. When the evening plan says it is time to have dinner at a Dominican home, it often brings anxiety to the group members. By the time the week is over, it is more often than not reflected upon as the highlight of the trip. Why? As guests, we experience amazing hospitality from a family who have minimal earthly things. But as a group, we learn the most important thing in a Dominican person's life—relationships. That learning is something we can all take home with us.

One of the gifts of going back to the same community is that there has been at least one person in the group that is a sponsor of one of the students. They became a sponsor from a previous trip. On previous trips, they have been to the homes of the students, met the parents and neighbors, eaten a meal, and maybe even played a game. The school plays an important role for these sponsors to continue to get progress reports each year. Sponsors feel connected to the student, the school, and even the country. They are able to watch how their sponsorship makes a difference in the student's life. In some cases, these sponsors have continued to support their student in post-high school academics. Those that sponsor know they can go back and visit very easily and stay connected with the family and the community. These connections have become real!

These trips have been critical in the faith life of the traveler. Travelers have seen God at work in the students, the work, the home visits, and in fellow travelers. These trips have changed the lives of the traveler, and continue to do so, long after the trip ends. After each trip, we see significant increases in volunteers getting engaged in God's world. After we have learned the gifts of the individuals, we have also found ways to get them into leadership roles of the church.

A long time ago, a member of the church challenged me on why we offered such expensive mission trips. He continued to say, "Why don't we just have the people write a check to the mission project?—it would do so much more." After I listened to him talk for several minutes, he came to his own conclusion, "I guess you cannot put a value on the change in one's heart after a trip." I agreed. ⊕

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Thus going on mission trips is so that our brothers and sisters in Christ are not looked upon as the object of our goal to fix and save but to share in the mission of Christ, that is, to preach Christ's forgiveness to each other. Does this mean we are not to see to it that our brothers and sisters' needs are to be fulfilled? No. It just means that out of Christ's mission, the fruit of the Spirit and faith, good works flow.⁵ The needs of our brothers and sisters, in the material sense, if there are any, can be fulfilled not as the demand of the law but as the fruit of the Spirit. Especially not for our glory but for our neighbor's benefit.

In a mission trip, no matter where it is we go, we are to focus on what the mission of Christ is with the understanding of the office of the keys (John 20:23, Matthew 16:19, 18:18).⁶ Every time one visits another place, locally or globally, one will be confronted by the sinfulness of this Old Kingdom. The poverty, injustice, remoteness, and challenges that the host experiences can be painful for the visitor. Guilt and shame is upon one's conscience because of one's own possessions. Our reaction usually is what we described above—the solidarity or savior syndrome, or both. Therefore, we are not there to fix or save our neighbor and walk *for* them, but to walk together proclaiming Christ's good news to one another. Thus, Christ's New Kingdom breaks into the Old.

What Luther said about Habakkuk's mission resonates with what we saw in our call as pastors and teachers of the church: "Thus our Habakkuk is a comforting prophet whose mission was to strengthen and to sustain the people, so that they would not despair of the Christ's coming, no matter how difficult the situation might appear to be. To this end he employed all means and methods to fortify their faith in the promised Christ in their hearts."⁷ This is what mission means for us, the conversation and consolation of the saints in the proclamation of the gospel.⁸ ☩

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⁵Smalcald Articles 13:2–3, BC, 325.

⁶Ibid., 7:1, BC, 321.

⁷Martin Luther, *Lectures on the Minor Prophets II: Jonah and Habakkuk*, in *Luther's Works*, vol. 19, ed. Hilton C. Oswald (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1974) 155.

⁸Smalcald Articles 4, BC, 319.