

# Misguided missions: Ten worst practices

by [Mark William Radecke D.Min.](#) in the [May 18, 2010](#) issue

Short-term mission trips continue to rise in popularity. In leading such trips and researching their impact, I've found that they can have a profound effect on the faith and life of participants, and good work is often done: people living in poverty have their needs addressed by energetic and caring people.

But the liability of badly implemented mission trips far exceeds the missed opportunities of staying home. Poorly conceived trips can distract hosts from their primary ministries, use up significant sums of money and energy on low-priority tasks and create unreasonable expectations for visible results in a short period of time. These are familiar criticisms; it's well known that short-term mission trips can be done poorly or well. Here is a brief inventory of the worst practices that can undermine the best intentions.

**Here to ogle:** Participants in short-term missions routinely report that what affects them most profoundly is getting to know their hosts, enjoying their hospitality, hearing their stories and witnessing the vitality of their faith. Hosts and partners are not like animals in a zoo. We visitors do not go to observe them; we go, at their invitation, to enter into their world and to experience—however briefly and incompletely—their realities. Dean Brackley writes eloquently about the potential impact of *norteños'* encounters with the *campesinos* of El Salvador:

If we allow them to share their suffering with us, they communicate some of their hope to us as well. The smile that seems to have no foundation in the facts is not phony; the spirit of fiesta is not an escape but a recognition that something else is going on in the world besides injustice and destruction. The poor smile because they suspect that this something is more powerful than the injustice. When they insist on sharing their tortilla with a visiting gringo, we recognize there is something going on in the world that is more wonderful than we dared to imagine.

This is the sort of encounter we want for short-term missionaries. But taking photos of makeshift dwellings and ill-clad children without permission—and without inquiring into the conditions that compel human beings to live in such circumstances in the first place—turns a mission trip into socioeconomic voyeurism.

**It's all about me:** Martin Luther described the essence of sinfulness with the phrase *homo incurvatus in se*: the person curved in on himself or herself. Of all the potential ironies of a short-term mission trip, objectifying people is perhaps the most spiritually damaging. When we fail to become acquainted with our hosts and their communities, we not only forfeit rich opportunities for accompanying them but inadvertently commodify the very people we intend to help. We take interest in them only insofar as they can help us achieve something else—which, too often, is feeling good about ourselves and what we're doing. With our culture's values as part of our baggage, we treat the mission trip as a thing to be consumed for our entertainment, edification and enjoyment.

**If this is 2010, then we must be in Tanzania:** Tanzania this year, Bosnia next year, Nicaragua the year after that, and the Philippines in year four: a different country on a different continent every year! Changing the mission trip location each year may provide variety for participants, but it subverts the goal of establishing deep and lasting relationships. Better to make a commitment to one community.

Naturally, team members will change from year to year. Different leaders may take turns. Reciprocal visits by members of the host communities may or may not be possible, given the ever-tightening constraints of border controls. The goal, however, should be to establish meaningful, mutual and ongoing relationships.

**Ethnocentrism, or “that's dumb”:** When the teams I take to Central America complete their home stays, they give each host family a small gift. Their hosts often react in a way that seems unappreciative to Americans—which has prompted more than a few participants to take offense. But that's simply the way people in that culture respond to gifts. They regard the way we gush at the mementoes they give us as peculiar, even childish. This is ethnocentrism: each is judging the other's actions by the standards of his or her own culture.

The gifts we take on these trips often have to do with time: an engraved clock, a photo calendar of Pennsylvania. But punctuality is not valued in Latin America the way it is in North America. “Where's the bus?” a participant might ask. “The driver

said she'd be here at 3:00. It's already 3:15!" I encourage participants to turn their perturbation into a question, to suspend judgment and simply ask why things are the way they are. Maybe a friend stopped by as the driver was preparing to leave home and pick us up. In her culture, it would be unthinkably rude for her to abbreviate that visit just to pick us up at three on the dot.

**Who am I to judge?** On the other hand, it's a false sense of multiculturalism that suggests that it is always inappropriate for participants to form any moral judgment about another culture. This cultural relativism is the flip side of ethnocentrism: both preclude actually taking another culture seriously.

To be sure, two weeks is far too short to understand another society's complexities. But that doesn't mean that participants must suspend all moral judgment. If the goal is to promote global awareness, then we need to equip short-term missionaries with the tools required to think critically about what they experience abroad.

**I see what your problem is:** Having an engineer on your mission team can be a mixed blessing. Engineers are trained to diagnose and repair problems; it's part of their professional DNA. They will typically go to a service site and immediately begin to calculate the most efficient approach to the tasks at hand—most efficient, that is, in their world of meaning and reference. This won't always work in another culture, and it may even be offensive.

A team I led a decade ago agreed to help lay the foundation for a modest new church. I sent a check ahead to hire someone to dig the foundation trenches before we arrived—a half day's work at most, with the proper equipment. When we got there, there was no such equipment to be seen, the job was less than half finished, and I was less than half thrilled. But as my Costa Rican friends saw it, it would be crazy to give the money to someone already rich enough to own a Bobcat; there were six unemployed adults in the community who were eager to do the work with picks and shovels for the same sum, even though it would take all six of them three full days to do it.

When we enter into our hosts' world, we do things their way.

**I have, you need:** A truck pulls into a poor community, and visitors open the back door and begin to distribute whatever it is they've brought: vitamins, food, toiletries, clothing. This may be a good model for first responders to a natural disaster. It is seldom if ever an acceptable one for mission teams. For one thing, it is undignified.

For another, it casts the *norteamericanos* in the role of beneficent givers and the recipients in the role of charity cases.

A better model is to give the donated materials to a local congregation or social-service agency and ask that local leaders distribute it. They may know the people of the community and their degree of need; they may also be familiar with unscrupulous individuals who might attempt to exploit the opportunity. What's more, this approach feeds two birds with one crumb: along with getting the donated materials to the intended recipients, it enhances the local group's ministry.

**Let's see some results:** Noel Becchetti of the Center for Student Missions tells of a local pastor in Mexico who tries to get visiting teams to help with his mission of outreach to men. Some teams, however, are dead set on building something: they want to see some (literally) concrete results. So the pastor has a wall that he has such teams work on. He has no idea what the wall will ever be or become, but building it keeps the visiting teams busy and out of his hair, and at the end of their time they can rejoice and be glad that they accomplished something tangible.

I have the privilege of seeing projects grow over the years. Team members, however, have only the perspective of their two weeks, and it isn't wrong to want to see results. When I sent photos of the church that was eventually constructed to the team members that did the foundation work described above, they were delighted and got a new perspective on the value of their labors. I now try to manage expectations, so that team members know if they are likely to begin, advance or finish a project; few are the projects that can be begun and completed in a week or two. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "I planted, Apollo watered, but God gave the increase."

**Where did you go to grad school?** It is certainly appropriate to draw on the expertise of local professors, pastors and others with advanced degrees. Some of our most powerful learning experiences, however, have come through presentations by Nicaraguan refugees and immigrants living in Costa Rica, only one of whom has completed high school. These friends have told us powerful stories of civil war and unemployment in their native land, and they have eloquently explained to us what Christ and his church have meant to them in the midst of tragic, trying and life-altering experiences.

**Carbon footprints in the sand:** The apostle Paul describes an irony that lies close to the heart of short-term mission trips: we want to do what is good, but various forms of evil can compromise our efforts. The air, bus and boat travel for one Central American trip may generate more than 41 metric tons of carbon dioxide. Contributing to the degradation of the environment is hardly consistent with the Christian faith. In an effort to offset our carbon emissions, we have made tree-planting—directed by local officials—part of recent ventures. (We’re aware, however, that experts disagree as to how effective this is.)

Or consider the practice of purchasing T-shirts for team members. How ironic would it be if such purchases supported companies that operate sweatshops exploiting the very people whose lives the mission team seeks to improve? It requires only a little research to make sure you’re buying sweatshop-free materials.

**They’ll figure it out:** When I began leading mission trips, I assumed that participants would naturally come to new understandings and integrate them into their faith and life. What I failed to appreciate was the importance of reflection—so critical that some practitioners refer to it as the “hyphen in service-learning.” When reflection is minimal or missing—when those involved in short-term missions do not ruminate on their experiences, ponder the situations of those served and relate them to their own faith—a precious opportunity is lost.

Often because of time constraints or the simple disinclination to expend mental and spiritual energy, we complete each day’s work, say a prayer and go our separate ways. Like the servant who buries the master’s treasure, we play it safe. We know we have encountered something that can challenge our convictions, deepen our discipleship and shape the contours of our own and others’ lives. Such encounters disturb our spiritual status quo. It is one thing to work alongside people living in humble circumstances; it is quite another to ask why the prosperity of a relative few is predicated upon the existence of a permanent global underclass.

We often consent to dispense with reflection or at least keep it superficial, preferring the comfort of knowing that we have done a good work—which, in most cases, we truly have—and that those we have served are at least a little better off. Their need is addressed, our guilt is assuaged, and all can return to life as we know it. But this is not transformation; it’s deformation.

Short-term mission teams travel down roads paved with good intentions; it’s important to avoid these wrong turns. Instead, those of us who lead such trips can

foster solidarity and Christian friendship with the partners alongside whom we serve, and we can create space in which all participants—guests and hosts—can ponder, reflect and grow.