






INSIGHT

THE CHRISTIAN MISSION: REFOCUSSED

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In the summer of 2007, Taylor Smith, then 15, was lying in a field on the outskirts of Los Cedros, Nicaragua. The only light was coming from above — the stars — because the government turned off the city's power every night in an effort to save money.

When he recalls the scene, his voice gets hoarse as he's fighting the emotion of the memory. This was the trip that changed his group of friends, the way he saw the world, and his future. He didn't like the people he had been hanging out with or the person he was becoming. This first trip to Nicaragua made him realize what kind of person he wanted to be and established friendships that he keeps today.

"Once I came back, I could take what I had learned about not only the world around me, but also the world within me. My own world, myself. And I could make the two align more," Smith said. "I find I was just being myself a lot more."

Smith's 2007 trip to Nicaragua was the second of five religious mission trips he took with his church between the ages of 14 and 18. In the summer of 2006, he visited Gulfport, Mississippi, to do reconstruction after Hurricane Katrina; second, he went to Jinotega, Nicaragua, in 2007 to work at an orphanage for 10 days; the third trip was to Beaufort, South Carolina, after a tropical storm; the fourth was a five-day "trip" in his native Pitt County around Greenville, North Carolina; the fifth was a second trip to Nicaragua to work at the same orphanage.

Smith's mission trips are indicative of a larger trend in the U.S. Young people, and some older people, are traveling domestically and abroad with their churches or ministries for "short-term mission trips." Money for the trip is raised ahead of time, people receive little training, and they usually perform tasks ranging from construction work — the most popular — to medical help or simple evangelism

for a few days or a couple of weeks.

Though many people believe that mission trips are worthwhile as long as they aim to help someone, others believe that if this aim is wrongly focused there will be problems, especially in cases where trips are poorly planned and overly evangelistic. Evangelism may be pointless in countries that don't follow a Christian faith or where people don't speak English as the first language. Today, few people advocate for mission trips whose only goal is evangelism or conversion. But even as mission trips have evolved over the years, a few questions have persisted: The mission team members are usually untrained, so can they make a difference? Is evangelism in foreign countries even a good idea? What are the best and worst case scenarios for mission and service trips? Do those being helped receive what they need?

A GROWING TREND, A GROWING PROBLEM

Noel Becchetti, 58, of El Cajon, California, has been involved with mission trips for 30 years. He grew up Roman Catholic and joined an organization started by one of his friends in 1988 called the Center for Student Missions. The group, originally in the San Diego area, did a lot of work around the impoverished Mexican border. Becchetti started as a volunteer for CSM, became a charter board member, and then took over the organization with his wife Kyle in 1996. They were in charge until 2008.

In 1997 Becchetti wrote an article titled, "Why Most Mission Trips Are A Waste Of Time (And How To Make Sure Yours Isn't)" for CSM's website. He said that things have improved some, but not enough, in the past 16 years. People still tend to approach these trips with their own perspective, and an idea that they are going to get to do what they want. They also expect to see major



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results from their work — whether in terms of people converted or houses built, when in reality only so much can be done during a two-week period.

“You’ve got people with virtually no experience on any level — they don’t have language experience, cultural experience,” he said. “What was being seen was these really dramatic life-changing experiences with a lot of built-in problems, like not even knowing what you were doing and not even being able to be of much help or, frankly, sometimes being a real pain to the people who might accommodate you for any number of reasons.”

Becchetti said that the focus of mission trips has changed. He referenced a book by Paul Borthwick, “Western Christians in Global Missions.” Borthwick says that 200 years ago, people signed up for missions knowing that within the first two years, about 75 percent of them would be dead.

“Diseases were going to take most of them out, and they went presuming that would be the case,” Becchetti said. “Now, you all wear the same colored T-shirts, you take a jet somewhere, you kind of call the terms of what you’re going to be willing to do or not do and you call it ‘building relationships.’”

Mission team members from the U.S. think they’re going to build meaningful relationships with non-Westerners in just a few hours, but that rarely happens. Becchetti said Borthwick highlights the glaring problem found in mission trips today — they’ve become about us, the mission team, and not about the people we’re trying to serve.

This seems true, Becchetti said, because ministries tell parents, “Well, this experience will change your kids’ lives,” instead of citing the importance of the work they will be doing. Smith, for example, repeatedly cited examples of how the trip changed him as a person, but couldn’t recall more than a few times when the people he did work for thanked him or taught

him something. Becchetti describes the experience as “an adventurous trip under the guise of mission work.”

THE PREACHING PART: AN ADDITIONAL PROBLEM?

The “all-about-me” mindset isn’t the only problem with mission trips today. Evangelism can be problematic in an increasingly open-minded world. Evangelical mission members believe they can go abroad for a few weeks and build strong enough relationships with local people to discuss religion meaningfully.

Smith, who no longer defines himself as religious, said on each of his mission trips he and his team members would do physical labor in the form of building a house or a fence, fixing a kitchen, or painting rooms. But they would also host time for prayer and reflection. In Nicaragua, they held a daily vacation Bible school for local children, and they walked around with a translator to invite people to events. Smith, whose church was Methodist, said they wanted to educate the children about God, but didn’t aim to convert them. Still, even as a teenager, he worried about forcing his religion on children with whom he didn’t even share a language. He worked on construction projects rather than the Bible school.

“In hindsight, I don’t necessarily agree to going from door to door to invite kids to a vacation Bible school run by well-off American white kids,” Smith said. “That’s why I was much more inclined to help out in a way that was more physical and hands on and had less religious interference.”

Smith said that in Nicaragua, the children’s parents were religious and agreed to or were happy about their children learning basic Christian principles. But his church had to use translators to help children understand the Bible school lessons linguistically, and there was no guarantee they understood the lessons fundamentally.

Dennis Horton, associate professor of ministry at Baylor University, said ministries must build strong relationships over time before preaching religion in foreign countries. Christians today are less likely to lock foreigners in a room and force them to learn about religion. Horton said that kind of evangelism is rare today and obviously the wrong approach to mission work. If evangelism takes place on mission trips it should be a reprieve from any violence in the area, not an addition to it.

“Like-minded Christians are going to want to share about (their faith), especially in areas where you see religion can be so oppressive,” Horton said. “But you should do that through ways where relationships are built, not just standing out on street corners and preaching and not being sensitive to what’s appropriate for the culture.”

Smith said that for his trip, religion played an integral part, but not in the way he would have thought. He didn’t have a “coming to Jesus” moment, but rather had a moment where he saw the importance of the principles taught in religion that also drive mission work — these principles didn’t include the need to spread the word of God.

“It was funded by my church, it was inspired by my church, it was inspired by my own faith, and so I would have never had those experiences to begin with without religiosity,” Smith said. “This trip was funded by people who believed that we were doing good things for the world in the name of religion. So, whether or not I agree with that personally is kind of beside the point.”

“The point that I think a lot of people are missing from what Jesus Christ as a religious figure and even as an individual was pushing for was not transformation in the next life, but transformation within our own existence, within life, here and now,” Smith said. “A lot of people see the end game of Christianity as getting into heaven, as finding salvation, as having the afterlife — in a basic sense, getting into heaven. And I think a lot of Jesus’ teachings were more geared toward giving people the platform and initiative to bring that

heaven to here and now. The point of missionary work should be to go out and for people to have that basic end of suffering and to more or less make heaven on earth – which is clichéd, but it shouldn't be just about going out and spreading the word."

A RIGHTEOUS SOLUTION

Becchetti said there are a few things that ministries and their members should do to solve the "all-about-me" problem, so that mission members get a life-changing experience while adequately addressing the needs of the people. Ministries must be willing to devote time to building real relationships in communities so that they get an undoctored look at the most important issues.

"You have to go in presuming this is going to take time and it's going to be difficult, and generally people (in the foreign country) are only going to want to tell us what they think we want to hear," Becchetti said.

Becchetti said Westerners must approach mission trips without the assumption that they are going

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to be the wealthy, more educated people helping the poor, uneducated foreigners; and rather, with a mindset that they have something to learn. The people being helped have just as much to offer as those doing the helping.

"If we can keep working at those two things: positioning our groups where they are of some benefit ... and also position our friends in the city to say, 'Look, you really have some things to teach here, you have some things to offer,' because again, like it or not, people in disadvantaged situations feel disadvantaged," he said. "Like it or not, they will approach outsiders as 'Well, you're smart, you're rich, you know everything, we don't,' but we want to say that's not really true. If you can view yourselves as teachers and not just recipients, you have some things to bring to the table."

A BEST CASE SCENARIO

Smith said the experience that hit him hardest from his five mission trips came during his first trip to Nicaragua, when they visited the city's dump. It was a dump for trash, but it was also where the poorest people lived.

"There were people living in houses made out of cardboard boxes, children on the ground naked and digging through trash to find food, and burning trash everywhere and the smell was horrible," Smith said. "There were starving cattle walking around everywhere. It was pretty much like every documentary you've seen about the worst of the worst world poverty. We were in it."

For a 15-year-old boy, he said, the experience was emotional and frightening. He said that he came to realize that his problems weren't that bad.

"You see

UNICEF commercials on TV and you see a little African child walking around in nothing but a diaper, and it's like, 'oh that's so sad,' but when you're there and you see it with your eyes and you smell the smells and you see the look on these people's faces – it made it real and it made that notion of underdeveloped countries and poverty real and tangible and something that I have a memory for," Smith said.

He said that he had two kinds of realizations on his trips: those that were physically affirming, where he could see the physical progress of his work, and those that were spiritually affirming, where he learned something that contributed to his maturity. The spiritually affirming realizations were grounded in religion.

"The spiritually reaffirming ones were like, in Nicaragua, the day that we climbed the mountain in the backyard of the orphanage and looked out and you can literally see for miles of just beautiful rolling landscape," Smith said. "It was moments like that where you could take in the vastness of what is the world and what is life. And it kind of puts you in a situation where you can step outside of yourself and realize that this world is pretty big and there are much more important things going on other than what's going on in your own personal life. What helped me mature as a person over the years was having these moments where I could step outside of myself, and for that, I thank my religion."

Such life-altering changes can blossom as a result of mission trips when people are acting selflessly and the concerns of those helped are adequately addressed. Horton, the professor of ministry at Baylor, has recorded some of these in a study about what college-age students get out of mission trips.

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He wrote about the study in a blog post for The Huffington Post.

"Of the 32 students interviewed after their trips, 29 said the experience had changed the way they see other cultures, with 17 mentioning increased respect and concern," the article stated. "Almost half said they were less likely to see their culture as inherently superior. Most who had been exposed to poverty on their trips said they had a greater appreciation for what they have — or even disgust for American greed — but only a few mentioned concrete steps they had taken to lessen their materialism."

Some of those statistics seem reaffirming, but some are shocking: Not even half said they were less likely to see their culture as inherently superior?

Horton said that this study was given to students who had been on only one domestic or foreign mission trip, and that the stats get higher the more trips a student takes. The study also found that the impact on students is greater and lasts longer if trip leaders hold follow-up meetings to solidify what students learned on the trips.

"Multiple trips and longer trips have much greater impacts than just taking one trip. And it also depends on a couple other factors: how the students and team members are trained before they go on the trip, how they're mentored on that trip, and then any of the formation that takes place after they get back home," Horton said. "To really have good formation when it comes to materialism and ethnocentrism and just care and concern for others, you've got to have good preparation beforehand, some really strong mentoring while the students or team members are on that trip, and then the followup when they get back to the city, so they can say, 'Yeah, we did that down in Mexico, but now what are we doing for the Hispanic community in our own city?'"

The more teams try to take what they did on a trip and apply it in their lives, Horton said, the more the experience will be transforming.

WHAT ABOUT THEM?

In a follow-up study focused on the people being helped, Horton found that mission trips are generally effective and wanted by those they are sent to.

For the second study, Horton said he and his research team interviewed 100 long-term missionaries, host partners, and nationals who worked with short-term mission groups. They asked them about pitfalls and whether the short-term teams contributed to the ministry, or general goal, of the host partners.

"Fifty percent said absolutely, the teams helped us advance our ministry, helped us make new contacts, and we saw a lot of advantages to having short-term teams come in," Horton said.

"Thirty percent had some reservations, but said that as long as the teams are run well and the host partners are the leaders in setting the agenda, it has a tremendous impact on their ministry. But they weren't quite as enthusiastic. That's 80 percent saying as long as the teams are appropriately trained, and you have a good selection of team members, you have the host partner setting the agenda, they are happy to receive teams as long as it's not too many teams. But only 20 percent — 10 said they never want to see another short-term mission team again and the other 10 percent said they weren't that helpful to our particular kind of ministry that we're doing, so it was not beneficial to them."

Overall, when mission trips are done in the right way and with the right goals in mind, Horton found that those we hope to help are being helped. When embarking on a mission trip, team members should focus on what they can learn from and accomplish with the people in that country — often, that



(Left) Smith said the orphanage's hammocks allowed his team to enjoy the cool weather. (Right) Smith is holding Daisy, a child at the Jinotega orphanage. Daisy, though not an orphan, lived at the orphanage with her family because her single mother had only one leg, and they were too poor to afford housing. Photos courtesy of Taylor Smith

may not include overt evangelism. Culturally aware and open-minded mission teams can create stronger cross-cultural experiences. Smith said the only problem is that the high missionaries get from helping others usually won't last for long.

"You are left feeling with, a lot of times, with this sense of accomplishment but at the same time, it's paired with this sense of not accomplishing anything, which can be really tough to contend with, especially when you're an idealistic little teenager," Smith said. "We could feel what we tangibly did in one place, but then could see how so very much needed to be done elsewhere. It's a matter of perspective with that sort of sentiment because in a way that sentiment can be inspiring, but also defeating ... There's no way you can do it all as a single person, but the fact that you can do something should offer some inspiration, which for me it did — that's why I keep doing things. That's why I went back."