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13. Mission Trips, Culture and Causality

A Proposal to Re-Think How North Americans Religiously Engage the World

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Abstract

Analyzing the current reality of contemporary international mission trips reveals deep problems with the way participants are formed, oriented, educated, and engaged as they navigate cultural, social, political, and economic differences. A growing body of literature argues that many overseas mission, service, and education trips do more harm than good. By way of response, best practices in community-based service-learning as well as resources from the Society of Jesus can be utilized to respond to the dominance of the current model. Current international trips for purposes as varied as mission or service usually include little or no preparation, minimal expectations for language engagement, little or no knowledge of the host community, a lack of reflection on site, and no follow-up upon return to process and integrate what was witnessed. A better approach would include orienting participants to engage host communities with respect; emphasizing trust through relationships; encouraging accompaniment rather than doing for; ensuring research, reflection, accountability, and sustainability; and educating participants about structures that cause poverty. It is possible to

salvage the contemporary focus on short-term trips, but such salvaging requires better planning, deeper investment in formation, authentic engagement with the host community, and honest, reflective integration upon return.

Keywords: international mission trips, service-learning, faith and justice, study abroad, poverty studies

Introduction

Imagine the following scenario: a group of students arrive at the Omaha airport from China. They all wear bright neon shirts that say, "Jesus Loves You Which is Why I Serve" (in Chinese). They stay together chatting in their language as they board a very nice bus for a downtown hotel. Each day they travel together to an orphanage in North Omaha; half the group plays with the children – whose language they do not speak – while the other half paints the outside of the orphanage, which has already been painted four times this year. The Chinese group eats together, prays together, returns to the hotel each night together, and spends virtually all their time with each other – always in their own language. After six days at the orphanage, playing with the children and painting, they travel to Omaha's Old Market to shop for the afternoon. The next day they leave a donation at the orphanage and are bussed to the airport where they board a flight to return to China.

One might be curious about this trip. What did the Chinese group think they accomplished while in Omaha? What did they learn and understand about the city of Omaha, about North Omaha, and the United States? Did their religious perspectives inform their understandings of what they saw, did, and experienced? How did they understand the motto on their T-shirts after their visit? How was their perspective influenced by their own culture and nationality? How did the fact they could not directly engage people in their own language influence their experience? Finally, in what way was this trip a "mission trip"?

This paper begins with an assertion that most North Americans experience global reality through their religious quest for experiences through trips to poor and oppressed communities in other countries. It proposes to unmask this model, with its many deficiencies, and offer a new set of principles for changing what has become a rite of passage for many young people. It is written from the perspective of an academic with twenty years of experience leading students on short terms missions, travel courses, and two years directing a semester abroad program. Many of the mistakes made by North Americans overseas have been made by the author. He shares these mistakes, and how to mitigate them, to inform others of the harm that can be done when the proper orientation, formation, action and re-integration of trip participants are not adequately accomplished.

The Contemporary International Mission Model

Mission trips have become opportunities for religious consumption. This is different from traditional missionary activity, which was imperialistic from a Euro-centric worldview. Religion in colonial times was often used to justify or validate the rule or authority of a nation or empire in the name of God (Kelly: 44-45). Today, the model has shifted to a religious framing of experiences which are consumed through visits to poor and marginalized communities. While there is a "using" that is occurring, it is usually not the explicit attempt by participants to justify or validate the authority of a nation or empire or to keep these

communities dependent on that empire. For various reasons, usually a combination of ignorance, the inability to communicate, and a lack of self-awareness, the contemporary model for international mission trips is deeply flawed and is often unintentionally culturally imperialistic. These flaws concretely influence how North Americans religiously perceive and act toward other peoples who are poor and marginalized. Contrary to their purpose, short mission trips often perpetuate stereotypes about the causes of poverty, sustain rather than reduce prejudice, and create a cognitive and psychological dissonance that participants find difficult to reconcile upon their return home. By way of response, most of the shortcomings of contemporary international mission trips can be addressed by the best practices of academic community-based service-learning as well as the Jesuit model for a "faith that does justice."

In his graduate thesis, William Taylor argues convincingly that short-term mission trips often have the exact opposite effect of their intent (2). By analyzing the narratives of short-term missionaries through the qualitative methods of social science research, he discovered that these experiences legitimate U.S. perspectives on poverty and create a psychological dissonance nearly impossible to overcome and, contrary to much public opinion, do NOT transform participants. According to Taylor, "Short-term missions did not radically transform participants. Instead the change is a slight amplification of existing beliefs that reinforce the status quo" (iv). Similarly, Robert Lupton notes, "Contrary to popular belief, most mission trips and service projects do not: empower those being served, engender healthy cross-cultural relationships, improve quality of life, relieve poverty, change the lives of participants [or] increase support for long-term mission work" (15-16).

A brief overview on the popularity of international missions is helpful: "Explicit or implicit definitions of international short-term missions commonly describe temporary, volunteer actions that have an evangelical component and are primarily Protestant Christian and originate in the U.S." (Taylor: 6). The number of churchgoers who have participated in short-term mission trips grew by 630% between 1996-2001. Over the past twenty years virtually every faith-based organization has expanded their mission outreach and their supporters have become more engaged in such missions (Taylor: 5). A Princeton University study in 2005 noted that 1.6 million American church members took mission trips abroad for an average of 8 days at a cost of $2.4 billion dollars (Taylor: 3). Defined this way, it is not clear if this considers the many school-based programs which send high school students for 7 days of latrine-digging or house painting.

The popularity of short-term missions is forming a generation of North American Christians and how they perceive poverty, the "other," and God's role in all of this. Thus, this topic is essential for understanding religion in a global context. "This movement is transforming the way North American Christians are engaging the world. But it is a grassroots and populist phenomenon almost completely divorced from scholarship, from missiology, and from seminary education" (Taylor: 13).

Noel Becchetti, former president of the Center for Student Missions, outlines three concrete problems with the current model of mission trips: 1) A desire to control the situation; 2) a desire to define what is "ministry;" and, 3) a desire to see certain kinds of results. While these problems apply especially to religious mission groups, they share many characteristics of short-term immersion trips as well. Thus, the fundamental problem is that foreign groups

attempt to enter a cross-cultural situation, often encounter a different language as well as different values, norms, cultural rules, and methods of thinking and acting radically different from their own, and then try to control it. This is the crux of the issue: a lack of cultural intelligence undergirds a problematic understanding of God and leads to views which legitimate poverty and reinforce misconceptions about the world.

Cultural Intelligence for Mission Groups

In their work on cultural intelligence, David Thomas and Kerr Inkson point out that "where interpersonal interaction is taking place across cultural boundaries, the potential for misunderstanding and failure is compounded" (9). Among the many intercultural failures noted by these authors, the following stand out in relation to short-term mission trips: 1) being unaware of the key features and biases of our own culture; 2) feeling threatened or uneasy when interacting with people who are culturally different; and 3) being unable to understand or explain the behavior of others who are culturally different (12). To remedy this lack of cultural intelligence, the authors suggest three steps worth considering. First, visiting groups need to acquire *knowledge* of the culture they are visiting and the fundamental principles of cross-cultural interaction. Second, participants need to practice *mindfulness*. Third, trip participants need to develop cross-cultural *skills* and become competent in a wide range of situations. Knowledge, mindfulness, and skills constitute the keys to orienting, forming, and preparing groups to travel to other cultures. The insights gained by utilizing these steps will suggest alternative understandings of "mission," "God's will," and the purpose of the trips altogether.

Knowledge

One useful working definition of culture understands it as consisting "of shared mental programs that condition individuals' responses to their environment" (Thomas and Inkson: 23). If it is shared and it is other than our own, then a new culture is one that we do not participate in. Culture cannot be reduced to external acts or behaviors – it goes much deeper. These deeply embedded mental programs emerge from a place and time and thus are historically contextual. Culture is shared, learned, and enduring and has a powerful influence on behavior. It is systematic and organized, and largely invisible. The visible "externals" of culture are often described as the "tip of the iceberg," where 90% of the iceberg is under water (Thomas and Inkson: 26-29).

In conversations about culture, cultural sensitivity, and cultural differences in orientation talks or trip preparation, there is often a focus solely on the externals – what participants can see, hear, taste, touch or smell. Such conversations do not attend to the sets of assumptions, meanings, and values about life that externals express or convey. Thomas and Inkson distinguish between an "individualist culture" and a "collectivist culture" (33). In an individualist culture, "people are most concerned about the consequences of actions for themselves, not others. They prefer activities conducted on one's own or in relatively private interactions with friends." In a collectivist culture, "people primarily view themselves as members of groups and collectives rather than as autonomous individuals. They are concerned about the effects of actions on these groups and the approval of other people in their groups." (Thomas and Inkson: 33). These are quite different manners of perceiving and acting in the

world, and they explain many of the cross-cultural failures by North American groups. North America and Western Europe are overwhelmingly individualist cultures, whereas most of the Third World, where mission groups are usually sent, are collectivist cultures. If the Haitian proverb "We see from where we stand" is true, then we are seeing the world from very different places (Diggs: 1).

Considering this deeper culture, let us return to the efforts by mission groups to control the situation in a culture they often do not even know. Because of this tendency to dictate, mission partners often divert visiting groups to meaningless (in their framework) tasks to fit their control grid. Think of it from the perspective of the visiting group. According to Jo Ann Van Engen, a person involved with ministry in Central America for 30 years with the Association for a More Just Society, short-terms groups that want "to solve problems quickly, . . . almost always do work that could be done (and usually done better) by people of the country they visit," and require a "great deal of time and coordination by their hosts" (2).

In the meantime, mission partners are not working on development in their own context, but rather managing teams of volunteers who really do not contribute much and who distract them from the work they should and could be doing. Neverthessless, there are strong financial incentives to host such groups. Becchetti notes that if we enter certain environments with cultural blinders on, we miss the fact that we, North Americans, come from what could be characterized as a "linear culture" and often enter "non-linear" cultural communities. Our culture is task-oriented while many other cultures are people-oriented (2). Without adequate preparation for the differences in culture, misunderstandings easily arise. Often when serving as Director of Creighton University's *Encuento Dominicano* program I witnessed significant cultural miscues by my students. This was understandable given the differences in culture that often colored the interpretation of the immersion experience. Once, while walking around a community in the Dominican Republic checking on students on a ten-day immersion, I saw a family seated in the shade with one of my students for their post-lunch chat time. I asked the parents of the family how things were going and they said they were having a wonderful time with my student just chatting and getting to know each other. My student asked me in English why he was wasting his time, just "sitting there" and "doing nothing" – he missed the cultural significance of the moment.

Mindfulness

The clash of task-oriented participants with people-oriented communities leaves both sides feeling the dissonance. Outside groups often demand tasks that may not be helpful to a community. These groups often come in with more power and money than their host community, and are largely unaware of how this can easily tempt their partners into telling them exactly what they want to hear. It is therefore very important to ask some fundamental questions about the trip itself. What are they doing in mission trips, how are they defining the purpose of these trips, and why does that matter? It matters, because visiting groups can easily presume their own cultural script if they are not mindful. Mindfulness is basically paying attention to context and its role in human interaction.

> For most of us, cultural cruise control makes our own culture the center of
> our mental universe and causes us to regard all others as deviant. Scripts from
> other cultures are not considered, and, if practiced by others, are likely to be

unnoticed, ignored, or misunderstood. Even if what we learn is simply unease in the presence of those from other cultures, or a feeling that they are odd, this discomfort is likely to be built into our cruise control (Thomas and Inkson: 49).

People who participate in mission trips often explain the reasons for the trip in vague terms. We are going to "help," we are going to "make a difference," we are going to support those who need it, help the "unfortunate," etc. While these may be the honest intentions of well-meaning people, there is a lack of critical reflection on both motives and methods. The results of such trips often reinforce currently held beliefs and do not transform the participants' understandings of new realities. Concretely, a lack of mindfulness can result in selective perception (seeing only part of reality), social categorization (placing people in our own cultural categories), as well as stereotyping and attribution rather than simple observation. An example can help illustrate some of these possible intercultural failures. Shortly after picking up a group of students from the airport in the Dominican Republic the bus pulled up to a stoplight next to a young woman with her family on a motor scooter. There was a child in front of her on the seat, two behind, and a toddler balancing on the handlebars. No person was wearing a helmet. One student in the bus said with absolute conviction as they looked out the bus window, "I can't believe how irresponsible that mother is!" The group had been in the country for thirty minutes, but the student was attributing judgment to behavior in a context they knew virtually nothing about. Later during the semester, I reminded that student of her exclamation. She acknowledged her ignorance and stated that she now realized it would be difficult for that young mother to transport herself or her family in other ways.

Mindfulness is a skill that needs to be taught by those orientating and forming any group that will travel to another culture. Concretely, mindfulness means "simultaneously paying attention to external situations, monitoring our own thoughts and feelings, and regulating the knowledge and skills we use" (Thomas and Inkson: 54). This can be taught through simulations, role-playing, case studies, storytelling, and a variety of other interactive ways to teach participants how complex intercultural interaction can be. With a basis in some cultural knowledge and a commitment to mindfulness, participants can overcome some of the problems with intercultural encounters, but these two alone are not enough. Cross-cultural skills are the final necessary component and these must be modeled by trip leaders.

Cross-Cultural Skills

The key to cross-cultural skills is to develop a repertoire that includes relational skills, tolerance for uncertainty, empathy, perceptual acuity, and adaptability (Thomas and Inkson: 60). These presuppose knowledge and mindfulness and operationalizes them in concrete situations. An example will help illustrate this. During a recent summer in Lima, Peru, the students in a study abroad immersion program constructed a home for a family in a poor slum. The family had been chosen by the community partners who consulted the community at large and everyone agreed this was a good project. After finishing the home and moving the family in, the students were ecstatic that they had made a difference, albeit for one family. The next year I returned to visit the family in their house, but I was surprised to see only the father of the family there. He informed me that his wife and children had decided to visit her mother for a long term stay in another city. When I inquired about this with our community partners,

I was informed that the father of the family had been beating his wife and she decided to leave with her children. What was the source of their conflict? She had wanted her name on the title of their new home.

We had known about *machismo* in Latin America – the cultural reality of male domination and exploitation – but we were not aware of its extent. Had we been more mindful of gender issues and more explicit in how we shared resources, this conflict could have been avoided. From that point on we only built homes for single-women with children, because we did not want another family forced out of what was rightfully theirs. Cross-cultural skills do not follow a set pattern, rather they are adaptable to whatever the situation calls for. Following this incident with the family, we men who lead the study abroad summer immersion interact very differently with the indigenous women we serve with our students. As we continue to learn and grow, our cultural behavior will improve as well.

What is lacking in most of the mission trips I have witnessed is an explicit effort to acquire cultural knowledge, live in mindfulness that is both cultural and theological, and learn new cross-cultural skills. Are North Americans aware of our own cultural hard-wiring? Do we understand how our own cultural awareness can influence our theological perspectives about God and influence how we perceive others and why? Are we reflective and self-critical about the interactions we engage in that create tension or dissonance for host communities? The consequences of ignoring these questions can be devastating. It is largely these consequences that help explain many of Taylor's findings that are confirmed through how people understood the poverty and marginalization they witnessed.

Perspectives on Poverty

Following his interviews of participants of short term missions, Taylor emphasizes the following:

> Although beliefs varied widely, several distinct patterns emerged. First, innate and cultural deficiency theories were common. Implicitly or explicitly, these theories identify some flaw in the character, culture, or biology of indigent people. Second, respondents viewed poverty as inevitable. Rather than seeing poverty as the predictable outcome of specific social arrangements, this fatalistic belief attributes poverty to supra-individual, non-structural forces like God's will, chance or destiny. Although all informants formulated some structural explanations for poverty, like histories of oppression, absence of a middle class, poor education, and government corruption, these explanations tended to be subordinate to individualistic and fatalistic theories (47).

Deficiency theories attribute the state or condition of a people to an innate or cultural inferiority and ultimately blame the poor for their poverty. This explanation is common in developing countries when those from higher social/economic classes characterize problems of poverty and/or inequality in their *own* context. Those "campesinos" are lazy, say many wealthy Dominicans, those "Haitians" are ignorant say many Dominicans, or those "indios" are superstitious, say the Peruvian elite – these are common refrains. Often these cultural deficiency answers are framed in opposition to modern progress or technology, other times in opposition to a North American work ethic or ideals, but either way these explanations by

those unfamiliar with deep culture as described earlier would be hard-pressed to explain it any other way. Left to their own explanations and lacking proper formation and background, how else could foreign groups explain the poverty they see?

A key aspect of understanding another culture is coming to a deeper awareness and understanding of one's own. If a person is unaware of their own cultural hard-wiring, for example, the mythic individualism of North American culture, they cannot see that the explanations they offer for realities often reflect their own views (Bellah: 144-47). But for this reason, "psychological reductionist and individualistic interpretation of the persistence of poverty resonates with popular U.S. blame-the-victim discourse" (Bourgois: 11905). Two consequences emerge from these perspectives which are injurious to the interaction between North American groups and their host communities. Both emerge from ongoing attitudes toward global poverty. First, the local people, who are viewed as culturally inferior, are dealt with paternalistically – that is, their own agency is undercut from a lack of respect. Second, charity focused on symptoms is embraced instead of justice focused on causes of social problems. Charity is viewed as the ideal response because of the perception one cannot change the inevitably of the people's condition – one can only treat poverty's symptoms. If poverty and marginalization are understood by unreflective foreigners as the result of cultural deficiencies, then "blame-the-victim discourse" can only continue. This is consistent with "free-market, corporate, capitalist ideologies that have been melded with Christianity in recent decades in the U.S." (Taylor: 59). While "God helps those, who help themselves" may have been written in Poor Richard's Almanack in 1736 – today it could summarize a cultural understanding of the failure of global peoples to escape poverty today.

The inevitability of poverty took on three forms in the findings of Taylor:

> First, some view of poverty as a social problem that is infinitely opaque rather than the predictable outcome of particular social arrangements. The second is a view of poverty as a universal principle that constitutes an inevitable feature of social life. The third and most common fatalistic belief was that poverty is the result of God's will (60).

On the first view, "To say poverty is inexplicably complex may be a way to ease the cognitive tension between ideas that blame an existing social, political and economic order and one that blames the poor themselves" (Taylor: 62). If the phenomenon is an unknowable mystery, it makes little sense to investigate or endorse a perspective. And, because one cannot really know the causes, one can avoid blaming anything concrete.

On the second view, thinking about a response to poverty in individualistic terms buttresses the belief that poverty is irreversible. If one does not understand the causes of poverty outside of the failure of individuals or cultures, then structural responses to structural problems will remain outside of one's purview. Without an understanding or explanation of a response beyond one's individual generosity or commitment, poverty becomes inevitable.

On the third view, Taylor found that most participants he interviewed "posited that poverty and economic hierarchies are a part of God's plan" (65). "If class positions are divinely ordained as some of the participants suggested, then there were clear reasons for Christians *not* to give their money away and *not* to challenge economic hierarchies" (65). Thus, poverty

and wealth were religious issues, not social or economic ones. The response to inequality is thus an individual commitment to be more generous because God expects that of the rich. Taylor found that "while some participants were torn by the inability of their current belief system to account for the poverty they witnessed, they found comfort in the same system" (68). Simultaneous belief that God has a perfect plan for humanity and that God is unfathomable allows mission participants to maintain beliefs that seem confusing, wrong, even contradictory – everything comes from God – wealth and poverty included. Where does this leave mission participants?

> Fatalistic beliefs about poverty as an inevitable, inexplicable, or divinely ordained condition may help participants explain some of the tension resulting from existing discordant beliefs without seeking alternatives. For example, if a short-term participant becomes aware that shared individualistic explanations are insufficient, adopting a fatalistic view of poverty reduces the same cognitive tension without the participant having to significantly change, alter or modify beliefs. The belief that poverty is inevitable has profound political implications. Hopelessness is political: it denies the impetus to explore alternative social arrangements that might address poverty. Denying the possibilities of alternatives serves short-term mission participants because it justifies, de facto, the existing hierarchies and power structures they benefit from (Taylor: 72).

Ultimately, this results in a perspective that legitimates poverty. "If deficiency theories imply little *should* be done about poverty and fatalistic theories imply little *can* be done, then why do short-term mission participants try to help the poor?" (Taylor: 72). When asked if participants have a responsibility to the poor, many had difficulty articulating "how religious commitments relate to political commitments" (Taylor: 72). This divorce between religious faith and social and political engagement, especially among North Americans, is well documented (Paul VI). Nevertheless, several themes emerged from Taylor's interviews:

> Most short-term mission participants view their responsibility to the poor as a responsibility to God to help the poor. That indirect responsibility is seen primarily as a responsibility to evangelize to the poor. Short-term mission participants view responsibility falling primarily on the individual and even while they concede that most individualistic responses to poverty are ineffectual, they do not accept broad based social responsibility and deny large-scale poverty reduction is even possible. For most participants, responsibility to the poor, through God is a religious commitment, not a political one (72-73).

To summarize, when poverty is the fault of individuals or cultures, little should be done. If poverty is inevitable, little can be done beyond individual actions and commitments.

Community Based Learning and Jesuit Perspectives

Most of the cross-cultural failures in the previous analysis of short-term mission experiences come from what could be termed the framing narrative. The framing narrative is the overall explanation, often implicit, for *why* a group is going somewhere, what its purpose will be once there, and how it will evaluate the success or failure of the trip. If the framing

narrative is a narrow Christian understanding of what it means to evangelize, with all the attendant presuppositions involved, there is little one can do to change either the negative outcomes regarding perspectives on poverty or the level of personal change participants experience. Most evangelical mission groups believe they are converting those they visit to Christianity – or at least improving the Christianity they practice. Many other mission groups, instead, believe they are contributing something economically or through their physical labor that their hosts are unable to do. Neither set of groups perceives their encounter with the foreign "other" as a source for their *own* conversion, or that they can learn anything from the poverty or marginalization they find themselves in. Their entire framing narrative usually emphasizes the difference the group will make. Their frame is thus triumphalist in that they see themselves as "givers" or "savers" but not as recipients of anything positive. This lack of mutuality is felt by the recipient. According to Rachel Noemi Remen:

> Serving is different from helping. Helping is based on inequality; it is not a relationship between equals. When you help you use your own strength to help those of lesser strength. If I'm attentive to what's going on inside of me when I am helping, I find that I'm always helping someone who is not as strong as I am, who is needier than I am. People feel this inequality. When we help we may inadvertently take away from people more than we could ever give them; we may diminish their self-esteem, their sense of worth, integrity, and wholeness.

"What can you learn from the poor and marginalized you will encounter?" is a deeply uncomfortable question for most U.S. students. The cross-cultural failures discussed here can largely be avoided if the framing narrative shifts from one of triumphalist evangelizing or saving, by whatever means, to learning from and accompanying others. Experience teaching and guiding U.S. groups overseas has revealed that Americans view the rest of the world in a particular way. To put it bluntly, "American exceptionalism" has made its way deeply into the national psyche. Many North Americans believe they live in a country that is better than other countries. This perception is largely driven by our definition of success, which is almost exclusively framed in terms of material prosperity. Participants on mission trips and travel courses are overwhelmed by the material poverty they witness, in part, because material prosperity is determinative of our own identity. John Kavanaugh argues that U.S. culture shapes people through what he names the "Commodity Form": "The content of the Commodity Form is marketing, producing, and consuming; and its result is a revelation of ourselves as replaceable objects whose goal and value are dependent upon how much we market, produce, and consume" (64). John Markey goes even further:

> In the U.S. context, the Liberal Creed lies at the heart of the cultural and social ethos in a way that actually transformed the ancient vices of envy and greed into virtues. Rather than challenging and tempering envy as a dangerous human tendency, U.S. culture accepted envy as a valid expression of individual and personal striving for success and self-fulfillment. This fundamental shift has had a number of negative consequences for U.S. social life and continues to profoundly impact the experience of almost anyone who is exposed to the U.S. social ethos (59).

Material poverty is thus met with revulsion, pity, and a "can do" attitude that we visitors can fix what is lacking for others if we just work hard enough. Students then return from short-term trips proud of the latrines they have dug or the houses they have painted – something residents of those communities could have done better and more efficiently.

The effort to shift a framing narrative is difficult, time-consuming, and counter-cultural. Such a shift requires a change in both the expectations and methods for leading these programs. The traditional chaperone whose job it is to limit liability and keep people safe has never been sufficient. The following principles are suggestions for how to respond to widespread North American attitudes of triumphalism and, thus, misunderstanding. These principles emerge from three main sources: *Doing Good . . . Says Who?* by Connie Newton and Fran Early, the Faith-Justice Process advocated by the Social Justice and Ecology Secretariat of the Society Jesus, and best-practices in international service learning. The following outline is a way forward, if they are embraced, taught, and used to frame a new narrative. It is possible for short-term trips to be constructive cross-cultural experiences for both hosts and guests.

Principle #1: Respect and Value the People You Will Encounter

Respecting and valuing others is first and foremost a choice (Newton and Early: xiii). It is a choice to enter relationality already having decided that all human beings are worthy of love and accompaniment and that ultimately agency must come from within the community itself if any real change will occur. This principle explicitly addresses the core problem of short-term missions: North Americans are not "helping," "saving," or "rescuing" sub-human beings; rather, they are recognizing the innate dignity of all people by choosing to serve those communities they visit. Additionally, there will be no real change in the community's situation unless that change emerges from within the community. Thus, at best, visiting groups understand themselves as encouraging and cooperating with agency that already exists within that community. This requires an awareness of North American perceptions of poverty and a realization that the causes of poverty have multiple explanations. This principle has many aspects.

a) Know what the purpose of the trip is, have clear objectives in a framing narrative that participants understand and clear outcomes to measure whether such a trip has been successful. Anticipatory reflection can be very helpful here (Dickel). The Peru Faculty Led Program Abroad program at Creighton University begins with five months of formation and orientation. We begin by asking students, "why do you want to go Peru?" They are asked to articulate their own reasons. We then respond with the purpose of the program as we frame it. Often, these purposes are very different – and this leads to the second point.

b) Require pre-trip knowledge of self and reflection upon the source of *originating* perspectives on poverty, difference, culture, sexual identity, race, ethnicity, etc. (Dickel). There are many ways to do this, but until participants understand themselves as situated in a context with social, cultural, political, and economic understandings inherited by them, they will struggle to see others through anything other than deficiency theories or fatalistic categories. Many educators, both secular and religious, assume that reflection is both possible and accessible to our students – more often, reflection must be taught and modeled.

c) Require pre-trip knowledge of cultural, historical and social issues in the context to be visited (Reisch: 98). If foreign groups cannot bother to learn something about where they are going, do they really belong in another person's context as anything but a tourist? Responsibility lies with the leaders of a group to ensure that participants know something about the context to be entered.

Principle #2: Build Trust through Relationships

When participants shift their framing narrative from one of triumphal evangelizing or service to relationship building, some important things occur (Newton and Early: xiii). The purpose of the trip is to encounter an "other" on the pilgrimage of life as we all journey toward God. If we are attentive, we may learn things from the poor and marginalized that result in mutual growth in faith, hope, and love. Building on the first principle, this focus on relationships extends beyond a project, work, or initiative and recognizes that relationships will mutually affect both participants and the community. As the Society of Jesus advises, "We accompany others and let ourselves be accompanied. We become true companions" (Social Justice and Ecology Secretariat: 3.1.1). This connection to others results in a commitment to their betterment and is the beginning of solidarity. But how does this accompaniment happen, especially with a lack of linguistic skills and cultural awareness?

a) *Leaders* of short-term trips must have the ability to communicate with community partners in their own language. Relationships require the capacity to communicate. Additionally, leaders have the responsibility to ensure that participants can communicate with people of a host community either through language training or by providing interpreters who allow participants to have conversations of substance and depth. This presupposes a relationship between the leaders and the people visited. Often it can be helpful if there is a relationship that a group can piggyback on and thus enter the possibility of deeper interactions.

b) Frame any task to be done as an opportunity to interact with people, not simply to build, paint, or make something. Common work can lead to deeper relationships, which lead to the possibility of mutual accompaniment.

c) Healthy relationality built upon mutual respect and value are based on listening, not dictating. If there are needs in a community, the community will identify them and the ways it may wish to address them. If the community cannot do this with a group, there is insufficient relationality to justify a visit. There must be real dialogue entered into by group leaders and community members *prior to any trip*, which is explained to participants so they understand the delicacy of the relationships and the trust implicit in them.

d) Require at least minimum proficiency in the language. Most people can easily memorize 10 phrases or 100 words to use when possible; it is vital that visitors make every effort to communicate with host communities. Such communication reveals vulnerability, openness, and trust.

Principle #3: Do With Rather Than For and Recognize Privilege

The faith-justice process put forth by the Jesuits states that "service happens when we realize that we possess resources that we make available to others to help them improve their living conditions" (Social Justice and Ecology Secretariat: 3.1.2). Thus, it is important for foreign groups to accept the fact that their participants and their institutions come from advantages not shared by the people they visit (Newton and Early: xiii). Additionally, groups ought to reflect on the source of those advantages, whether they were earned or inherited, and how the group continues to maintain those privileges. This needs to be stated clearly, honestly, and openly. This recognition is not a wallowing in guilt but the recognition of responsibility as well as an opportunity to create a more just world.

a) Trip leaders should make every effort to leave 30% of their resources on the ground with host communities in a variety of forms that have been mutually agreed upon. They should recognize the power differential here and see it as an opportunity to serve and always a temptation to dominate. This means the groups do not stay in charming hotels, they do not eat everything they see, they do not focus on tourist activities – rather they give up those wants and leave resources where they best serve the needs of their host community. For some students, this could be their first glimpse of solidarity – i.e., a deferring of one's *wants* in order to serve the *needs* of others.

b) *Doing with* in an unfamiliar environment means encouraging participants to ask questions and to query their hosts about a reality they do not understand. This shows vulnerability in their ignorance, it demonstrates trust to those they are visiting, and it encourages a mutuality of discourse that comes from such interaction. It also requires a certain linguistic accessibility made possible through good planning by leaders and real participant efforts. Participants used to controlling their context leave their comfort zone when they reside with community members and must communicate in their language.

Principle #4: Ensure Research, Reflection, Feedback, and Accountability

This principle particularly applies to those responsible for short-term trips and courses where participants entrust themselves to the expertise and guidance of leaders (Newton and Early: xiii; Social Justice and Ecology Secretariat: 3.1.3). It is a commitment to an ongoing quest for learning, reflection and assessment that never ends. This will explicitly undermine cultural deficiency theories of poverty as well as the inevitability of any situation. Marginalization as the result of social, political, economic, and religious structures is possible to understand with information from a variety of fields. If carefully done, this principle will also negate any theological justification for the poverty witnessed. The leaders of mission trips must be more than chaperones. There are various aspects to this principle as well.

a) Research is not objective: "Our research adopts the perspective of the poor, reflects on their reality, and seeks their welfare. Choosing this perspective enable us to expose the forces that systematically exclude the marginalized and to discover the sources of life that will restore them to dignity. Such research seeks for ways to effectively change social reality so as to favor the poor" (Social Justice and Ecology Secretariat: 3.1.3).

b) Reflection should take place prior to, during, and after a service-trip or travel course. It should happen both individually and in groups and time should be set aside to ensure that it is done intentionally, carefully, and thematically. Reflection is a tool that should become a way of being for those immersed in other social and cultural contexts.

c) Feedback must come, first, from the community hosting the group; second, from the group participants; and third, from the leaders who are accountable to both. Different forms of feedback, which are direct and indirect, anonymous and named, will help create a whole picture of where improvement is required. Considerable time with host community mediators will ensure that honest communication is present in a way that leads to improved relationships. Improvements to the planning, implementation, and return of groups should be integrated every year.

Principle #5: Consciousness-Raising, Continuity, Sustainability

Formation and implementation is essential to a short-term service or class trip, but consciousness-raising continues after the trip and is important for long-term sustainability (Social Justice and Ecology Secretariat: 3.1.4; Reisch 2011: 98). "One and done" experiences are not worthy of the resources or time they take to enter another community's reality. This principle will explicitly reject short-term trips as consumptive practices by wealthy North Americans by extending the meaning of the experience far beyond the time in-country. The purpose of a trip must include an effort to raise awareness among others upon return. This can take different forms.

A better phrase than short-term mission trips would be "witness trips." The purpose of these trips is to educate the participants about a social or economic reality and to spread that awareness to others just as a witness has an obligation to testify to what they have seen in the service of justice. Observers can simply look at something and continue on their way. Witnessing something demands much more. Whether we have guided short-terms trips to borders, urban slums, poor rural communities, or fair-trade farms, encouraging participants to remain invested and to witness to what they have seen can lead to constructive sharing and integration upon return. Eric Usner captures the importance of witnessing:

> Witnessing . . . holds personal belief accountable to lived experience. Witnessing then, is a robust theological or epistemological method. If we shy away from the challenge, choosing the comfort of belief over the accountability of experience, we lose something of ourselves. This is ultimately how individual and social transformation takes place (96).

Later he defines witnessing as:

> an experience of interconnectedness and compassion that compels a change in our understanding of the world and how we act and live in it. The knowledge and perspectives gained through honest, vulnerable engagement with human experience evoke ethical responses that compel us to question taken-for-granted truths and norms. They help put human back in the humanities (97).

Short-terms trips end when participants decide they will end. The choice to put an experience behind you is just that, a choice. The exercise of will to continue raising awareness,

researching, reflecting, and challenging the consciousness of others is essential to our responsibilities and obligations of privilege. For some participants, this may mean leading another trip. For others, it could mean staying in touch with community members with whom one built relationshipsh. For still others, it means allowing the experience to influence how they live out their vocation of work and service as they move through life in their own context.

Principle #6: Structural Transformation

Finally, North American individualists must be educated on structures and their importance. I received my first lecture on U.S. trade policies from a rural Dominican farmer with a second-grade education who tried to explain patiently to me why he could not make any money selling his goods at the local market because of international trade policies that I did not know existed. I was both horrified and fascinated as he explained how he could not compete against the heavily subsidized agriculture from the U.S., even though he only had to transport his produce 7 miles. The short-term mission trip is an opportunity to learn about and engage in structural transformation:

> Structural transformation takes many forms: proposals regarding public policies, active presence in the realms of political decision-making, consequential dialogue with the authorities, denunciations and protests, collaboration with social movements, monitoring and evaluation of legislation, etc. . . . The Congregation refers to political advocacy as one of the preferred methods for promoting structural transformation (Social Justice and Ecology Secretariat: 3.1.5).

In an age of trade agreements such as the Trans Pacific Partnership, North American Free Trade Agreement, Central American Free Trade Agreement, and others, North American groups to foreign countries need to educate themselves on the consequences of trade agreements promoted by their own country. These agreements often adversely affect people in other countries as well as our own. This principle alone could negate multiple theories of how North Americans understand why people are poor or marginalized. While no participant can work to transform every structure, all participants have the responsibility to work on some structure – healthcare, education, energy, climate, etc.

Conclusion

How short-term mission groups project themselves abroad is important for understanding religion in a global context. These trips from the U.S. often reinforce stereotypical explanations of poverty and marginalization and God's relation to those realities. This is frequently due to cross-cultural failures resulting from poor orientation, lack of formation, and an ethnocentric framing narrative. Cultural knowledge, mindfulness, and cross-cultural skills are rarely possessed by chaperones, and thus cannot be taught to participants. The principles suggested for reframing these trips demand leaders with experience, insight, and time. When the reality of poverty and marginalization is understood as the result of social systems and processes in each context, different theological lenses are acquired for understanding God's role. The suffering witnessed is no longer God's will, but the result of limited or misused human freedom leading to the dehumanization of others. How we perceive a problem, is critical for how we judge a problem and its solution.

Schools, colleges, universities, and churches should pause trips they currently support and review whether they are legitimate learning opportunities that include the principles mentioned above. Without such a review, these experiences may do more harm than good by legitimating the same poverty they are intended to fight and reinforcing beliefs about why poverty exists and whether participants should or can respond to it. Those who promote such trips as transformational need to assess whether they are transformational or not – simply asserting a thing does not make it true. What is necessary is careful and prolonged preparation and formation, reflection on a regular basis throughout the trip, and concrete follow-up on insights gained and commitments made. There is some hope that mission trips can turn into *witness* trips if the framing narrative is carefully constructed.

While no short-term trip abroad is perfect, trying to work with the previous six principles will go some way toward avoiding the self-negating consequences currently evident in traditional models of how religious, educational, and service groups engage others around the globe. Adhering to best practices in international service-learning, listening to the evolving tradition of the Society of Jesus, and privileging the opinions and perspectives of those with long-term experience in countries who host volunteers are three steps to improving what today is a seriously flawed model for international trips.

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