

8 Mistakes We Make On Short-Term Mission Trips

By Shane Pruitt

The number of Christians in the United States who participate in short-term mission trips—those lasting a year or less—has risen exponentially over the last 50 years, growing from 540 in 1965 to more than 1.5 million annually, with an estimated \$2 billion per year spent on the effort, according to *Missiology Journal*.

Sadly, in recent years, there has been some negative light shed upon short-term mission trips. Many questions have arisen, such as, “Are the trips truly advancing the mission of God? Are the teams that go on these trips more of a help or a hindrance to the missionary who is living there? Are we really being good stewards of our resources? Would it more helpful to send the money directly to the missionary and the ministry instead of paying for plane tickets?”

These are all great questions and worthy of our consideration. However, all of these thoughts shouldn't discourage missions but rather make us better in our missions efforts. The act of going is important. Jesus left his home to be among the people and to bring them a message of hope, love and life. Plus, Jesus has commanded us all to “go” in the Great Commission.

However, we're not perfect; we're going to make mistakes. And, here are at least eight mistakes we make on short-term mission trips:

1. **Believing you're the Savior:** We must remember that we are not the hope of the world—Jesus is. What countries, cities and people need is Jesus, not me and my passport. At the very best, I can make a temporary impact; however, the gospel will make an eternal impact. Give them Jesus.
2. **Treating missionaries like travel agents:** Now, don't get me wrong. Often, missionaries are the best people to help plan the details of the trip and travel. However, we must realize that is not their primary reason for being there. They're calling is to minister to the community, share the gospel and make disciples ... not to be your “on-call travel agent.”
3. **Going with our own agendas:** Sometimes teams go on a mission trip with their own agendas, looking for the missionaries, cities and local ministries to meet their demands. What missionaries, ministries and communities need are long-term partners who will encourage, energize and invest in continuing the kingdom work that has already begun there. Be a help, not a hindrance. Remember, if you make a mess and then leave, they are the ones that have to stay and clean it up.
4. **Operating as though they are on your turf:** Once, while on a mission trip, one of our team members said, “Wow. There are a lot of foreigners here!” Wait! What? Seriously? Yes, there are a few foreigners here. It's us! Remember, you're on their land, their streets and in their homes. Be sure to respect their culture, context and history. Once again, cultures need the gospel, not a Western mindset or even the “American Church.” People will sing and “do church” differently than what you're used to. Praise God for that. There is a lot we can learn from people in different contexts.
5. **Doing things for people that they can do for themselves:** We must ask ourselves, “Why are we flying halfway across the world and paying thousands of dollars just to paint a wall all by ourselves?” Are we doing jobs for people that they can do for themselves? Last time I checked, people in developing countries can hold babies, build fences and hand out beans. So why are you doing it for them? If painting a wall or handing out food is really a need in a place, then invite people in those villages to do it with you. Or, if our teams are going to do these projects alone, then we must make sure that we're doing them with Gospel intentionality! For example, sometimes, handing out food opens the door for gospel conversations in closed countries. Likewise, painting or light construction can accomplish needed work that would be impossible for one or two missionaries to accomplish on their own, so it serves a critical need. “*Empowering people with the Gospel for change, not enabling people for the same,*” should always be our driving force.
6. **Impressing people, instead of empowering them:** It's so easy to impress people with a certain skill set that the Lord has blessed you with. It feels really good to go somewhere for a week or two, and show people how much you know. However, what if you spent that time teaching people to continue doing the same things once you left? Now, that would be true long-term community impact. For example, if you have a dental hygienist, instead of them cleaning teeth the whole time, have them utilize their time teaching others in-country how to clean teeth properly. The work done in those few days will have more long-term impact than simply one person performing a handful of cleanings.
7. **Participating in poverty tourism:** If the biggest lasting impact on you from a mission trip is that it made you more thankful for your stuff back at home, then you've completely missed the point of missions. You must search your heart and intentions. Our motivation for missions cannot be to have a “great experience,” or to take photos of hurting people. You are part of something much larger than yourself. You're a part of the story of God and fulfilling the Great Commandment and the Great Commission—love God, love people, make disciples.
8. **Not asking before clicking:** Pictures can be a great—they help you remember what God has taught you, they remind you of the relationships that were made, and they tell a story to others who were not there for the glory of God. Just be sure to ask first and be wise. Don't turn your camera into a weapon. How would you feel if strangers were taking pictures of you, your children and your home?

So, yes mistakes are often made, but God is sovereign and his grace is sufficient. However, we can be aware of the mistakes, learn from them and make the changes necessary for healthy kingdom expansion. We have an incredible opportunity to “go” in wisdom and with excellence because our king deserves our best.

‘Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit’ – Matthew 28:19