



BY ANDREW ROOT



TOURISTS OR MISSIONARIES?

Theological Questions You Need to Answer Before Your Group's Next Mission Trip

Nadia and three other youth workers were surrounded by a hundred young people in bright orange T-shirts that read "Operation Change: Being Jesus' Hands in Making the World Right." The shirts had been provided by the organization that had contracted to handle logistics for another mission trip.

She liked this organization, which led trips into Mexico and a half dozen other countries. They picked up groups at their churches and drove them hours into Mexico, also setting up all the accommodations and service outings. In other words, they did almost everything, so Nadia and the other youth workers didn't need to think about it at all.

After herding the kids into busses, Frank, the representative of the organization, approached the four youth workers to review safety ground rules

and ask the group leaders what they were hoping to get out of the trip.

Tara, the youth director of a group from a middle class suburb in the Mid-West, said, "I'm hoping to shake my kids up some, hoping this experience pushes them to really believe. I think it will make them more God-centered and less world-centered."

Kevin, a veteran youth pastor leading the largest group of the three, chimed in. "I agree. I want my kids to be moved to take their faith more seriously; and in taking it more seriously and doing these trips, I really think my kids can change things in this broken world."

Bud said, "What we're really about is being right in the middle of the will of God; when we're doing mission and service, we are doing God's work."

Bud then turned to Nadia and asked, "What about you? What do you want from the trip?"

A year ago, Nadia would have said the same things the other youth workers said, but now she was tongue-tied. "I don't know," she blurted out.

After an uncomfortable silence, she felt compelled to say more. "I understand the practical reasons all of you mentioned. I see they can have an impact; and honestly, kids like traveling and going on the trips. I guess I am wondering why—theologically—do we do them?"

The uncomfortable silence continued, interrupted only by the sound of busses preparing to move. The four youth workers joined their kids; but for Nadia, the questions continued.



Barrio as Backdrop

During the next few hours as the busses headed south, Nadia couldn't stop asking theological questions. She thought about Jesus' miracles: feeding the 5,000; raising Lazarus; casting out demons.

For John, these three miracles were signs of the coming of God's new reality, a witness that God's future is breaking into our world. They are tastes of God's future. Jesus' action of healing is more than just a function, but also as a sign of God's coming future, a true taste of it. The sign here is an actual experience of what will be completed in the future. It is sample of the coming feast.

Take Lazarus' resurrection. Lazarus was alive, his life a sign of the coming of the new reality of God's future; but his experience was only an appetizer, a witness. Therefore, he had to die again, for the banquet—the fullness of God's future—had not yet arrived. The point isn't that Lazarus was resurrected but what his resurrection means. His resurrection is the puncturing of this reality of death with a sign of the coming of God's new reality, the coming of God's kingdom.

When finally the bus pulled up and unloaded a hundred kids into the impoverished Mexican village, Nadia began to grasp what was bothering her. Walking the streets of the village, helping one group of her young people prepare a puppet show and another group paint a wall of the little Sunday School building, she realized her focus was almost completely on her kids.

Sure, the village was here, but in many ways only as background, as a sound stage for her teenagers' experience. The village was important, but only for the way it could be used.

Nadia thought about Matthew 25 and how the actions toward “the least of these” always drew the one acting into an encounter with the humanity of the one acted for and how this led to mutual relationship and a shared gift; but she didn't see relationship happening here in this barrio.

Nadia wondered if this *real* impoverished village with *real* poverty and *real* people was *real* to the herd of orange-shirted crusaders. If the purpose of the mission experience was centered on the young people, it was hard to say whether the village served any other purpose than being the themed backdrop to their experience.

Believe in What?

This takes us back to the beginning of our story, back into the point of all this for youth ministry. Jesus began by wanting His disciples to experience the act of resurrecting Lazarus so they might believe. However, as we asked above, believe in

what? They had already left home and family, risking death to follow Him.

What Jesus wanted was not for them to commit rationally to a set of belief or facts, to assimilate to a doctrine or hold to a moral code. Jesus wanted them to taste the new reality, to

recognize that as Jesus' disciples they were participating in the very action of God to bring forth the future of God. Jesus wanted them to taste so they might believe, might trust, in God's action to bring forth the new reality.

Jesus wasn't concerned with His disciples possessing knowledge, but having the eyes to see—to see that God's future was coming and to believe so fully in its coming that they might be willing to bend their lives toward a future that was not yet there. Jesus easily could have said, “It is good that you will see Me resurrect Lazarus, because when you nibble on the new reality it will burst upon your tastebuds and you will be, and see, differently. You will become people of anticipa-

tion, people who seek to find in the world more places where the future reality breaks forth. People who pray and yearn for it to come in fullness. People who trust that it is coming and so seek to participate with their action in the action of God to bring forth the new reality. *To believe is to taste and see* God's future.”

So maybe this is the point, the purpose, of mission trips in youth ministry. They are *not* to be used as tools to move kids into religious commitment, but rather are opportunities to participate in tasting God's future. It might be that in our small and insignificant actions of service we witness to God's future, and by our witness—by taking action—we are pulled into participation. In other words, witness is not passive by the very active way of participating in God's own action.

We have no power to bring forth the fullness of God's future new reality; but in seeking God's action, our feeble actions of feeding, clothing and supporting become substantive witnesses to (ways of participating in) the coming of God to the hope for the new reality.

So, the mission trip is not an all-purpose tool youth workers use to shock kids into having spiritual epiphanies. The mission trip in youth ministry is a week of insignificant acts under the heavy shadow of oppression and poverty that seek to witness to God's new reality. We clothe the homeless now, knowing that one blanket doesn't solve their plight or get them off the streets; but one blanket is, to a freezing person, a taste of God's future.

The mission trip seeks to taste God's future by acting in small ways congruently with it. The mission trip is a week of tasting and offers others a chance to taste, as well. Sure, our actions might be grocery store samples, small and episodic;

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but against the backdrop of God's action as feeble ways of participating in God's action, mission trips become the yearning participation in the eschatological.



Mission or Tourism?

At the end of the week, the young people filed back onto the busses, weighed down by bags and bags of stuff (mostly tourist souvenirs) they had bought. The kids seemed to be glowing from the nourishment of fast food and cheap touristy products, and an electric energy bounced around the bus walls.

Kids unveiled their purchases with excitement and explained for whom they'd bought them. ("This T-shirt is for my friend Melinda; she'll look so hot in it!") The bus roared with excitement. The chatter of great bargains and cool stuff rattled Nadia's mind. As she watched kids hold up T-shirts and shot glasses, she couldn't help but wonder what the difference was between the mission trip and a vacation.

As the deadline to return to the bus approached, Nadia thought about how much easier it was to get kids to sign up for the mission trip than come to almost anything else on the youth ministry calendar. Only 15 students had gone on the fall retreat, between 18 and 25 participated in the weekly youth group program, eight to 10 came to the Bible reading group, and surprisingly only 17 were willing to give up a day of their summer to go to the local amusement park. Yet when it was announced the mission trip would be returning to Mexico, 30 spots filled in two and half weeks—a record.

Submerged in the cacophony of excitement over T-shirts and shot glasses, Nadia wondered if the reason they were so willing to sign up had more to do with touring than serving. Nadia didn't doubt that kids wanted to do some good; they liked that idea. Still, that idea didn't eliminate the desire to enjoy the sensations of travel. In fact, a number of her young people had given her a hard time when they learned one of the other youth groups on the Mexico trip was stopping for two nights at Disneyland before making it home. They wanted a similar stop.

Nadia realized it is hard to extract the tourist mentality from young people as they go on mission trips because this tourist mentality comes through the devices and material we use to go on these short-term mission trips (planes, rest stops, fast food, souvenir shops, etc.), as well as the devices and material we use in our daily lives (phones, iChat, satellite TV, etc).

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Globalization and Easy Travel

Motion has become one of our primary ways of being in the world. We always seem to be in motion, even when we're sitting still. Our smartphones and laptops aren't communications

devices, but portals to cross space at the speed of fiber optics.

In fact, there is hardly such a thing as long distance anymore. You can call anywhere for the same price and for unlimited time. Just as long-distance calling is disappearing, so is the concept of long distance, period. We can be anywhere in a relatively short time. Space, as some social theorists have asserted, has become liquefied.

The technology that has allowed us to be constant movers has bound the world together as one place. It has moved us into what's been called a globalized world, with the



opportunities to cross vast stretches of space very quickly. We are connected to people across space—sometimes

connected more to people thousands of miles away than to those

living across the street. Globalization itself is a process that has been going on for hundreds of years, but only in the past four decades has it become full-blown.

It's no wonder that as the world has become one place through globalization, short-term youth ministry mission trips became the hot thing to do. These mission trips are only possible because of a globalized world. Cheap airfare and open borders allow middle-class young people to travel across the globe for an experience of mission and service. The very technological and economic realities that make globalization a reality also open the possibility for church youth groups to surf the wave of globalization to the ends of the earth in the name of Jesus.

The very fact that we can place *short-term* in front of *mission* is the result of full-blown globalization. As globalization binds the world into one place, it blurs distance by accelerating time. The world is one place, not because space itself has shrunk, but because jet fuel and microprocessors slingshot us quickly across space that once took months and years to traverse. In other words, in a globalized world most everything is accelerated. Now thanks to globalization, you can do an accelerated, short-term mission trip.

So it's no wonder that it's easier to get kids to sign up for mission trips than almost anything else on the youth ministry calendar. A mission trip offers young people an opportunity to move—to move their bodies physically across space as they had been doing digitally. The mission trip is so appealing to young people, (and therefore has become the central youth ministry trip), because it allows young people to live into the cultural state of their beings. Nothing is more appealing in a globalized world than being allowed to move.

However, this moving comes with a backlash; it often means they move as tourists, meaning the mission trip often takes on a vacation feel over and against the desires of youth workers such as Nadia. Vacation, tourism and travel are nearly synonymous (unless you're a vagabond hiding in someone's truck).

Tourism is enjoying the sensation of having a short-term experience. No tourist on an African safari wants to live permanently on the savannah. Rather, what they wish and pay for is a short-term sensation of experiencing the place before moving on to another. Tourism and consumerism are indelibly linked; tourism provides the sensation of consumerism through the short-term sensational experience of another place.

It's no wonder you need to buy a T-shirt, shot glass and glossy picture to commemorate your trip. The consumer stuff and tourism go hand in hand; without the stuff, the short-term sensational experience of tourism would fade from memory immediately following another handful of sensational experiences.

Perhaps the young people with Nadia were buying souvenirs as mementos they hoped would help the sensation of the mission trip last in their memories—to keep it from being forgotten as were last year's must-have shoes or last spring's must-do bungee jump.

Deeper Realities

I tell this story of Nadia and her nagging questions because I care about kids and the mixed messages we are sending them through our poorly conceived activities. The story may contain some harsh words, but please don't become uneasy or defensive. I'm not against short-term mission trips.

What I'm trying to point out is that even with our best intentions (and I think 99 percent of the time short-term mission trips happen with the best of intentions), there are forces and realities that impact the young people we take on these trips.

This doesn't mean we should avoid or cancel these trips, only that we have a responsibility to think deeply about them and to do so confronting the tourist realities that globalization (for good and bad) gives to us.

I'm not trying to ruin your calendar or make you feel bad. I only want to challenge you to articulate clearly the preconceptions you and young people have as we go on short-term trips.

Effectiveness in ministry involves thinking about the results and outcomes we want to see in our kids, and designing activities and experiences that have a likelihood of yielding these results.

When we stop asking the complex theological *why* questions, we may find ourselves mindlessly repeating activities that don't help our kids or the groups our trips are designed to help.

So, let me close by asking the question that stumped Nadia. "What do you want to get out of this trip?" **YWJ**

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