

Transforming the People of God

Participants of mission trips often exclaim, "That trip changed my life!" Many youth and young adult leaders promote mission trips as an exciting way to keep young people active in the life of the church. Still others promote the importance of mission trips in developing "global Christians" for our increasingly interdependent world with its old and new challenges. Today, hundreds of church groups are traveling together as God's people to every part of the earth. Many groups host return visits from "neighbors" of other lands and cultures. In all of the going and coming, God's people are being transformed.

Mission trips are, of course, insufficient apart from the ongoing ministry and mission of the church. But, with careful planning, a mission trip can be a powerful experience in which significant learning takes place about the following:

- God's vision for our world and God's action in it;
- ourselves, as individuals, as communities of faith, and as a society;
- other people who share God's creation: their culture, history, and faith experience;
- the church universal and God's purposes for it.

What Are Mission Trips?

Mission trips are. . .

- **windows** through which to see the world and God's vision for it in new ways
- **mirrors** in which to see ourselves, our church, and our culture more clearly
- **doorways** through which we enter into deeper fellowship with God and our neighbor
- **voices** through which we may hear God's call to us

Mission trips go by several names, differing by whether the purpose is primarily educational and relational or primarily service-oriented. Service trips are greatly enhanced for both visitors and hosts when combined with educational and relationship-building activities. Within this set of leader materials, the term *mission trip* is used to include the variety of names by which these experiences are known:

- travel/study seminars
- mission encounter trips or seminars
- work/study trips
- mission service trips
- work camps or work trips

Whatever the name and primary purpose, mission trips are short-term group experiences that typically last from one to three weeks. Participants vary by age or range of ages: adults, youth, college students, other young adults, seminarians, and intergenerational. Youth mission trips are often further divided, with younger youth (11-14) typically participating in mission trips to U.S. communities and older youth (15-18) sometimes participating internationally.

A mission trip may be sponsored by a local congregation, a presbytery or a synod, a seminary or a campus ministry. Return visits by delegations from the international partner are common, especially in presbytery partnerships. Offices of the General Assembly sponsor several international travel/study seminars each year and, occasionally, work/study mission trips for particular age groups.

Why Mission Trips?

Some Common U. S. Trip Leader and Participant Expectations

Leaders and participants usually share some common expectations of the trip as well as some particular hopes, based on the place and people to be visited, participants' ages, and the purposes of the body sponsoring the trip. Below are answers given by some trip leaders and participants to the question.



Why do people go on mission trips?

- serve others
- learn about another culture and expression of Christian faith
- have a sense of accomplishment; completing a useful project
- share the gospel; fulfill the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20)
- learn what is important in life
- see the effects of poverty and respond
- do something new
- provide an incentive or participate in a tradition of mission trips for a particular age group
- grow and mature as persons of faith and as communities of faith
- develop a new sense of community among group members, bonding
- interact with people visited and build relationships with other Christians
- accompany people who are in danger or whose rights are being abused
- learn from others about worship, importance of God in their lives
- learn about the mission of the church around the world
- learn from your own group in a different setting
- cross boundaries that divide us from each other
- renew and unify own congregation through mission
- produce lasting changes in lifestyle and stewardship of resources and talents

The above list of reasons (and your own group's) might fall into different categories. Some focus on the growth and transformation of the *individual* participant or on the renewal and cohesion of the *mission team and its sending body*. Other purposes are focused on the *communities or churches visited* and, in some cases, *served*. Some are mutually beneficial to visitors and hosts.

Transformation has to do with producing lasting changes in lifestyles, commitments, and stewardship of resources and talents; it has to do with deepening our love and expanding the scope of our concern. If we are to understand the transformative potential of mission trips, we must think carefully together about our hopes, dreams, and expectations of them. And we must consider which reasons are for ourselves and which are for others. Both sets of reasons are valid and have their place. Our loving concern must be to clearly recognize our reasons for going on a mission trip and to consider the needs and dreams of the "others" we encounter with our own needs and our inward journeys. As the global church in mission together, how are we--those travel-

ing and those hosting—to become more faithful disciples and witnesses to the gospel in the whole of our individual lives and in our witness as Christ's church in the world? What do we have that is ours to give and what do we need to receive?

As with U.S. mission trip participants, our partners in mission do not speak with one voice concerning their reasons for hosting U.S. church groups. Their reasons are as shaped by their history and present challenges as are ours. But their churches, like ours, also stand on the promises of God to "make all things new" and to transform the church's attempts at faithfulness into a visible sign of God's kingdom to the world and a blessing to the nations. Many of our partners are willing to share with U.S. Christians their experiences, their faith, and their struggles for *our* transformation. Many also yearn for *their own* transformation and the transformation of their churches and societies through their participation *with* us in God's mission in the world.

Perspectives on Partnership in Mission

Being a "partner" in mission is a challenging enterprise. Yet it is also a blessed adventure and stretching experience for the people of God. God, through scripture, calls us to be partners with God and each other in mission and ministry to our world. But how can we be truly in partnership with those so very different from ourselves? How can we experience mutuality in our relationships when great inequalities in material resources exist?

U.S. churches and our partners-in-mission around the world continue to struggle with barriers to true partnership and mutuality in relationships. It is not only our task but our calling to continue to deepen our understanding and practice of partnership. When planning mission trips, leaders and participants are necessarily engaged in grappling with the idea and practice of partnership and how it can be embodied within the context of a mission trip.

As we engage with others as partners, may we be mutually transformed as God's people, witnessing to the love and justice of God in our own communities and in those far away, placing our hope in the One who gave all so that all might have life--and have it abundantly.

From "When God's People Travel Together, A Trip Leader's Planning Manual", Debby D. Vial, pg. 6-8. 1999 Presbyterian Peacemaking Program, Presbyterian Church USA, Louisville, KY.