

The Summer Missions Trip

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It was before the days of essentially being strip-searched before your flight. It was even before the days of the climate-controlled, enclosed ramp to the airplane. We braved the hot, windswept tarmac and climbed the questionably-secure metal steps to board the flight which would carry us to our life-changing adventure.

The year was 1986, and I was an eighth-grade student in a group of church friends headed to a small island country in the Caribbean. Armed with modest,

floor-length skirts, a flannelgraph or three, and polish-free toe nails (the only cultural knowledge I had about our destination was that toe nail polish signaled you were a woman of the night, and though I didn't even fully understand what that meant, I knew it was nothing a good Christian girl should be), we spent a week taking in fantastically beautiful beach views, bleaching our drinking water, and teaching local kids about Jesus.

I came home with a new appreciation for paved roads and ice cubes and promptly entered my ninth grade year thinking about cheerleading tryouts, making the honor roll, and not at all about my life-changing experience.

Years later, my husband and I moved our family to the country of Guatemala to lead missions teams.

Most people who came on teams were sincere-hearted, wonderful folks who wanted to help the world.

Most people who came on teams were kind and good and hard workers.

Most people who came on teams brought our family gifts and loved us well.

But during our four years there and after hearing the stories of missionaries who had spent decades welcoming U.S. Christians in, summer after summer, some common and worrisome themes began to arise. So if you or yours are considering a summer missions trip, I'd like to offer some boots-on-the-ground truths.

First, let's be honest. Many of us send our church teens on a summer missions trip hoping that it will rock their worlds or at least get them to look up from Snapchat. Don't waste your time. Your teen will come home with photos (and Snapchats) of precious children, with stories of how terrible the poverty is there, with cheap souvenirs which will end up buried in a closet somewhere, and then...he or she will go back to life, mostly unchanged. It doesn't mean your kid has failed or you have failed or the \$3,000 you spent on the trip was a complete waste. Just mostly a waste. But seriously. It means that your child is a teenager, and one week in another country is not enough to change a lifetime of culture and family and habits. My own children spent four of their most formative years living in a developing country, and while that length of time and breadth of experience did shape them profoundly, they are still normal teens with normal struggles. Although, they don't use Snapchat, so I might be able to give Guatemala some credit for that small victory.

If you're going on a trip hoping it will change your OWN life, don't. It is an insult to the beautiful people who live in that country and work there and have real-life relationships. The indigenous people you are serving are not stupid. They know how it works. They know that North Americans show up for five days, throw money and "superior" skills at the problem, get a good feeling and, for the most part, walk away. These people you are helping are just trying, like most of us, to get through the day, to have enough food, to raise their kids, and so of course they will take your help and say what you want them to say. But they are not fooled. They know exactly how it works.

Of course, there are exceptions to the rule. There are friends who come, year after year, to foreign countries. Who build actual relationships and keep in touch when they leave. Who give money and real support to the missionaries and aid workers on the ground. Who provide respite and care for them. Who invest in the country and its people...without trying to take over, as we Americans are so wont to do. But the reason they are the exception is that they are the listeners: They talk less and listen more. They come in with open hearts and no agenda, except to find out what the real problems are, not the imagined ones. They come in with open hands and no opinions on issues that they have zero knowledge of. They listen to the missionaries, the local business people, the aid workers. They are not there for themselves, but for the people they came to serve.

And really, when you think about it, that is something we all can do, right now, in any country or city where we work. We don't know the intricacies of a problem unless we are the legitimate experts in that field. We all have more to learn and less to say. And while we're learning and listening, we can humble ourselves to work under the instructions of those who know what they're doing, those who have put in the time and tears.

In the meantime, send your kid on that missions trip if you want. Or consider giving that same money to a missionary, NGO, or local church in that same country. I guarantee your \$3,000 will be multiplied and used over and over again in wiser ways than we, here in our comfy American homes, can conceive of. And you won't even get a crappy souvenir you have to pretend to like, so it's a total win. Just make sure if you or your teen DO go on a trip, it is with a posture of willingness: Being willing to work in a way that is less about the feel-good for us and more about how it truly helps those on the receiving end.

Let's do better. We can and we have to. This breaking world needs us to be loving, but love and wisdom can walk together.

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