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Doing short-term mission well: Prepare, learn and share

BY ELLEN SHERBY

Amanda's farewell from an urban Honduran community is forever burned in my mind: She pats Pedro on the head before turning around to step into the rented tour bus to leave.

As interpreter and group facilitator, I am stunned and embarrassed for Pedro and for Amanda: Pedro is not a sweet seven-year-old boy; Pedro is an adult. Amanda's gesture is not one of equals, as brother and sister in Christ. The church Amanda traveled with has come to this community more than once in the past few years. Despite orientation intended to help her group develop deeper connections, they seem to see Hondurans as helpless people instead of able partners in God's service.

A much sweeter memory comes from the northernmost mountains of Nicaragua: A group of women from Presbyterian churches in the U.S. and women from a rural coffee-farming community gather spontaneously to talk about being girls and women in two very different cultures and realities. While they talk, the North American women wash the feet and paint the toenails of their Central American sisters. The Nicaraguan women have worked all week as primary cooks in the communal kitchen to support this mission trip group that visits yearly as part of a long-term partnership. Around the circle of women, laughter, deep conversations and tears flow naturally. The nature of the relationship is one of deep camaraderie and fellowship instead of, "Let me do something for you, a poor Nicaraguan."

These two stories speak volumes about the best and the worst of how church groups engage in God's world through short-term mission. Are our short-term mission trips *really* about God's mission, or about feeling good, or meeting our own needs and agendas? How can we develop, lead and participate in short-term mission in ways that reflect kingdom values and build up the Body of Christ in mutual respect and love?

Trip preparation makes a difference. Being intentional about preparing for your short-term mission trip will make an enormous difference in your team's experience and the impact you can

have. Fundamentally, it will make a difference in how your team engages with mission partners — those whose ministry you are invited to join as co-workers in God's mission. Here are some practical tips for "doing" and "being in" mission well:

PREPARE

Before you begin to make mission trip plans, know that God is already present in the place you plan to go.

- » **Pray** with the members of your mission trip group, with your sending congregation and for the mission partners where you will go — whether you know the destination at this stage or not.
- » **Discern.** Keep an open heart — where is God leading your group and for what purpose?
- » **Pray some more!** Once it is clear where your group will go, pray with and for your mission partners and invite their prayers for your group. Consider how God — through the mission partners where you will travel — will shape the lives of the trip participants and your congregation.
- » **Listen to** your mission partners. Let their voices lead you and your group before, during and even after the trip. Ideally, mission partners will provide staff to help guide the group.
 - **Mission partners are vital** to helping the trip leader make realistic and meaningful plans beforehand.
 - **Mission partners can accompany** your group to help you experience the host site and engage with locals in ways that are culturally appropriate and that support a relationship in which God's mission flows from you to them *and* from them to you.
- » **Plan.** An effective trip leader will seek the guidance of mission partners as she or he prepares the church and trip participants before and during the experience.
 - **Meet with** mission leaders in your church to discuss how the mission trip might contribute to part of long-term congregational mission strategy.



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- Before leaving on the mission trip, make plans to share the story with your congregation once the group has returned home. With the participants, consider other places and venues where you might be able to share about what you've learned, such as local schools, in other churches or at a nursing home.
 - Together with the group, think about different ways to share about the trip aside from talking about it: a photo gallery in a fellowship hall or chapel; a slide show during a church potluck; the use of music. Planning ahead for "mission interpretation" will help you gather the types of photos, video and audio that best express the amazing moments in God's mission you want to share.
 - Work with mission partners to develop a balanced agenda that meets trip objectives; allows time to learn about the history, culture and current reality of the site location or country; for group debriefing and devotions; and some down time. Consider holding devotionals together with mission partners.
- purpose and what "mission" means. Set team expectations and create and affirm a group covenant.
- Commit to limited or no use of technology while you are on the trip as part of the group covenant. Don't let your smart phone serve as a blinder, a buffer or a security blanket. Appoint a single person on the trip to keep in touch with your home congregation through scheduled Facebook or blog posts.
 - » During the trip be humble and flexible. Listen well, pray often and take time to process what you are experiencing, feeling, thinking and learning.
 - Be prayerful: Ask God to help you have "eyes to see" and "ears to hear." Thank God for new experiences, knowledge and connections. Pray for God to reveal ways for you and your group to bring the mission experience home to your personal lives and your church.
 - Let your mission partners guide you in all ways before, during and after the trip: in planning, during on-site orientation, in the actual mission 'work' to be done, and the overall experience.
 - Listen, listen, listen! Listen to your mission partners; listen to your mission team. Help your team listen well to each other. Listen to God speaking to you through others by the grace and power of God's Holy Spirit.
 - Be present in your mission partner community! As already noted, avoid use of social media, which will disconnect you from the place and the people where and with whom you are serving.

LEARN AND REFLECT

- » Before the trip all participants can learn about the history, culture and current context of your mission partners.
- Hold a pre-trip orientation to address logistics and offer team-building activities. Learn together about your mission partner's cultural context as well as their current social, political, economic and religious reality. Include a biblical reflection that helps trip participants understand the trip's

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- Be patient. Guard against the North American tendency to want to be in control, to make quick judgments of people or situations and to jump to “fix it” approaches.
 - Be humble. Remember that your way of learning, doing, being and experiencing faith in God is rooted in your own life experience, values and culture. The people in the mission partner community will understand and live life and faith differently.
 - Be flexible each step of the way. Even well laid plans may not bear fruit in the ways you thought they would. Be open to the Holy Spirit as plans may change from hour to hour during the trip.
 - Bring a journal with you and take notes.
 - Debrief daily with your group. This will help you and the group members come to deeper learning about the place where you are serving, the people of the host site and what the experience may mean for you after you return home.
 - Hold devotions with your group. If possible, plan for at least some of your devotional times to be held together with the mission partners with whom you are serving.
- » After the trip continue to reflect and learn. If you spend quality time learning and reflecting before and during the trip, this will come naturally. Allow the “short-term” mission experience to shape day-to-day life for trip participants and for your congregation.

BRING IT HOME

- » Tell the story. After the trip, find ways to meaningfully interpret the experience to others.
 - Shape a story about the trip. Upon your return home, look over your journal to remember the feelings, sights, sounds and smells of the place where you served. Find passages that reflect “moments of the heart” when you felt connected with God and with others. Use these sensory and communion experiences with people to tell the story about your trip instead of telling the story as a chronological report.
 - Gather together with trip participants to remember your experiences, look at one another’s photos and to think together how to tell the story.
 - Follow through with plans for sharing the story that you made before you left.
 - Use social media to share about your mission experience. This is particularly appropriate *after* you have returned home.
- » Integrate the trip experience personally. Consider next steps for your daily life.
- Commit to practices of simple living by doing things like using less water, being aware of food consumption, or limiting your use of social media to maximize quiet time and/or time to connect with people face-to-face.



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OF ELLEN SHERBY.

- o Continue with a practice of journaling and/or a devotional practice that was significant for you before or during the trip.
- o Consider other forms of mission service in your community or abroad.
- » Visit pcusa.org/yav to find out about the Young Adult Volunteer Program for a year of service in the U.S. and six other countries.
- » Go to pcusa.org/msr to learn about long-term mission service opportunities in over 50 countries with a global mission partner of the PC(USA).
- » Integrate the trip experience congregationally. With others, discover how the trip may shape congregational life.
- o Explore how your church can learn more about and live into God's mission in the place you visited:
 - If it was an international site, invite a mission worker from that country to come and speak. You can find profiles and letters from PC(USA) mission workers at pcusa.org/missionconnections. Contact the World Mission program assistant for itineration support, Rachel Anderson, at rachel.anderson@pcusa.org or 800-728-7228, ext. 5826 for more information on inviting a mission worker to your congregation or presbytery.
 - Give to mission, either to support a mission worker in the place you visited or to a host site with a partner church or organization. You can learn more about making a financial commitment to support the work of mission co-workers or PC(USA) church partners around the world by contacting church support associate Chris Roseland, chris.roseland@pcusa.org.
 - Give through established channels in your church or presbytery and the receiving mission partner. This helps avoid conflict and duplication of efforts.
 - Give with a listening ear for the true needs of mission partners rather than what you or your group thinks the need is.
 - Explore the possibility of a long-term mission partnership for sustained relationships and impact, under the direction of congregational mission leaders and mission partners.
 - Find other ways to connect with mission. Learn about mission resources at pcusa.org/missionresources and by contacting me at ellen.sherby@pcusa.org or 800-728-7228, ext 5612.

WE ARE THE BODY OF CHRIST!

A favorite Spanish/English hymn, "Somos el cuerpo de Cristo" by Jaime Cortez, embodies vibrant, mutual mission as part of the Body of Christ in the whole world. The refrain invites us to a call and response, singing:

Somos el cuerpo de Cristo

— we are the Body of Christ

Traemos su santo mensaje

— we've come to bring the good news to the world

The song affirms that "each person is part of the kingdom" and invites us to "serve each other" to build it up. Short-term mission has received its fair share of criticism because of situations like Amanda's parting pat on Pedro's head, but there is hope. When short-term mission is rooted in thoughtful preparation, leadership and follow-up and then carried out with practices and attitudes of love, respect, dignity and humility, truly we can all serve one another across cultures near and far as the Body of Christ.

RESOURCES:

- » Download mission resources, including trip leader helps at pcusa.org/missionresources and click on "Plan a mission trip."
- » Connect with mission workers who can help you organize a mission trip to their country of service: pcusa.org/start-mission-partnership
- » Sign-up for Mission Crossroads magazine and for Presbyterian World Mission e-news: pcusa.org/missioncrossroads.
- » Read insightful books that will change the way you lead trips:
 - o "Helping without Hurting in Short-Term Missions: Leader's Guide" by Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert.
 - o "Serving with Eyes Wide Open: Doing Short-Term Mission with Cultural Intelligence" by David A. Livermore.

ELLEN SHERBY is the coordinator of equipping for mission involvement in Presbyterian World Mission. Ellen lived in Nicaragua for 11 years working with short-term mission teams from the U.S. to Mexico, Honduras, and Nicaragua. Nine of those years she was a Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) mission co-worker with the Council of Evangelical Churches of Nicaragua (CEPAD).