

SEND YOUR LEADERS ON A MISSION TRIP!

It is not uncommon to hear of a congregation sending the minister on a trip to the Holy Land, or on one of those special-theme cruises. Many Christians spend large amounts of money on special leadership retreats and rallies. These are all well and good, but why not consider a trip to a mission field and see how it can combine sight-seeing, spiritual retreat, cultural education, hard work and the leading theme of the Scripture rolled into one?

With the booming economy and a willingness to travel, the past decade has witnessed a tremendous increase in short-term mission work. It is estimated that over 200,000 individuals each year from the U. S. and Canada will be involved in a trip of some kind. Has your congregation been involved?

With such a trend has also come questions about the phenomena and its value to world evangelism. Several national articles have focused on the stewardship issue? Wouldn't it be better, they ask, to send the financial support to the field instead. Is that really the right question, though? A more appropriate one might be-- Wouldn't it be better to send ministers or members to the mission field instead of the spiritual retreats, rallies, seminars, and sight-seeing trips?

We believe everyone will acknowledge a need to use common sense in judging the practicality of any mission journey based on the goals and the money that will be spent. Some trips may be questionable in value. The biggest danger is, of course, allowing these trips to be a substitute for regular financing of full-time work. Naturally, it is best to send the financial support, but that doesn't preclude money also being spent for short-term missions. Such criticism assumes there is only so much of the mission financial pie to slice. In reality, mission trip funding usually is extra money, often raised by individuals and their families that would not have been given to church or mission work.

Critics speak of mission teams taking away work from the nationals who are poor and in need of pay. Yet in most construction-oriented trips that actually is incorporated in the plans, with local workers being compensated for advance work and assisting on site.

Some comment that mission trips become self-serving with people paying to get a "good feeling" and the benefactors are not the missionaries or the native people, but the team itself. Well, isn't that also true of all retreats, seminars, rallies and conventions, as we seek to receive a good spiritual "experience?" A mission trip can pay dividends well beyond the blessing received by the team and the spiritual growth involved.

We should not discount the benefit a good team brings to the mission field and the work of the missionary or native evangelists. A group of skilled and dedicated workers, who raise the necessary full funding and erect a home or building in a week or two, fill a need that might not be met for many years, otherwise.

While personal evangelism may be hampered by language barriers, groups can demonstrate the gospel through other forms of expression. Teams have been organized to conduct feeding programs for children, health screenings with American professionals; literature, clothing, toy distribution and even sports camps where equipment is brought for the youth to learn and play. With a couple of locals and a few bi-lingual folks on the mission team, large Bible Schools and various training sessions can be conducted, as others assist. Even a quick fact-finding trip may help a church discover ways to become more involved in expanding the outreach of that mission. Nothing beats first-hand

experience and observation. Certainly the wishes and plans of the host should be honored above all, as the visitors are there simply to serve and learn.

The impact of these efforts can be seen in the appreciative faces of those helped and the realization that it is being done in love. They see God through the willing hands and smiling faces. The enthusiasm of those involved from another country is often contagious, leading the local folks to become more aware of the church, its mission and message, and pitching in to help, also. When the people realize that mission team members often sacrifice vacation time and work hard to raise money for the trip to come and help, they are amazed that foreigners, they didn't even know, would care that deeply. Work teams can truly make a difference in our world.

But one of the most important by-products of the mission trip is realized upon the return home. The majority of those who go, do not come back the same people. Their attitudes are changed as they examine their own lifestyle and personal finances and begin to put a face and name to the poverty of the earth. Their vision becomes widened beyond the borders of the affluent community where they may live, to see the multitudes of the world in need, without opportunity and without a Savior.

A dramatic shift in emphasis in the local congregation can take place as the enthusiasm of the team spreads, resulting in greater mission giving. Suddenly those folks and missionaries they met on the trip begin to receive more monthly support. Those new stained-glassed windows in the budget become simple pews for the foreign church or the money for that extra staff person is now directed to increasing personnel, vehicles, or resources for the mission efforts.

A trip allows a person to see God work in many ways. Team members learn to accept other people, cultures, and forms of worship and learn to understand and appreciate the long-term missionary. It can inspire folks to a deeper commitment and a closer walk with the Lord. It may even lead some to consider full-time mission work.

A mission trip is an exciting undertaking and maybe is not for everyone. Any venture is a financial, emotional, spiritual and physical challenge, but one most people will not regret accepting.

If, as Christians, we still believe the great commission is the duty and responsibility of the church, we must begin to take it seriously with the stewardship of our time and money. Jesus said our field is the entire world, and we can't continue to spend our entire church budgets or ninety percent of them at home and expect to make progress for the cause of Christ. A congregation will not get excited about missions until its ministers and leaders get on fire with a passion for world evangelism and benevolence.

Maybe a short-term mission trip will ignite the flame?