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Maturing missions

Short-term trips abroad inspire American Christians and harness their energy. But many congregations now are blending the volunteer approach with long-term, strategic partnerships.

by [David Gibson](#)



Cooperative Baptist Fellowship Photo

Elaine Childs conducts Bible clubs for children in Roma villages.

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American congregations may be based locally, but for the past generation they have been acting globally.

Evangelical zeal, the increased ease of international travel and the relative wealth (at least until recently) of middle-class Americans has helped create a new approach to mission work: first-person outreach by individual churches sending congregants on short-term excursions. Over the past generation, enthusiastic volunteers from local congregations began to eclipse the old model of long-term mission work coordinated by denominations or mission societies.

“The greatest change in our field in the last 20 years is the desire by congregations to have their own hands-on experience of overseas mission,” said Peter Kemmerle, who coordinates mission work for the Presbyterian Church (USA).

But Kemmerle and others in the field say this popular model now is undergoing a transformation.

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Although no one expects -- or wants -- the locally based approach to disappear, a maturing process is underway as congregations realize the need to take a coordinated, strategic approach to mission work. This is especially true as the economic crisis begins to hit home. (See related features.)

New strategies -- some of which represent a turning back to old models -- include partnering with other churches or organizations; coordinating with denominational agencies; and putting a greater emphasis on long-term commitments and professional missionaries.

Casely B. Essamuah, a native of Ghana who studied missiology in the United States and now runs missions programs for the Bay Area Community Church in Annapolis, Md., said it's a matter of striking the right balance. Bay Area Community Church, a megachurch affiliated with the Willow Creek Association, supports 15 long-term missionaries around the world, mainly medical professionals, as well as sending 70 to 100 congregants each year on short-term trips.

But even large congregations like his "tend to reinvent the wheel every time we go on a mission," he said. "On the other hand, with denominational structures, they can sometimes become impersonal."

Harnessing enthusiasm and expertise

The phenomenon of short-term missions continues to flourish, and even relatively small churches can sponsor trips to nearby regions, such as Central America and the Caribbean. Overall, up to 1.6 million American Christians take part in overseas mission trips each year, with trips averaging about one week in length, according to research by Robert Wuthnow, a sociologist of religion at Princeton University. He estimates churches spend \$2.4 billion on these trips each year, and other researchers put the numbers even higher.

Questions to consider:

- What is your theology of mission, and how does it affect your practice of mission?
- How do you help mission volunteers move from the idea of helping people to the idea of entering into relationship with them?
- How well does your religious community partner with others? What's at stake in such partnerships?
- How do you help mission volunteers reflect on their experiences and incorporate their learning into their lives?

But in recent years, congregations and mission experts have begun to recognize the limits of short-term mission work and to look for ways to couple the energy and enthusiasm of local congregations with the expertise that's needed overseas.

Individual congregations that embark on mission work can repeat mistakes that easily could be avoided with better preparation and greater cooperation. A Washington Post story last year recounted some blunders, such as the church in Mexico that was painted six times in the course of one summer by six mission groups. The story also noted that holiday locales are preferred and that the Bahamas, for example, receive one short-term missionary for every 15 residents. Such American evangelizers sometimes are dismissed as "vacationaries."

Yet millions of U.S. believers have had their eyes opened to the reality of life in other parts of the world, as well as the faith that flourishes in Africa, Asia, Latin America and elsewhere.

"I would say the secret [of missions] is that it's really about our own transformation," Kemmerle said. It happened to him 25 years ago when he visited a Honduran refugee camp and saw the hope that people maintained, by faith, under unimaginable circumstances. "That experience of what faith can do for a people keeps me going to this day."

Local, national and global

Denominations and missionary associations -- once bypassed in favor of local efforts -- now are trying to help offer a larger strategic vision for missions and guidance on best practices they've developed over many years, Kemmerle and others said.

For example, a chief need overseas today is for professionals to give medical assistance or theological and ministerial training for indigenous pastors and lay people. Providing such personnel or supporting them is often beyond the capacity of any single church.

“Instead of trying to squelch or control it [short-term missions], we’re trying to help it,” said Steve Nelson, head of Global Mission for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Besides, he added, “It is hard to stop a freight train with a caboose.”

Nelson said the ELCA is developing ways to coordinate mission efforts among the 64 synods, or regions, to take advantage of the collective wisdom and resources of the denomination and congregations. Fifteen or 20 years ago, the ELCA had about 300 long-term missionaries in place around the world. Today there are just 150, and their numbers are falling. Financial support also has been diverted from denomination-centered mission to local and regional initiatives.

Kemmerle of the PCUSA said his organization is facing a similar adjustment. “We don’t encourage or discourage it. We recognize it’s happening, and we see our role as trying to do it effectively.”

He said the PCUSA is trying to foster networks of presbyteries whose congregations are working in particular areas to come together to share know-how.

Other bodies are adapting as well. In 2007, for instance, two venerable mission agencies, the Interdenominational Foreign Mission Association of North America and the Evangelical Foreign Mission Association changed their names to CrossGlobal Link and The Mission Exchange, respectively.

The changes reflect both the reality that many churches are “bypassing agencies as they do mission directly” and a globalized, interactive view of mission, Marv Newell, of CrossGlobal Link.

What makes a successful mission?

Successful international missionary work today depends on several factors, said Todd M. Johnson, director of the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

One is to look at mission work as a partnership rather than as well-to-do Americans doing something “for” a poor village in a foreign country.

Today, from denominations to megachurches, the new watchwords are “partnering,” “accompaniment” or “building capacity” for Christian communities that already exist.

“The generation of establishing churches has passed for us. It would not be our goal to plant the Lutheran flag in another country,” said Nelson of the ELCA. “It’s more to collaborate with churches that are already in existence and help them to be the church in their own environment.”

The best practice is to develop a sustained long-term relationship on the ground, Johnson said. He cited the example of his former Presbyterian church in Richmond, Va., which started, with three other churches, a business development center in southern Kazakhstan to train Kazakhs. They sent dozens of teams over the years.

The dynamic of these successful partnerships is generally one in which short-term missionaries serve as periodic infusions of energy for an ongoing project that is supported by long-term missionaries or established agencies. And that means congregations must be willing to stick with a project for the long haul.

“The urge to try new things each year is strong,” Essamuah said. “But we have a lot more measurable progress when we continue to go back to the same place.” This approach builds relationships; when a storm blows the roof off a church that U.S. missionaries built last year, the community knows those missionaries will be back next year to rebuild it.

Essamuah suggested that church leaders look for “natural linkages” or a connection someone in their congregation may have with an overseas Christian community. Essamuah’s Ghanaian roots made mission work in Ghana a natural fit, and because his wife is Ugandan, Bay Area was able to start work there, as well.

“Sending” congregations also first must listen to the communities with whom they are going to work to see what their needs are.

“Partnership means working with the church that Jesus Christ founded in each country so that the church can discern God’s will in that country for that place. So it’s not us going and deciding what the needs and priorities are,” Kemmerle said. “It’s not an easy way to work, but in the long run, it is the only way to work. And it is very rewarding and effective.”

Such an approach builds relationships, but it also builds expectations in the “receiving” church -- expectations that the U.S. partner must be ready to maintain.

“Keeping up the relationship is not easy,” Essamuaah said. “There are different cultural expectations. We write letters, for example, but others often have a much more oral culture. They appreciate a phone call much more than a lot of emails.”

‘One stitch at a time’

If national missionary organizations are changing to support local mission work, local congregations are adapting their practices as well.

First Baptist Church of Knoxville, Tenn., for example, has been sending mission teams to Croatia since 2004 as part of a partnering program with the Croatian Baptist Union. The principal aim of the Knoxville church is to support a pastoral center in Cakovec, Croatia, and to provide seminary extension textbooks and classes for Baptist pastors and church members enrolled in the Baptist Institute of Croatia.

Community Minister Carol McEntyre, who has led six of the church’s mission trips, said the connection “really dropped into our laps” in 2004 when the church, which has a Sunday attendance of about 700, was looking to get involved overseas. Members heard about the needs of the small but growing Baptist community in Croatia, and the relationship grew into a strategic partnership.

“It has become part of the DNA of our church,” McEntyre said. “What we have learned is that there is something to be said for going to one place and investing time and energy year after year.”

Last year, that partnership expanded when First Baptist started sponsoring its first long-term missionary, Elaine Childs. She is a congregant who is working in Cakovec as one of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship’s field personnel. In an interview with Associated Baptist Press, Childs compared her work in Roma villages to lace-making, which is a Croatian tradition.

“Most of life’s achievements come about because we make one tiny stitch at a time, and eventually something complete comes out of it,” Childs said.