

SHORT-TERM MISSION

WOULD YOU LIKE FRIES WITH THAT?

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The debate has long been brewing: are short-term mission trips a way to truly engage with our world? Or are they a consumer item – simply glorified Contiki tours for young Christians? This question was let loose at the recent Unearthed* gathering in Melbourne. With some witty banter, sarcasm and colloquial chatter, the debate began...



"I can't help but feel short-term mission has become the new consumer item for young Christians," said one mission-minded young adult. "It's the 'in' thing. It's what all good Christian twentysomethings should do if they're serious about faith. It adds to your 'Complete Christian' kit, alongside your Make Poverty History wristband, Third Day CD and 40 Days of Purpose key ring. It's the Christian's answer to Contiki!"

Sceptics argue that this generation of young Christians are spoilt for choice, and when it comes to mission, young people are choosing the cheap, expendable, short-term option.

They make the point that while short-term overseas experiences are all the rage, there is a distinct lack of interest in local communities.

One observer put it this way: "Where are the groups heading to the inner cities to care for the homeless or outer suburbs to spend time with refugees? Pay a few thousand bucks and consume the 'experience' of mission and travel, with little or no real cost."

Fuelling this unease is the fact that groups heading overseas predominantly consist of people from large, wealthy, white, Bible-belt churches. In turn, some say that short-term mission trips are a poor use of financial resources and a luxury that few people in the world can afford.

Affluent Christians can pay for it, but does this make it justifiable? Could their funds be better utilised? Working on the basis that the average mission trip to South East Asia costs roughly \$2,000 - \$3,000 per person, and multiplying this by a few hundred young adults¹, you have nearly \$1 million of missions funds spent on short-term trips with, arguably, no long term impact.

Cynics point out that this is enough to provide small business loans to over 8,000 people to help them break out of the poverty cycle. It's enough money to print over 140,000 Bibles in developing countries. God calls us to be good stewards of our money and we should, they contend, be investing in Kingdom projects and ministries where the fruit will long outlive the investment. It is a big upfront cost, but the question must be asked, would these young adults commit financially to missional work if they hadn't experienced it firsthand? **If they had no connection with long term cross cultural workers, would a young adult willingly contribute to their costs or is the pull towards a new flat screen TV too strong?**

The clinical nature of organisations in exploiting a new generation of young Christians who are paid up and ready to travel has also been brought into focus. Short-term mission trips, "have become a marketing dream," according to one youth pastor. DVDs, postcards and websites spruik short-term experiences, while mission agencies at conferences attempt to lure people in, claiming what they can do for the individual.



With so many destinations to choose from it's the same as consuming anything else. Like buying cereal at the supermarket. Which country will I go to this year? A quick Google search reveals the consumerist mindset which has permeated cross-cultural experiences. MissionFinder.org, for example, states: "Are you looking for a short-term mission trip? Not sure what you want to DO? Where you want to GO?"²

But this only tells half the story. Short-term enthusiasts counter that the increase in participation in short-term trips is based not on rampant consumerism, but a heart for Godly mission. Having experienced such a trip, one person put it this way: "We're actually a generation who cares about world needs and poverty, who wants to make a difference, to do justice and love kindness. We like to get involved, get our hands dirty, and be active rather than sitting in our cosy middle class homes talking about the could-bes and should-bes."

Adding weight to this argument, it has been suggested that mission trips are about stepping out of our comfort zones and obeying the Great Commission to 'Go and make disciples of all nations'.

If you really listen to the stories of people who have been overseas you can tell the difference between those who went as a consumer, and those who went to learn more about mission and deepen their experience of God. **The mission-minded people have had their hearts and lives changed – they've grown in their world perspectives and they've encountered God in a new way.** They've got a fire inside them that burns passionately. This can't come from consumerism – it's a fire that can only come from God. It's not the same as the thrill from buying a pair of boots.

Supporters of short-term mission trips contend that they allow people to learn and experience first hand what it means to live in hardship, what it looks, sounds and smells like to live in poverty, or what it means to be marginalised - uneducated, a woman, a child, or a foreigner in a developing country. People often return uncomfortable with their Western surrounds and by their right to freedom and choice.

These experiences widen young people's world view, lead to an increased sense of global awareness and connection, and result in evaluating what they do with their time and income. As well as this they return with greater passion, purpose and commitment to mission in their community. They see the long term worker's vision for transformation in a particular people group and are inspired with similar visions for the colleagues, neighbours and people groups in Australia.

While mission agencies do 'market' opportunities for short-term visits, they're not expecting three week trips to change the world. The emphasis is placed on exposure, learning and awareness rather than preaching on street corners or digging wells. The next generation of long-term workers will come from those who've had a taste.

Then there is the fact that God moves in and through these trips in powerful ways. The stories of those whose lives have been changed provide a compelling case which serves to derail the most hardened critic's reservations. "I know a couple that went on a mission trip to Indonesia, where they developed a passion for each other and the country," says a former missionary. "Today they're serving as career missionaries. The lives that have been changed make us realise that all the arguments about mission trips as consumer items are like when somebody farts in the wind. Sure, the ugly smell is there, but when the wind of the Spirit blows, who notices?!"

*The Unerthed Network involves regular interactions with other mission-minded young adults, aiming to shape culturally creative followers of Jesus. Unerthed gatherings focus on issues of global and local significance through the input of Global Interaction workers and others who are dynamic and inspiring communicators. www.globalxposure.net.au/unerthed

¹Approximately 230 people are involved in Global Interaction short-term trips in 2007.

²<http://www.missionfinder.org/summer.htm>