WHEN MISSION TURNS TOXIC

Posted on July 21, 2021 by Eddie

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Category: Short-Term Mission

I can't say that I've been enjoying Ours To Explore: Privilege, Power and the Paradox of Voluntourism by Pippa Biddle; as it is a very uncomfortable - if necessary - read. As the title suggests, the book takes a look at the rise in volunteering tourism; working in orphanages, hospitals, painting schools and the like. I'll be writing a fuller review in a day or two, but for the moment I just want to focus on one thing that struck me throughout the book.

> *Millions of voluntourists are booking trips based on what they want to do and where they want to go, not what skills they have or what communities really need.*

> *Orphanages are incentivized to maintain low standards of living because voluntourists and visitors want to see poverty.*

The book makes a clear case that much of the voluntourism industry is driven by the desires of the volunteers to have an experience and to feel good, rather than by what is actually needed in the communities that they are purporting to serve. Ultimately, this is at best unhelpful to the local communities and at worst, positively harmful. There is little evidence that short-term volunteers contribute positively to the development of the places that they visit.

My concern, is that we in the Christian mission industry can fall into this self same trap in a number of ways. Short-term mission trips, are sometimes crafted in a way that ensures that the people going on them have a positive experience, with much less concern about the needs and long-term good of those they will be visiting. I recall writing an article for a Christian publication in the UK which suggested that those going on short-term trips needed a basic minimum of training and preparation. An online commentator replied that I had no right to restrict the ability of young people to experience a mission-trip. Don't worry about the damage they might do or the mistakes they might make; the only important thing is that British kids have a spiritual experience.

I hasten to add, that not all short-term mission trips fall into this trap. However, some do and that number is bigger than we might like to think.

Another way in which we can fall into the same trap is the way in which we raise funds for mission projects. It is tempting to shape funding projects in such a way that their aims, methods and timelines appeal to Western donors, rather than focussing on the needs and realities of the people

that the project claims to be serving.

When the focus of our mission shifts to serving ourselves; whether that is in terms of short-term teams having a "spiritual" experience, donors feeling good about the way in which they have changed lives, or any other manifestation of the same thing, we have started to miss the point completely. This isn't to say that teams can't have a great time or that donors shouldn't feel excited about what God has done through them - but that is a secondary concern - not a primary motivation.

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However, the reality is that most mission agencies rely on a flow of short-term teams and/or donors who will fund projects. Short-term experiences are the best way to attract long-term missionaries, which are the agencies life blood and attractive projects which bring in money can ensure financial stability. Faced with this temptation, it is all too easy for agencies to loose sight of the central issue and to focus on what is most likely to attract support.

At this point, I suspect that any mission leaders reading this will sigh and say that they are glad that their agency doesn't fall into this trap. At which point, I would simply ask, "are you sure? Have you checked?".

It is all too easy to tailor our mission and our publicity to meet the needs of people at home so as to ensure a flow of people and money. However, such an approach to mission, which sidelines the needs of those we claim to serve (and, incidentally, also sidelines God) is toxic and ultimately doomed to failure. We need a rigorous approach to our publicity and actions if we are to avoid the trap. Good intentions are unlikely to be enough.