ISSUES WITH VOLUNTOURISM

Posted on July 28, 2014 by Eddie

"Imagine yourself as the survivor of a large disaster. Your house is gone, you have no assets, and no workâ€“no option of working to make money to rebuild. Three neighborhoods away thereâ€™s an INGO paying the local residents to do clean-up, etc. But in your neighborhood there are a bunch of international volunteers doing the clean-up around you. They donâ€™t speak your language, but you can see them laughing, having a great time. They eat three meals per day, but you eat only one. How do you feel?"
Category: Short-Term Mission

I would quite cheerfully, never write another blog post about short-term mission; it's a subject that we've covered fairly regularly over the years and I keep thinking that there is nothing new to add on the subject.

How wrong can I be?

J. the author of the excellent Missionary, Mercenary, Mystic, Misfit, has just written a blistering blog post about short-term volunteers in the aid and development world. I don't think everything he says is immediately transferable to the Christian mission world, but much of it is very, very relevant. I'll put a few highlights here with some of my own comments, but I strongly urge you to go and read the whole article along with the comments.

From the start of his post, J. doesn't leave us in any doubts about his thoughts:

> ***Letâ€™s not split semantic hairs**. I donâ€™t care what the title, designation, or salary package is. Iâ€™m against untrained, unqualified people dropping in for a few days/weeks/months to have an adventure or have a â€œgood experienceâ€ while making some nebulous contribution to some alleged greater good.*

> ***Aid and development are professions, not hobbies.**Â It takes specific knowledge, skill and experience to get this right. Aid is hard and complicatedâ€“getting it right is tough, even for professionals. If the point is helping for real, then leave that helping to those who know what theyâ€™re doing. The continued fixation on volunteers (or unqualified people with some other title traipsing around the field) speaks to a fundamental lack of respect for aid and development as actual professions.*

I will probably return to this at some point in the future; but cross-cultural communication of the Gospel is also very complicated. It concerns me that an increasing number of people are heading into cross-cultural mission (both short and long term) with very little training or orientation.Â We have accumulated hundreds of years of experience in this sort of work; it seems highly irresponsible that people would not wish to learn from that.

> ***Yes, but the local people really liked our volunteers!**Â This is a common one. Local people the world over are hospitable nice to outsiders.Â Just because volunteer aid workers wonâ€™t get sued for malpractice or driven from the field in the dead of night by angry villagers with torches and pitchforks doesnâ€™t mean they are either effective or appreciated. You have to get past the smiles and look at the evidence of what gets accomplished for real.Â*

This one rings so true. Hospitable people will make you feel welcome, it's what they do.

> ***But surely there is something volunteers can do? Grunt labor, maybe? The dirty work?***Â *In more than two decades of humanitarian aid and development work, I cannot recall a single real-world instance where it really made more sense to bring international volunteers than to simply hire local people.*

This doesn't just apply to 'grunt-work'. I know of well trained Christian professionals in African cities who find it difficult to get work because they are priced out of the market by volunteers from abroad who will come and do their jobs for nothing.

One area in which the aid and development industry is much stronger than most Christian mission work is in the area of measuring impact. They are generally much better equipped than we are to demonstrate the effectiveness of their programmes and to assess the impact of short-term volunteers.

These issues should not be avoided when we consider short-term mission (though all too often, they are). This doesn't mean that we should stop short-term work, but it does mean that we need to do it well and we need to do it responsibly.