IT'S NOT ABOUT YOU; IT MIGHT BE ABOUT THEM

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Category: Short-Term Mission

It is well known that banks are so keen to get students to open accounts with them that they offer all sorts of incentives. The logic is that most people are reluctant to change their bank accounts and if you can sign someone up at 18 you are likely to have gained a customer for life. What is less known, is that mission agencies think in the same way. If someone goes on a short-term mission trip with an agency, they may well turn into a lifelong supporter of that agency and they may even sign up as long-term missionaries. There is a lot at stake in short-term mission trips and many agencies indulge in hard sells to pull in the punters.

This is why articles like this one are important. Though not specifically aimed at the Christian world it makes a number of excellent points about volunteering in Africa (though the same principles apply around the world). If you don't have time to read the article, the title is self explanatoryÂ "Dear volunteers in Africa: please donâ€™t come help until youâ€™ve asked yourself these four questions".

I'd like to pick up on two things that are mentioned in the article.

Children

> *If they offer the opportunity to work with children, do they do background checks to ensure voluntourists donâ€™t have a history of abusive behaviour? If not, do you really think they care about the children they claim to help?*

If you want to be involved in working closely with children in the UK, you have to have a CRB check. It's a bother, no one likes doing it, but we acceptÂ that it is sadly necessary. The same should be true of any agency which sends people overseas to work with children. The problem is that when you say things like this, people complain that it is an unnecessary bureaucraticÂ hurdle. Do we really believe that African children don't deserve the same safeguards as those in the West?

Are You Qualified?

> *Itâ€™s also important to do projects that suit your skills, not just your desires. For example, a popular activity for many voluntourists is building structures. These structures could be houses, libraries, schools or other community buildings. The problem? Plenty of voluntourists donâ€™t actually have any building skills or experience. As a result, they often make unsound structures that could put locals in danger.*

If you have no experience of doing something at home, the likelihood of you being able to do it successfully in another country where you don't know the language or culture is pretty small.Â Just

being keen and well motivated isn't enough; volunteers and short-term missionaries actually have to have some concrete skills and experience to build on.

Where am I going with this?

The point is that good short-term mission trips are a lot of work and take a lot of money and a lot of organising. Those who want to go on a short-term trip have a duty to prepare themselves for the work they are hoping to do. This could involve a CRB check, some basic language study or some orientation to the situation. Good agencies will provide support in these areas and if they don't; avoid them.

The problem is, that when I suggest things like this, people don't always like it. I wrote an article on this subject in Christian Today a few months ago and some of the responses were very angry. One person said that I was quenching the Holy Spirit and another said that British Christians had a right to go on mission trips and that I shouldn't stand in their way.

The thing is, mission trips (short or long term) are about serving people and pointing them to Jesus. They are not about you having a transformative experience or feeling good. When the focus is on what the "missionary" gets out of the process, it ceasesÂ to be mission in Â any meaningful sense of the word. Jesus calls us toÂ lay down our lives for his sake and to take up our cross and follow him; in that light, a CRB check or a few orientation lectures are a small price to pay.

If agencies are not willing to insist that short-termers undergo a minimum of checking and orientation, then churches and individuals should avoid them. Similarly, if individuals are not willing to go through some orientation and preparation for their trip, they should simply stay at home.

For the record, I think that well planned and well prepared short-term mission trips can be of huge value. I also realise that they can be a massive blessing to the person who goes on them - but that is a by-product, not the purpose.Â