Complete Makeover Mission Trip Edition: Improving the Effectiveness of Mission Trips

Summer Murray
summermurray@unomaha.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/university_honors_program

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/university_honors_program/56
Complete Makeover Mission Trip Edition:

IMPROVING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF MISSION TRIPS

MAY 2019

Summer Murray
# Table of Contents

*Executive Summary* ......................................................................................................................... 3  
*Introduction* .................................................................................................................................. 4  
*Literature Review* ............................................................................................................................... 6  
  - What we’re getting right .................................................................................................................. 6  
  - How we're hurting ............................................................................................................................ 7  
  - How we can improve ......................................................................................................................... 9  
*Interviews* ......................................................................................................................................... 12  
  - Methodology .................................................................................................................................. 12  
  - Findings ......................................................................................................................................... 13  
  - Human impact ................................................................................................................................. 14  
  - Project impact .................................................................................................................................. 16  
  - Participant benefits .......................................................................................................................... 21  
  - Success .......................................................................................................................................... 24  
  - Conclusion ...................................................................................................................................... 27  
*Recommendations* ............................................................................................................................... 28  
  - Where do we go from here? ........................................................................................................... 28  
  - Preparation for relationships ......................................................................................................... 29  
  - Making room for relationships ...................................................................................................... 30  
  - Transforming relationships ............................................................................................................. 32  
  - After the trip is over ....................................................................................................................... 35  
  - Conclusion ..................................................................................................................................... 39  
*Appendix 1* ......................................................................................................................................... 40  
*References* ......................................................................................................................................... 43
Executive Summary

Mission trips are a rite of passage for many high schoolers -- a way to experience new cultures and economic backgrounds, as well as learn the concept of service. These trips can impact the way young people view the world around them and may lead to students becoming ambassadors for a certain organization or community later in life. However, missioners need to remember to evaluate their trips and make sure that they are truly helping the communities they intend to serve. This report explores some common mission trip practices using the relationship between the Episcopal Dioceses of Nebraska and the Dominican Republic as a case study.

The report is organized in three sections:

- A literature review summarizing how mission trips can help, hurt, and how they can improve
- Interviews with key players in both dioceses about their experiences and how missions have impacted their lives
- Recommendations for improving the effectiveness of future mission trips

The biggest takeaway from this report is that mission trips should be more about the cross-cultural relationships they create than the tasks they accomplish. Trip leaders can encourage relationships by preparing participants for the culture of the host community, providing opportunities to spend time with locals, helping participants reflect on what they are experiencing, and continuing communication through group video chat upon return. If these steps are followed, future mission trips can create lasting friendships between the communities, giving both a chance to learn from and help each other.
Introduction

The idea for this report started three years ago, as I was doing research for a class on the ways that cognitive biases may affect international development. I came across an article about how mission trips may actually do more harm than good, how they can create dependency and leave holes in communities after the mission team leaves. The article hit me hard, since I chose my undergraduate degree based on experiences I had on a mission trip I took in 2014. I realized the article had a lot of good points, and I started to wonder if the trip I took had hurt the community I worked with, some of whom I still call my friends.

I’ve spent the last few years talking about this with people from a lot of different backgrounds – classmates, parents, church goers, people who aren’t religious at all. I’ve scrolled through pictures of my friends on mission trips, painting churches and singing songs with kids, and I’ve wondered if they’re really making any difference. The world is a big place, full of tricky problems. Is sending unskilled teenagers there for a week really the best way to fix any of it?

I started writing this report thinking I could fix the system. I wanted to figure out what projects would truly help communities, what they needed instead of layers of paint and smiles. I wanted to tell mission teams to stop hugging kids and get to work. But what I found after talking to community members was that these trips were actually delivering exactly what they needed: friendships. Yes, the projects were helpful and improved their community, but what really impacted their lives was the fact that people thousands of miles away cared about them. Trip-goers cared about their struggles and their joys, they cared about learning from them, they cared about
keeping in touch after they left. Missioners and community members became real friends, the kind that wish each other happy birthday and check in to ask how the day was. The community came to know that they had another community that would always have their backs. That relationship was what exactly what they wanted. So it turns out that mission trips aren’t as problematic as I had thought.

What this report became is a reminder to mission trippers to focus on those friendships. Yes, work on projects that will help the community, but don’t forget to spend time simply being with the community as well. Laugh, cry, try new things, but also make time to reflect on what you’re experiencing and how those lessons can make a change in your life once you return. And when you get back, log on to Facebook, Instagram, or WhatsApp and say hi to the friends you just left. Let them know that they made a difference in your life that you won’t soon forget.
Mission trips have the potential to have a huge impact on the lives of participants. This can be an especially formative event for high school youth, and the results can be seen years after they return home. A study by Beyerlein, Trinitapoli, and Adler (2011) compared a group of 3,370 English and Spanish speaking youth between the ages of 13 and 17, some of whom had been on a short term mission trip and some who had not. They found that civic engagement -- which they broke down into political participation, financial donations, informal volunteering, and formal volunteering -- was higher in youth who had been on a mission trip than those who had not. The study controlled for outside factors like the civic and religious involvement of family and peers and found that the difference in all four activities was “positive and significant in every case” (p. 789). Mission trips correlated most strongly with formal volunteering, both secular and religious, and least with political participation. This study was one of the
first to compare mission trip participants to a non-mission trip control group, and it demonstrates that these trips add value to both the lives of participants and society.

There are also benefits for the communities being served. A case study of house construction in Honduras compared answers between families who had received a new house from local vs. foreign missionaries (Ver Beek, 2006). Although they found no differences in the level of satisfaction with the house or spirituality 1-3 years after the house was built, Honduran families reported that they learned about work ethic and unity from the North American missionaries. They also said they valued the chance to interact with other cultures and help break stereotypes about their own culture and community.

HOW WE’RE HURTING

Some common mission trip practices actually end up hurting the very communities they are trying to help. Jerry Bower (2013) explains that a traditional mission trip structure where communities are given free things can create cycles of dependency. For example, when a group builds a house for a family, who will take care of that house when it needs repairs? Recipients often aren’t given the tools or knowledge to take care of houses or other projects when they inevitably need service in the future. Another factor that is not taken into consideration is how the rest of the community feels about the house. There may be feelings of resentment toward the family that got the gift. In the long run, this may disincentivize families to make repairs on their own house or work to improve their situation, because they see that the family that is the worst off will receive the most benefits. Bower also mentions that mission trips that enter and leave communities suddenly can leave holes in the economy. Giving away free food or clothing can put local suppliers out of business, and when the mission
decides to focus their efforts elsewhere, there are no longer any local businesses that can fill that need. One final problem is that there is no discussion about any of these failures because all groups want to display their successes to draw in more participants. Without talking about the problems they will never be resolved.

“\textbf{The problems they are there to help with may be bigger than what can be accomplished in one or two weeks.}”

Mark Radecke (2010) also points out that mission trips can turn into “socioeconomic voyeurism” if we’re not careful (p. 22). This is especially true when participants don’t spend time interacting with the people they are there to help. Mission teams create tensions when they only interact among themselves -- eating, talking, and spending free time -- within their own group. Interaction with the community needs to be more than taking pictures with kids for a Facebook profile picture. Mission teams also need to understand that the problems they are there to help with may be bigger than what can be accomplished in one or two weeks. It is not beneficial to communities when projects are made up just so a group can see results in the time they’re there. It also hurts relationships with the community when a foreign group comes in and wants to completely change the way a task is done, leaving locals feeling obsolete. Radecke warns against creating a white savior complex in which the mission team rides into the middle of town and hands out gifts and supplies at random. It is much better to give the supplies to a local charity and let them distribute the goods according to need. One final way that mission teams can hurt the people they are trying to help is with their
carbon footprint. The effects of global warming are felt more strongly in many developing countries, and teams contribute to the problem through international flights. They should also be careful to buy sustainable or green materials wherever possible -- for example making sure that the matching shirts they order don’t come from a factory that violates labor laws.

HOW WE CAN IMPROVE

Andrew Root (2008) points out the dichotomy between youth mission trips as a service and as tourism. Week long mission trips to developing countries have become “the event” in the way that church camp was in the 80s and Christians concerts were in the 90s. Mission trips are an experience sold as a way to see the world as much as they are to help others, and because of this, kids see them as a checklist. They go, build a house, paint a room, try the local food, and buy souvenirs. The entire trip is about doing something, and once it’s done they take away memories that will eventually be replaced by new experiences. Root suggests that if we shift the focus from “what are we doing?” to “who will we be with?” participants may be more likely to make a connection with the community (p. 317, emphasis added). If they go to listen, understand, and empathize with their problems then they will come home perplexed, contemplating their place in the world rather than simply happy to have helped people. Week long mission trips by teenagers are too small to solve the big problems, but they can help build bridges in the world. Youth should go to be a part of the existing local mission, rather than coming with their own agenda. They should also prepare to be open to the experience by learning about the local culture and politics, watching documentaries, and reading literature from native authors. Participants should also strive to make those communities an active part of their lives after they
return home -- the experience isn’t a one-and-done but an opportunity to open their eyes to other worlds and understand where they fit in.

Michael Simmelink (2013) points out that the type of aid given should be in line with the stage the community is in. This is based off advice from Roger Sandberg, director of Medair in Haiti. He says that aid should be divided into three stages: relief, rehabilitation, and development. Most mission trips happen during the development stage, when communities are trying to be self sustaining and the missionaries are trying to work themselves out of a job. It can be harmful to these communities if mission groups try to carry out activities that belong in the relief or rehabilitation stage, for example giving out clothing and food. They should focus instead on enabling
the community to do for themselves. Short term mission groups should also always work with long term missionaries -- people who are on the ground for two or more years. These people will have a better sense of what the community needs and where they can fill in gaps. Finally, mission teams should always ask the community for input and give them control over what projects are being carried out.

“Focus instead on enabling the community to do for themselves.”
Interviews

METHODODOLOGY

Interviews were conducted with twelve individuals who had been involved with diocesan level mission work. These individuals fell into four categories -- trip participants, trip leaders, community members, and Dominican Republic mission staff. The final category included both local priests and mission trip coordinators. Interview participants were selected through snowballing, a process in which an initial known source identifies other people who would also be good interview candidates (Berg, 2001, p. 33). Participants were also identified through self-selection. Members of the NE2DR Facebook page, a group of 117 members who have been involved in some way with the Nebraska - Dominican Republic missional relationship, were asked to volunteer to answer questions for the study. Interviews were conducted in a variety of ways in order to reach the geographically diverse subjects. Conversations took place in person, through video calls, over email and Facebook messenger, and by phone. Participants were asked one of five sets of questions depending on which group they were a part of (see Appendix 1). Interviews were semi standardized -- questions were predetermined, but probes for further information and clarification were used where necessary (Berg, 2001, p. 70).
FINDINGS

Over the course of these interviews, several themes emerged. The biggest was the relationships that have been built between the Nebraska team and the Dominican Republic community. Every subject interviewed spoke about the friendships they had created and how these had impacted their life. The impact of physical projects were also discussed and looked at from several angles. Another theme was benefits to the participants, and how the mission trip changed their lives and daily routines. Finally, subjects spoke about the success of their trips and the keys to making them successful.
HUMAN IMPACT

One theme emerged across all interviews, among all groups of people: the biggest impact mission trips have is through building human connections. Trip leader Julius Ariail emphasizes that “tangible results... are not as important as the villagers knowing that we care enough about them to come 1,500 miles each year just to work alongside them on a variety of projects and share common experiences -- and for us to learn more about their way of life” (personal communication, Feb 24, 2019). This sentiment is echoed by participants who say they still keep in touch with in the DR and chat with them through Facebook Messenger on a regular basis. DR community member Yefri Victoriano says that “the most interesting part is that you can share and know and understand a person you’ve never met in such a short time” (personal communication, Feb 17, 2019). This emphasis on human connections and interactions aligns with Ver Beek’s (2006) study which found that community members valued personal connections and the chance to show foreigners their way of life. The study showed that communities were willing to accept smaller economic benefits and fewer projects completed in exchange for the relationships they built with mission teams (p. 482). Mission work has joined in friendship the Nebraska team and the Dominican Republic community, and this connection seems to be the most important factor to both sides.
These personal connections that have grown over the years have led to help being given even outside of the week long mission trip period. Trip leaders Don and Melissa Peeler told a story of a young teacher whose teaching certificate had expired. She didn’t have the money to renew it, and therefore would be unable to continue working in the local school. The Peelers paid for the classes she needed to renew it, and she was able to continue serving the community. This is a need that may not have been met had the woman not had a connection to people outside her community. That relationship, fostered through years of work in the DR community, created a solution to a problem that may have otherwise been difficult to solve.

Not all relationships that are created have quite the same positive outcomes, however. Ellen Snow, who spent 16 years in the Dominican Republic coordinating mission teams, recounts several stories of foreigners who just didn’t understand the community needs. One couple became attached to a child and wanted to take him on a trip to Disneyland. While it’s a nice sentiment, Ms. Snow explained to them that there were more urgent needs that weren’t being met. The child’s family didn’t have the financial backing to send him to school, and that money would be better spent in the form of a scholarship. This is less fun than taking a child to Disneyland, but more beneficial for the child and the community as a whole. Another couple wanted to adopt a child they met. Ms. Snow reminded them that there would be many legal hoops to jump through, as well as a huge cultural adjustment for the child who had lived his entire life in the Dominican Republic. Both of these stories serve as a reminder that missioners need to be aware of their limitations and realize that what may seem helpful for their new friends may in fact be harmful.
Every mission team that heads to the Dominican Republic has a project to work on during the week. These range from building and repairing houses, playgrounds, schools, and churches; holding Vacation Bible School; teaching a skill; holding medical clinics; and music programs. Traditionally, these projects are all coordinated through the diocesan offices by long term missionaries like Ellen Snow. Ms. Snow says teams would reach out to her with their proposed budget and skills, and she would match them with a project that fit their talents. A list of potential projects was kept on file and updated regularly by talking with local priests to find out what had been done and
what was still needed. This process follows what other studies (Simmelink 2013, Radeke 2010) suggest in working with people on the ground to perform a service that is truly needed by the community.

Leaders Don and Melissa Peeler say they prefer to coordinate with local contacts when deciding on a project. They talk with a local priest, community member, or long term missionary to figure how they will spend the week. They come in with their own ideas about what they want to do -- build, paint, teach -- but let the community tell them where those skills are most needed. This compromise doesn’t follow exactly what current literature suggests, but it does still utilize community input. On occasion, they have gone against community suggestions. On one trip their small group had only a few days to work on a building that is a combined church and school. The priest asked them to spend their time making repairs in the parish hall, but upon seeing the mold in the classrooms the group decided to focus on scraping mold and painting in the school. They said they would prefer for their project to more directly benefit the children. It is reasonable for volunteers to want to pick their projects, and having safer, mold-free classrooms undoubtedly benefited the children, but it wasn’t the project they were initially asked to do. On another trip their group brought projectors, speakers, and videos and set up a media room for schoolkids to use. These materials were not requested by the community, but the group was sure that they had the capabilities to connect and use the technology. When they returned a year later, they found the room was also being used for adult education classes. Here again the group implemented a project outside of what the community had asked for, and it had unintended positive consequences.
Some studies have raised concerns about the impact of projects after the mission team leaves. Bowyer (2013) questions whether unequal giving creates tensions among community members: “What happens when the other community members see that this one family got lucky, and they won the charity lottery?” But priest Ramon Garcia explains “Naturally, where there are many needs there will always be people that will not be satisfied to see that help was given to others. It’s not a big problem because they treat it as a gift. The people know that not everyone can be helped at the same time” (personal communication, Feb 17, 2019). Some projects mission teams carry out benefit only some parts of the community -- rabies clinics for pet owners, bracelet making classes for teenagers, knitting classes for women -- so perhaps there is an understanding that everyone will be served eventually. Other projects benefit the majority, such as improvements to the school and church, and fiestas for the entire community. In this particular community, there seems to be enough activity that one family “winning the charity lottery” doesn’t fracture the rest of the group.
Another common concern is that projects that groups complete will fall into disrepair after the group leaves. Communities may not have the money, technology, or time for the upkeep required. Don and Melissa Peeler vouch for this when they say they have seen rooms full of silent, dead equipment like lawnmowers, abandoned after they break down or even run out of gas. The small, rural community to which they were gifted doesn’t have the resources to make simple repairs or acquire gas. Nevertheless, the community continues to ask visitors for lawn mowers, a request the Peelers turned down because they knew the impact would only last as long as the gas tank. One other way the Nebraska team has dealt with this concern is by working in the same community every year. When they see that a playground they built needs repairs, they can make that part of their schedule for the week. The team also works in partnership with groups from other states to ensure that projects are completed and cared for.

“Communities may not have the money, technology, or time for the upkeep required.”

Several studies state that mission teams should absolutely not hand out free things directly to community members (Radecke, 2010; Bowyer, 2013; Simmelink, 2013). This results in dependency and undermines the local economy. If mission teams really want to give donations, they should be done through the local church or a long term missionary who better understands the needs of the community and can distribute accordingly. However, because of the close relationships they have developed with members of the community, Don and Melissa Peeler often bring hand-me-downs from
their grandsons to friends with kids. They have visited villages with long term missionaries, handing out cereal and candy to children as they went along. This is different than teams handing out freebies at random to a community they don’t know, but it does still go against what current literature suggests.

One suggestion that has been brought up (Radecke, 2010) is to buy sustainable materials wherever possible. There is a cruel sense of irony to mission teams using materials made in a sweatshop that hurts the very people they are trying to help. Buying responsibly made products for use on the trip ensures that good is being done for all stakeholders, not just the community being served. In an ideal world, these products could be bought as close to the community as possible, to help spur economic growth. But Don Peeler explains that this is not always possible. His team has begun to bring their own brushes and scrapers for painting, because buying them from the town supply shop has proven frustrating. Even though money is sent in advance for all materials that will be needed, sometimes teams arrive and find that the materials have not been purchased. Picking up paintbrushes can turn into a three hour ordeal when the shop is out or closed at odd hours. Their group has decided to avoid the uncertainty and bring their own supplies. The local economy doesn’t get a boost from their purchases, but in tradeoff more work is done for the community with the time they save not tracking down supplies.
PARTICIPANT BENEFITS

A primary focus for the Nebraska team seemed to be giving the youth who went a fulfilling, spiritual experience. Leaders spoke proudly about the transformation that was evident in the youth, from their departure as a nervous, unconnected group to the third day when everything seemed to “click.” After that participants bonded as a team and began to try to express in words the feelings they had about their work in the community. Nightly debrief sessions for the teams are often marked by crying, hugging, and contemplative silences as the group tried to reconcile their own lives with the lives of their new friends in the Dominican Republic, realizing just how lucky they are. Over the years, participants and leaders alike have said they can clearly see God in the work they are doing. This emphasis on spirituality and trying to understand the lives of community members is important, because according to Root (2008), it creates a better opportunity for participants to take their experience forward into their lives. Speaking of the privileged as tourists and the economically challenged as vagabonds, he says:

When our mission trips are about doing something, then like good tourists we are free to move on and eventually forget them, for we have done our part and now it is time to move on to another experience…

Instead of kids feeling empowered because they have done something (what a great experience!), they should come home perplexed, recognizing how knotted the world is, and how our own advantage as tourists is borne on the backs of vagabonds. They should come home having sought to understand another as near to God, and therefore to see their own lives and recognize their own connection and disconnection from others who are forced to live as vagabonds. (318)
Throughout the trip, participants are given time to explore their feelings about what they are seeing and doing: the inequality, the joy, the suffering. As a result, participants said they continued to think about their experiences after they returned home, and even changed the way they carried out their daily lives. Two time participant Elizabeth Nelson says “It has absolutely changed my life. I have changed the way I do things. Before, I wasn’t super thankful for everything I had here. I wasn’t always the most loving person I could be. After, I am always more cognizant of other cultures, I treat my family more lovingly, and I became closer to God. Words can’t describe how this trip has changed me. It means so much to me, that I got the tattoo of the Dominican Republic on my leg, with “Con mucho amor” above it. Ever since after my first trip, I always try to live my life “con mucho amor”. After my first trip I became excited for church, I became more eager to take on the day. I feel as though this trip impacted my life enough that I feel as though I left my heart there. My home will forever be in the Dominican Republic” (personal communication, Feb 14, 2019). Participant Jake McCaffrey echoes this sentiment of change: “Before I went on this trip, I was like ‘it’s all about me. I gotta get my life on track.’ After, I realized that maybe it’s not all about us. I think there’s more important things in the world than just caring about yourself. It definitely moved me as far as caring about others and not judging people for certain
things” (personal communication, Feb 20, 2019). These effects can be seen in the long run as well: 30 years after her first experience with mission work, Noelle Ptomey is certain that it impacted her youth. “Over time, I can look back and say for sure that trip changed me - it was one of the first times I looked outside myself. It was one of the first times I realized how different places could be. But most of all I learned that life is hard for many people (by American standards), but I also learned there was joy to be had. And that the people we met were generous and joy-filled” (personal communication, Feb 22, 2019). Trip leader Jim Drazdowski comments, “You measure the success by whether or not the team members have gotten something out of it” (personal communication, Feb 28, 2019). In the minds of these youth participants, the trip wasn’t truly over after they returned home. Because the trip was about people and community, not just tasks, they didn’t simply check it off their lists when they came back. The projects were over, but the community and those experiences remained in their thoughts, and began to change the way they think about the world.

Trip leaders have been similarly affected by these experiences. This can be seen in the way they talk about the connections they have with community members and the number of return trips they have taken. Leader Lauren White says “We were fortunate to experience such unconditional love from first strangers, then friends, then those who became family” (personal communication, Feb 20, 2019). Noelle Ptomey remarks that she first wanted 

“After, I realized that maybe it’s not all about us. I think there’s more important things in the world.”
to go on a mission trip after seeing her dad return from a medical mission trip noticeably changed and with a new world view that impacted her upbringing. Don and Melissa Peeler often refer to community members as family, and they keep up to date on daily happenings in their lives. The Peelers are planning their seventh mission trip to the Dominican Republic, and admit that they have considered moving there. Leader Julius Ariail has been to the country 29 times on various mission projects, leading his own church team six times. It is clear that the trips have impacted their lives in a way that lasts longer than just the week they’re on the island. They may have checked projects off their lists, but they continue returning and sharing their mission because of their connection to the community and the way they have fit their paths together.

SUCCESS

In a further testament to the emphasis that is placed on connections, every subject who was asked defined success of the mission trip in terms of relationships. From the community perspective, local priest Ramon Garcia says “A successful mission trip in my opinion is that which establishes a bond between both countries and dioceses represented in the groups, it is successful when the experience affects both in a positive manner and this can help in the mission of each diocese” (personal communication, Feb 17, 2019). Leader Jim Drazdowski measures success in terms of how participants feel, which he says can be clearly seen in their involvement in future mission trips. Leader Julius Ariail says “The purpose of the trip is to be there with the people of the village for a week” (personal communication, Feb 24, 2019). Youth participants added a little more about the success and impact of the physical projects they completed, but also mentioned relationships. Jake McCaffrey comments, “I think it was a huge impact. You could tell by the looks on their faces when they saw all that
work completed. Not even the work itself, but us as people. They love it when people come and spend time with them” (personal communication, Feb 20, 2019). In general, youth participants mentioned the work they did first, but they spent more time explaining the friendships they made.

Trip coordinator Ellen Snow believes that the unifying factor in successful teams is good preparation. Groups need to have a plan before they enter the country: this includes knowing how to do the project they will spend their week working on, establishing a relationship with the other team members, and, most importantly, understanding the country and community’s culture. For many participants, a mission trip is their first experience with international travel, and differences between US and Dominican Republic culture can cause problems if participants are not anticipating
them. She cautions visitors, “Before you speak, observe. After, comment about what
you saw and ask someone to explain. A lot of times, what you see is not really what’s
going on” (personal communication, Feb 18, 2019). Root (2008) agrees when he
asserts that groups need to be prepared to understand the world they are walking
into. He suggests youth learn not only about the culture they will visit, but that they
ask questions of their own culture to try and understand how the two fit together (p.
319). This seems to be an approach that the Nebraska team has adopted. Jake
McCaffrey comments that a large part of the preparation was mental -- focusing on
how the environment, food, and people would be different. The team met several
times before they left to prepare both logistically and emotionally, as well as give
everyone an opportunity to meet their fellow team members.

“Not even the work itself, but us as people. They love it when people come and spend
time with them.”

As a final note to teams on how they could maximize their success, Ellen Snow says “A
smile goes a long way, politeness goes a long way -- even if you don’t speak the
language. Above all, be respectful, even in facial expressions. A person can tell if you’re
disgusted or upset or angry. It’s important that you be kind. North Americans are not
thought of highly in a lot of Latin America because of the few people that have
mistreated them. You have to prove yourself that you are wanting to help them. If you
prove yourself to be that way then their hearts are open. Never go in with the attitude
that you know better” (personal communication, Feb 18, 2019).
CONCLUSION

No matter who is speaking -- participants, leaders, community members, coordinators -- mission trips seem to have made a huge impact on the lives of all involved. Many of the practices that the Nebraska team follows in their trips to the Dominican Republic seem to align with the best practices current literature suggests. Some practices diverge from these suggestions, but they are supported by counter arguments and reasons for doing so. Over and over again, those interviewed spoke of the impact their relationships and projects had for all involved. They also pointed out how the trips had changed their lives for the better and expanded on why they thought they had been so successful. Interview subjects were all pleased to have the chance to explain why the trips have been meaningful to them, a sentiment perhaps best explained by participant Elizabeth Nelson when, speaking of the Dominican Republic, she said “Honestly, I can’t wait to go home. Sometimes I get homesick.”
Recommendations

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

To improve upon the existing structure of short term youth mission trips, we need to look at how success is defined. Traditionally, in promoting the trip and explaining past experiences, an emphasis is placed on the tasks that are completed. But after listening to trip participants and community members talk about the impact mission trips have had in their lives, it became clear that the most important thing being built is relationships, not houses. People who have been a part of mission trips define success in terms of relationships; the rhetoric around these trips needs to change to mirror that. When recruiting participants for a trip, leaders should talk first about the human connections they will experience, leaving the physical tasks as a secondary agenda item. As participants fundraise and talk with their church community, the focus should be on the lasting friendships they will create and the good that will come of that. Since relationships are the most impactful part of the trip, communication and conversations about the trip should reflect that. We need to be honest about what we are there to do and what we are proudest of.
If the ultimate goal of mission trips is to build relationships, participants need to be given the foundation and tools for creating these connections before they set foot on the plane. It is important that pre-departure information discusses who they will be with and why they are going, not just what the team will do. This could include stories from past participants about their interactions with the community and the challenges and triumphs they faced. Pictures of the community, the buildings and houses there, the clothing people wear, and the food they eat could be used to help participants form a clearer image in their minds of what to expect. Trip leaders should talk about economic conditions and what an average standard of living looks like.

Participants should be briefed on the cultural differences between the two countries -- and they should understand that these differences are numerous and not just limited to the ones they discuss. This information doesn’t all have to come from trip leaders -- participants can do their own research and talk about their own past experiences. Learning could come from watching movies, reading books, or analyzing song lyrics. All of this pre-departure information serves two purposes. First, it gives participants an idea of what to expect and how to interact with a new group of people.

**Pre-departure checklist**

- What does the community look like?
- How is their economy different?
- What is an average standard of living?
- How are food and clothing different?
- What are some major cultural differences?
- How do past participants describe their experiences and interactions?
- How do movies, books, and songs describe this culture?
people. Second, it sets team meetings up as a safe space to share ideas and reflect on experiences. This idea will become especially important during the week the team is away, when discussions can help them make sense of their new situation.

MAKING ROOM FOR RELATIONSHIPS

During the week of mission work, teams should prioritize spending time with community members. Locals are already a big part of the projects that are carried out, working alongside mission teams to construct and build for their town. Encourage participants to talk with community members as they work. When language barriers prevent traditional conversations, remind participants that a lot can be learned through pantomiming and facial expressions. Communities that see many mission groups may be used to communicating in creative ways -- in interviews, even participants who did not speak any Spanish said they made friends with Dominicans. Not speaking the same language can be intimidating, but it doesn’t prevent forming relationships if both parties work a little harder.

Another way trip leaders can foster relationships is by pairing small groups of participants with locals for projects. Participants may naturally gravitate toward their own similar peers, so providing a structure for them to meet new people can be helpful. This setup also allows community members to take charge of the projects, tailoring it more to their own needs and demonstrating their worth. In Ver Beek’s (2010) case study on Honduran house construction, he found that while the Hondurans felt they learned work ethic and unity from working alongside Americans, they didn’t feel they taught the Americans anything of equal value. To counteract this feeling,
mission trips should allow locals to take the lead and show participants how to build or paint.

Another area in which mission teams could increase interaction is during meal times. The Nebraska teams have usually eaten three meals a day as a group inside the housing complex. Sharing food is seen as a way to form and strengthen friendships in both American and Dominican culture, so these meals are a huge opportunity to make room for new relationships. The easiest meal to share would be lunch, since the mission team and community members are already working together on their tasks when they break for food. Community members could be invited to eat with the mission team and relax with them in the space after the meal. This also helps to break down the “us” and “them” mentality that can happen when the group that had been working as one splits in the middle of the day. Working and eating together helps solidify the team mentality and the idea that the groups are interacting as equals, which creates a space for new relationships.
TRANSFORMING RELATIONSHIPS

Equally as important as creating opportunities for friendships to form is intentional discussion and reflection about them. Mission trips are usually only a week long, not quite enough time to make a meaningful impact in the life of a participant if taken as an isolated event. However, through conversations and self-reflection during and after the week, the experience can carry over. There is a chance for transformative learning to take place, a concept coined by Jack Mezirow in 1975. According to his theory, everyone views the world through a set of assumptions, which have been both consciously and unconsciously learned from the people and events in one’s life. These assumptions dictate the way we interpret the world around us and make decisions. However, when someone experiences a “disorienting dilemma” there is an opportunity to challenge and change assumptions. Mezirow breaks this change down into ten phases, but the most important factor is reflection -- self reflection as well as reflection about the environment. Without this key element, a significant event like a mission trip will remain just a cool story that a participant occasionally tells.

With this concept in mind, trip leaders can begin to prime participants to reflect. Daily discussions about what the participants are seeing and feeling can turn the experience into one with lasting significance. Leaders should keep in mind Mezirow’s three types of reflection as they ask questions. The first is content reflection -- what am I thinking, feeling, and doing? This is the broadest category where participants can begin talking about what has happened on the trip so far. Leaders can probe with questions about what participants thought about a specific event, how they reacted, and how they think others might feel. The goal is to get participants to recall their thoughts and actions. The second type of reflection is process -- how did I deal with those thoughts,
feelings, and actions? This is questions about which thoughts they acted on and which they kept to themselves, how their actions differed from what they might do at home, and how they felt about their thoughts and feelings. The third reflection type is premise -- why did I have those thoughts and feelings? This is the most important category because it gets to the heart of the assumptions participants have about the world and forces them to examine the validity of those assumptions. Leaders can ask participants about an “aha” moment they had, where they realized that an idea they came in with about a situation, person, or place was not reflective of reality. Try to get participants to pinpoint where those assumptions came from. This is also the time that participants should begin to think about and express why these experiences are important. The ultimate goal is for them to be able to answer the question “why does this matter to me personally?” Reflection is a process, and participants may not have answers right away or even during the week of the trip, but the important part is that trip leaders start them on this path of thinking.
Content Reflection
What am I thinking, feeling, and doing?
- How did I feel when this event happened?
- How did I react to this event?
- How do I think others may have felt?

Process Reflection
How did I deal with those thoughts, feelings, and actions?
- Which thoughts did I act on? Which did I ignore?
- How did my actions differ from what I would do at home?
- How do I feel about my thoughts and feelings?

Premise Reflection
Why did I have those thoughts and feelings?
- What “aha” moments did I have? Where did I realize my assumptions are different from reality?
- Where did my assumptions come from?
Using a transformational learning approach and providing opportunities for critical reflection increases the likelihood that the trip will have a lasting impact on participants. For the participants interviewed, that impact could be seen in their continuing friendships with community members, desire to return to the Dominican Republic, and increased gratitude. These changes had a positive impact on the lives of the community members as well, as they expressed their joy at having friends across the ocean that care about their lives. Nebraska’s diocesan mission trips have traditionally included daily check-ins and discussions, which may be a key factor in their impact on participants. Participants and leaders who were interviewed from other dioceses that did not have daily reflections seemed to place greater importance on tasks completed rather than relationships. This doesn’t make their work less meaningful, but it does suggest that those groups had fewer long-term cross-cultural relationships. If the goal of mission trips is to create friendships that endure beyond the week, then reflection is critical.

AFTER THE TRIP IS OVER

The work isn’t over after the team comes home. If trip leaders continue to be in contact with participants, they can encourage two more great outcomes: a lasting impact on their lives and continued relationships with community members. In a study on the impact of short term study abroad experiences (Rowan-Kenyon & Niehaus, 2011), students repeatedly reported that it wasn’t the ten days abroad that changed their lives, but what they did after returning. The time after the trip is just as important as the trip itself, and leaders should strive to take full advantage of it.
One way that participants can continue to make meaning from the trip is by talking with others about it. This could be in informal conversations with their families and friends or in more structured presentations. In many trips, the church community as a whole provides funding or other support for mission trip participants. Trip-goers can give back to the community by hosting a dinner or presentation where they recall their experiences. Putting their thoughts and emotions from the week into words for an outside audience is another exercise in reflection. Participants can also be encouraged to talk to others who are thinking of going on a trip and explain why it was meaningful for them. Those who just returned from a trip will be some of the best recruiters and resources for the next year’s participants.

Leaders can also help participants find ways to stay in contact with the community members they left behind. In the community the Nebraska team has created a relationship with, many of the locals have reliable access to computers, internet, and Facebook. Lots of past participants are Facebook friends with community members, and they report regularly seeing updates about their lives and using Messenger to chat with their friends. The Nebraska team has the opportunity to take this one step further and use Facebook to connect between groups, rather than just between individuals. The community in the Dominican Republic has a media room in their church, equipped
with a projector, speakers, and internet capability -- a project from a past mission trip. Thousands of miles away, the Nebraska community has a similar media room, and through the magic of the internet the two groups could be connected once again. Trip-goers and community members could gather occasionally and meet digitally through Facebook video or Skype. These services are usually reliable and would provide a chance to recreate the big community feeling that participants value. It also gives individuals who are not bilingual more of a chance to talk, since there are people who can translate for the group on both the Nebraska and Dominican Republic sides. Finally, the group meeting format includes individuals who may not have made the kind of personal connections where they feel comfortable chatting on Facebook, but still want to see and hear from their new friends.
Mission trip leaders could coordinate with local priests or community leaders to set a time once a month to video chat between the two groups. Leaders on both sides are familiar with church discussion groups -- youth group, Bible study, or a similar format. Drawing from this experience, they could lead the group through a related activity. Open with life updates from everyone -- what the best and worst parts of the week were, what they’re looking forward to, major local news. Move on to reading a passage from the Bible or a book and then allow everyone to react. Leaders can ask a few questions relating the scripture to today’s world and paying special attention to the similarities and differences of answers between the two cultures. All of the discussion will have to be translated on both sides, so keep the number of questions small and allow for organic conversations to flow. End with prayer and an opportunity for final thoughts.

The Bible study format is one that both groups are familiar with, and it connects them through their shared church experiences. Open ended questions leave room for discussion, not just about the Bible but current issues and controversial topics as well. Both communities have a lot to learn from each other, and they can continue to do so even as they are separated by thousands of miles. Equally as important as the topics discussed is the time spent together. Community members and trip participants alike spoke about the significance of their continued presence in each other’s lives. Creating a space for the groups to see each other and be a joined community again on a regular basis can strengthen that shared bond. Instead of contact decreasing after the trip ends, it can continue to be a normal part of everyone’s lives.
CONCLUSION

The goal of all of these recommendations is to shift the trip focus from tasks to people. It starts before the trip by priming participants to think in terms of relationships and preparing them for what they will experience. During the trip, reflection is encouraged using the three types of reflection found in transformational learning. And after the missioners leave, they are encouraged to continue thinking and sharing their experiences with others. The friendships forged during the trip can continue individually and through group video calls. Both communities can learn from each other as they talk through their faith and support each other through their individual highs and lows. The longest lasting impact of mission trips, both for participants and the communities they serve, is the relationships they create. If we can structure trips to foster relationships, it is possible they can grow to make everyone’s world a little better.
Appendix 1

Mission Trip Participants
1. When did you go on a mission trip to the DR?
2. Why did you decide to go?
3. Was this your first experience with mission work? Was this your first experience with international travel?
4. How did you prepare for the experience?
5. What did you do while there?
6. What were your interactions with the community like?
7. What impact do you think your trip had on the community?
8. Have connections with people in the DR impacted your life since returning?
9. Has knowledge about the DR and the experiences of people there impacted your life since returning? Have you changed the way you do things, or started or stopped doing things, as a result of the trip?

Mission Trip Leaders
1. How many mission trips have you led? What years?
2. What aspects have changed over time? What has remained constant?
3. What does the process of putting together a schedule for the mission trip look like?
4. What is communication with the DR staff and community like during the planning phase?
5. How do you prepare participants before you leave?
6. What is interaction with the community like during the trip?
7. How do you talk with participants about the new experiences they are having throughout the week?
8. What impact have the trips had on the community?
9. How do you measure the success of a mission trip?
10. Do you follow up with participants about their experiences after the trip is over? What did they say?

Community Members
1. How did you get involved with visiting mission teams?
2. What is the best interaction you’ve ever had with a mission team? What’s the worst?
3. What were your interactions with the Nebraska mission team like?
4. How did their presence affect your community in the week they were in the DR?
5. What impact did the project they completed have on your community?
6. If you could change one thing about these mission trips, what would you change?

DR Mission Trip Staff (Priests)
1. How does the agenda for visiting mission teams get set?
2. When groups build a house or do something that specifically benefits one family, how is that family chosen? How does the rest of the community feel about this?
3. If you could have mission teams do any task for a week, what would be the most helpful for the community?
4. Are jobs that teams do ever not helpful or even harmful to the community?
5. How do you see the community being affected during the week the mission team is there?
6. How would you define a successful mission trip?

7. What ministries are being carried out in the community by the diocese outside of the mission trip season?

8. Could visiting mission teams be helpful to these other ministries?

9. How do the projects teams complete impact the community a year after they leave? Five years?

DR Mission Trip Staff (Coordinators)

1. How does the agenda for visiting mission teams get set?

2. Do you prepare the communities in any way for the arrival of mission teams?

3. Are jobs that teams do ever not helpful or even harmful to the community?

4. What have been some of the long term impacts of projects and interactions after mission teams leave the country?

5. When teams do a project that specifically benefits one person or family, like build a house, how is that family chosen? Is there ever backlash from the rest of the community?

6. How would you define a successful mission trip?

7. What’s the common factor in teams that are the most successful?

8. What is the single most important things for mission teams to keep in mind?
References


