Short-term mission trips: Beyond good intentions

by Paul Jeffrey in the December 12, 2001 issue

After Hurricane Mitch devastated Central America in 1998, hundreds of volunteer mission teams descended on Nicaragua and Honduras. Many came from churches in the United States. At times the region's threadbare airports were filled with herds of North Americans wearing T-shirts with slogans like "Jesus for Honduras," "Mission to Nicaragua 2000" and "Christ Loves Central America." Ushered past beggars into waiting vans, these churchpeople embarked on an adventure of solidarity that marks a shift in how we understand mission.

The concept of sending mission teams for short-term work has grown increasingly popular in U.S. congregations. People are not excited about sending their dollars off to faceless mission agencies; they want to become personally involved. Encouraged by the testimony of others who have had a life-changing experience in a Third World country, they want to "do mission" themselves.

Two other influences—the spread of the Internet and the increasing popularity of direct covenant relationships between churches—have diffused the role of denominational agencies. Plotting denominational mission strategies has become more difficult, in part because mainline mission executives first tried to ignore this paradigm shift, then tried in vain to shape it. Today, most accept the decentralizing trend as a legitimate movement that needs to be nudged in the right directions.

Latin Americans have had to take account of the changes too. Gone are the days of receiving block grants, and North American churches generally have less money to give. At the same time, denominations have more personnel to send, especially as short-term volunteers. Instead of filling out project applications and evaluations, Latin American churches and development groups have had to learn how to host North Americans and tolerate their often paternalistic behavior in order to shake loose money for programming.

The volunteers' money is likely to be designated for projects that have caught their fancy. This isn't necessarily all bad. It may foster greater accountability. And, as affluent volunteers and congregations back home get excited about seeing that their surplus wealth can make a difference, the new pattern of giving may yield more money.

Yet there is a downside. North Americans often come seeking the emotional rewards of hands-on involvement rather than a way to make an investment in long-term empowerment. A United Methodist mission team from South Carolina came to El Estribo, a poor village in southern Honduras, and insisted on handing out $50 in U.S. money to each family (single mothers excluded) despite objections by local church workers. In view of such insensitivity, some local churches refuse to cooperate with mission teams, and insist on working only with those development and evangelistic practices that empower the poor without exposing them to the embarrassing rich.

Other groups accept the fact that the short-term volunteer mission trips are likely to remain popular, and aim to reach the volunteers with a deeper form of the gospel. "They come here thinking they're going to give something to us, but many discover that instead they receive, from people who have almost nothing, a new experience of hope, faith and love," says Dámaris Albuquerque, executive director of the Nicaraguan Council of Churches. Many team members are changed by the experience. Although they've volunteered in order to do something for the poor, their paternalism comes apart when they meet articulate poor people who often believe in God more than they do and who want a world where North-South relations are characterized by justice rather than charity.

A central task of program coordinators is to facilitate that encounter. A good start is to help volunteers overcome the "edifice complex" by downplaying the notion that what's most important for the group is the classroom or clinic or house that they're going to build, and emphasizing that the real purpose is pastoral accompaniment.

In the past two or three years, 2,000 volunteers came to Honduras as part of a Church World Service reconstruction program designed to break the bad habits of other volunteer programs. A few participants were veterans of as many as two dozen volunteer trips. They'd paved parish driveways in Costa Rica and repaired clinic roofs in Jamaica. But Honduras was the first place where they worked alongside local folks.

Why has it taken so long? Why do we send volunteers out into the world to work for the poor when they could be working *with* the poor? Fault lies with both North and South, yet it's time to change. It's time to quit treating volunteers as spoiled children, and get them out of fancy hotels and into tents and dirt-floored chapels in the countryside and urban barrios.

Some work team chaperones will argue they can't push people that far out of their comfort zones. I believe we've got to stop protecting volunteers from interacting with the poor. Taking two dozen volunteer trips without working side-by-side with the poor is not mission. As long as the poor remain objects of volunteer trips rather than joint subjects in a common enterprise of faith, it's never going to be mission.

It may be hard for some Latin American hosts to change the pattern. They've practiced their smiles and learned not to take offense at insensitivity. In exchange they receive personal rewards. They are invited to speak in North America, their kids obtain scholarships in the North, and they live well while the North Americans are in town. Volunteer groups should not provide employment to local gringo wannabe elites—or northern missionaries living in the South—who act in the name of the poor but actually erect barriers to true encounters because such encounters would threaten their privileged role as interlocutors.

People who live in villages affected by Hurricane Mitch have had a great experience hosting church teams that helped them rebuild. When they talk about the visitors, they do not begin by describing the buildings that were built, but emphasize that they felt accompanied and sustained by the volunteers. At a time of great trauma, the poor felt important and loved when the overloaded church van pulled in among the shacks.

"They didn't come to tell us how to do things, which is what the gringos have always done in the past," said Toribio Dubón, a peasant leader in Nueva Victoria, a rebuilt village in the Honduran province of Santa Barbara. "These people came to sweat in the sun with us, to listen, to treat us as equals. We felt blessed by their presence beside us."

According to Don Tatlock, coordinator of the CWS program in Honduras, if housing was the sole priority, church leaders "could ask folks to stay home and just send us the money they were going to spend on airplane tickets. . . . What's more important are the relationships they build with the poor and what they learn about why people

are poor. And by giving up their time and money to come so far, they're conveying a sense of love that pays off in increased self-esteem and encouragement among villagers."

Nurturing healthy encounters requires work at both ends of the journey. Church workers in the South face the complex challenge of empowering peasants in the countryside or urban barrio dwellers to host an encounter in a way that allows them to feel equal to the northerners. Bridging the gap by spiritualizing poverty doesn't work; that's only a cheap trick to romanticize the misery of others. What then do the poor in the South really have to offer to affluent northerners? Southerners need to reflect together on this question; otherwise reciprocity will remain elusive.

The theologies of liberation that emerged from this region in the '70s and '80s evolved from the organized poor, who suffered repression at the hands of economic elites and their U.S.-financed military forces. Today the relevant theologies are those that emerge from the excluded—the poor who have no place in a globalized economy. They are not repressed so much as simply treated as nonpersons. Who is God for them? If we from the North are to open up our own spiritual and theological lives to refreshment from the South, we must get close to the people who ask this question.

As part of their experience, volunteers must wrestle with the questions of today's poor. One of the major tasks facing the U.S. church today is giving folks the tools with which to process and interpret their firsthand encounters with economic and racial disparities that characterize our hemisphere. We need curriculum that will prepare work teams for their trip theologically and culturally, and guide them through a process of discerning changes in their lives after they return.

Early in 2002 the Mennonite Central Committee will release "Connecting Peoples," a guide for pastors and local church leaders who want to lead groups or establish sistering relationships. According to Daryl Yoder-Bontrager, co-director of the MCC's Latin America–Caribbean Department, the guide will include suggestions for converting the trip into concrete solidarity at home.

We need to help returning volunteers convert their emotional experience into action: promoting the purchase of fair-trade coffee, working to close the School of the Americas or educating others about the complex realities of hemispheric relations. Otherwise, participants who feel a need to "do something" will return to paternalistic

models, send money once or twice to particular families or congregations in the community they visited, and then forget them.

This integration of political responses will be easier if the entire church family becomes involved in the volunteer movement. Many volunteer programs around the U.S. have been scorned by progressives, who see such work trips as paternalistic and politically unsophisticated. Yet charity and justice need each other. If people of varied ideological backgrounds participate, the volunteers' experiences will be enhanced. Despite what some consider the deficiencies of the movement, it is here to stay, and the responsibility for making it a force for long-lasting change in both the South and the North falls on the entire church community.