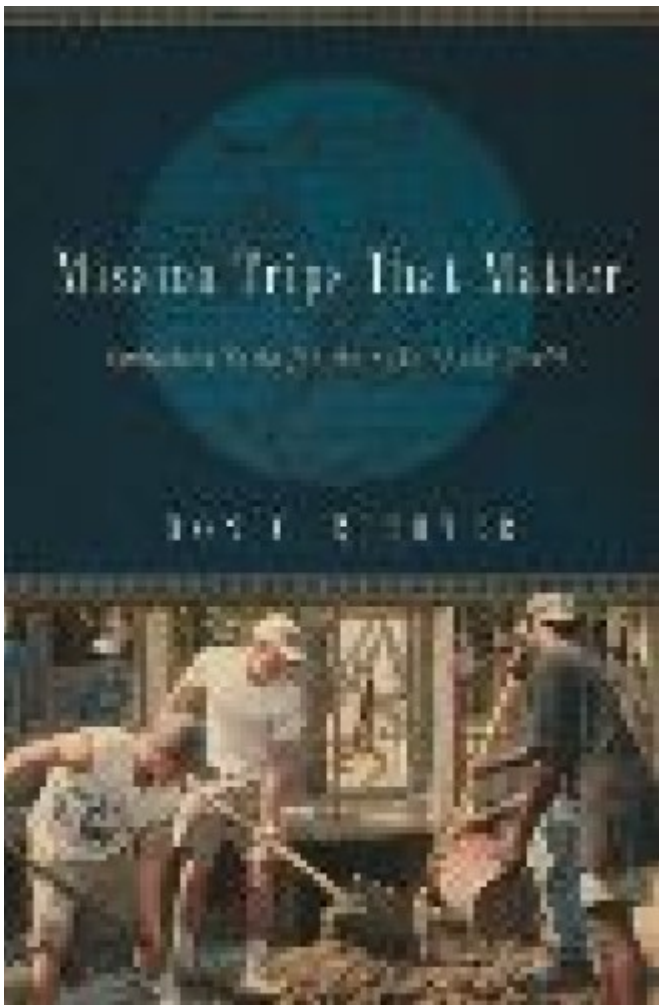


Mission Trips That Matter: Embodied Faith for the Sake of the World

reviewed by [Emily J. Anderson](#) in the [July 29, 2008](#) issue

In Review



Mission Trips That Matter: Embodied Faith for the Sake of the World

Don C. Richter

Upper Room

"It's happening again," said the 17-year-old seated next to me on the airplane. A veteran of several mission experiences, she was making her second trip to the Yucatán Peninsula of Mexico. On board an Aeroméxico flight from Houston to Mérida our fellow travelers were Mexican citizens, a few vacationers and the 24 members of our mission team. We were to spend a week in a rural Mayan village working on a construction project and leading a Bible school for the neighborhood children.

"Listen. It's happening again," she said. All I could hear over the roar of the engines was the lively conversation of native Spanish speakers and the occasional call button. "What's happening?" I asked.

"The psychological claustrophobia," she said. "You know, that feeling of isolation you get when everyone else speaks a different language. You can be surrounded by people and still feel totally isolated."

Dehabituation, Don Richter would call it, "breaking out of old habits and patterns." What Richter and this 17-year-old both recognize is that mission experiences take us out of our comfort zones; they break us open so we can see God, the world and ourselves with new eyes.

Richter, who is associate director of the Valparaiso Project on the Education and Formation of People in Faith, makes his case by drawing from a deep well of engagement with the world. A practical theologian with a pastor's heart, Richter was the founding director of the Youth Theology Institute at Emory University and is the father of two young adults, both of whom accompanied him during his extensive field-based research for this book.

The real depth of Richter's reflection appears in the first few chapters as he lays the groundwork for what is to follow by explaining why mission trips are (as Dorothy Bass says in the foreword) "a powerful crucible for Christian formation." Veteran mission-trip leaders will recognize the issues immediately. Richter's gift is to locate their common experiences within a broader interpretive framework as he draws on larger philosophical and theological themes: *communitas*, liminality, pilgrimage.

Richter claims that the book is not intended to be a checklist and suggests that readers view it more as a why-to than a how-to. But mission-trip leaders will reap great benefits from Richter's pragmatic and detailed approach to a multitude of practical considerations: assembling and preparing a leadership team, partnering

with mission agencies, planning for expenses and telling people about the experience upon return. Each chapter ends with prayers and exercises designed to help the group absorb and assimilate specific learning in preparation for its mission. Richter includes a detailed listing of resources, both practical and theoretical, and concludes the book with a chapter of meaningful and appropriate prayers to guide travelers during their journey.

While *Mission Trips That Matter* was not written explicitly for youth mission trips, Richter's fieldwork predominantly centered on youth. If there is a weakness to his work, it is that he fails to ground mission experiences in the context of ongoing relational ministry with youth. Still, the book will be a helpful tool for many of the 2 to 4 million mission participants who set out each year to discover how God is at work in the world—and in their own hometowns.