

The Short-term Mission Trip as Pilgrimage

The Reverend Christopher Morck

For twenty years or so, I have had the incredible privilege of being a part of short-term mission trips, both through helping to host and facilitate these trips as well as participating as a member of a visiting group. From this experience I have learned that the most fulfilling and fruitful trips – those which have the potential to meet real needs and (as one of these needs) to lead us into a deeper sense of who and whose we are - seem to be those framed in some sense as a pilgrimage.

In the original sense, a pilgrimage is a journey to a special or sacred place as an act of religious devotion or a search for deeper spiritual understanding. In Christianity, the first pilgrimages were made to places where Jesus himself had walked. Through the centuries up to the present, Christians have made pilgrimage to sites and shrines associated with saints and martyrs all over the world, from Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico to Canterbury Cathedral in England, from Saint Catherine's Monastery in Egypt to Santiago de Compostela in Spain or the site of martyred Christians in Japan.

At their best, these experiences help those on pilgrimage to grow in their relationship with God, each other, and the rest of God's creation as they come into closer contact with Jesus' life and ministry and with those sisters and brothers in Christ who have gone before us. In similar ways, when a mission trip is understood as a pilgrimage, it becomes a mutual journey of growth in relationship and community, intentionally seeking greater connection with God and each other, and discerning together how to live more fully into who God calls us to be as individuals and as the body of Jesus in the world.

Framing, and preparing for, the short-term mission trip as a pilgrimage helps to foster an experience that authentically reflects our values as followers of Jesus, of humility and self-giving, openhandedness and equality, the building of peace and mutual understanding.

This trip also has greater potential as a space of tremendous spiritual growth for individuals and communities, while also building relationships which bridge regional, cultural, socioeconomic, and even linguistic difference. Through working, eating, and worshipping together, sharing stories and experiences, both those who are sent and also those who receive have opportunities to be challenged in the best sense and to see themselves, others, and God in exciting and expansive ways.

God invites us to live out lives of reconciling love. We need each other to do this. God desires abundance for us and for all that God has created. We need each other to walk toward this. My own well-being and the well-being of others are intimately tied together.

Framing the short-term mission trip as pilgrimage can foster openness – even eagerness – to grow into a living understanding of God’s abundant, reconciling love for all that God has made, ready to learn from each other and listen to what God is saying to us through people and place, both those people and places which are familiar and those which are not.

One example of the fruit of such an experience is beautifully shared by a U.S. group which visited a community in Ecuador and wrote about their interactions with each other and with those who welcomed them:

We worked, and played, and laughed together. We shared food and shelter, and listened to stories. *They embraced us as family...* and when it was time to leave, we hugged and cried, openly expressing this love we shared. You come home from an experience like this both filled and emptied, elated and exhausted, knowing that the culture and the people of that village so far away had changed you [italics in original].

Although understanding the short-term mission trip as pilgrimage certainly does not guarantee a trip’s success, it can help our “service for others” – whether painting a school, building a church, participating in a medical mission, or cooking a meal – more sincerely to come out of a place of grace-filled gratitude rather than of sinfulness. This can be true for both the trip’s “guests” as well as the “hosts.”

When an experience is not viewed as a shared journey, however, issues such as individual or cultural arrogance or shame, wealth or impoverishment, feelings of knowledge or ignorance – realities which God seeks to transform within us and our communities - are more likely to result in unfortunate and even painful moments. These often unconscious attitudes are reflected in a story I remember hearing several times from one community in Ecuador, when a visiting group publically refused to eat fresh and healthy food lovingly prepared by the host community and instead brought in take-out from a fast food restaurant in the city.

Another, more common occurrence is when a construction or medical mission group insists that something be done “our way,” because the visitors believe that their way is superior to how something is done locally (interestingly, many times “our way” ultimately proves to be inadequate or unsuited to the task). I also think of outcomes which are almost humorous, like the supposedly all-season bathroom built without insulation in an area known to have harsh winters, constructed by an outside group which did not bother to consult the host community.

A sense of pilgrimage, though, helps to guard against some of these incidents as it prepares our hearts and minds and communities to engage in closer mutual relationship, while we actively look for God in our midst. As well, when faced with humility and looking actively

for God's grace, even negative experiences can bear good fruit leading to transformation and reconciliation.

Pilgrimage envisions our growing relationship with God, each other, and even the whole created order as a path to be discovered by the walking – by walking together. The short-term mission trip, seen in this way, can be a valuable part of our journey with God as we are invited to experience and show forth generosity and hospitality, interdependence and inclusiveness. We actively open ourselves to better understand who we are and our own needs, the needs of others, and our relationship to the world around us.

Through a sense of pilgrimage, we come away not only with a sense of accomplishment but with a broader sense of God's work in the world and the reality of our interconnectedness. We also become more intimately familiar with God's presence within and God's work of redemption through us, our communities, and the world in which we live. By God's grace, we open ourselves to build relationships with those near and far, seeking God's abundance and reconciliation together.

- The Reverend Christopher Morck, priest-in-charge of Grace Episcopal Church in New Bedford, Massachusetts, and his wife Trish have lived ten years in Latin America, particularly in Honduras and Ecuador. During those years, in the midst of farming, teaching, parish ministry, and work with refugees, they have helped receive and host groups and facilitate their short-term mission trips in these countries. Now, living in the United States once again, they are part of parish groups who are invited, sent, and received.