

Mission Trip Thoughts – Dr. Ken Vermillion

You want to go on a mission trip. Great! Be prepared! I mean that both physically and mentally. You will be told, “It is an experience of a lifetime” or “It will change your life forever”. That may be true. However, don’t expect a “Mountaintop experience” or even an “Aha moment”. This *may* occur but don’t be disappointed if it doesn’t. Everyone who goes on a mission trip reacts differently. It may depend on the depth of the experience. One thing I can guarantee. You will be changed! It may be dramatic or it may be subtle. The way you see things, help others, talk about the world, and even eat, will change forever. You will be more aware of your surroundings and view your life’s purpose with a different set of eyes. You will be blessed because of the experience.

I stated earlier, “Be Prepared”. An excellent resource is the booklet, **Welcome Forward**. This is a field guide for global travelers prepared by the ELCA’s Division of Global Mission. It will lead you through the planning and expectation process of before, during, and after your mission trip. The booklet is accompanied by a CD of inspirational and thought provoking music.

It’s time to get ready. You are excited! Your mind will be churning with preparation details and expectations. The fear of the unknown can be overwhelming. Do your homework. It will help to make your experience less stressful and more rewarding.

The mundane details of getting ready can be unnerving but necessary. Many hours will be spent with details concerning financing your trip, custom regulations, health, medical, safety concerns, type of climate and what to pack in your suitcase. The State Department has websites to prepare you for the country you will visit. It is beneficial to avail yourself of this information and register with the State Department for safety concerns. The sites are:

State Department: <http://www.state.gov>

Smart Traveler Enrollment Program: <http://step.state.gov/step>

To some, financing a mission trip may be an obstacle. You will find that people were very generous when asked, even strangers who you do not know. You should approach family, friends and your congregation about your intentions. Prepare a brief presentation. You will be surprised at the outpouring of generosity to support your efforts.

Set realistic goals and expectations for your trip. You are not going to save the world, however, you will grow by having cross cultural experiences, both good and bad. The ELCA and the Florida-Bahamas Synod follow the *Accompaniment Model* for mission work. Walking hand in hand with whom we serve can reap benefits far beyond what you could imagine.

You will be part of a mission team for your trip. Group dynamics are important. If you are fortunate, you will know and have worked with members of your mission team before your trip. However, that is not always the case. Different personalities, egos, expectations and idiosyncrasies can lead to turmoil within a group. Engaging in open discussion, communication, team building exercises, reconciliation and forgiveness will go a long way to help rectify any team dissension that may arise. A Group Covenant will be prepared with the expectations of all team members signing and abiding by its terms.

Above all, prepare yourself mentally for the trip. Approach the trip with a positive, open attitude. Your attitude could make the difference between a trip “born in heaven” and the “trip from hell”.

The preparations are over. You have arrived at your destination. Now, the challenges begin. You begin to settle into a new culture. Be careful! As Americans, we think we have all the answers. Remember, we want to build new relationships on accompaniment and not power.

Be prepared to be overwhelmed. Things can start crashing down on you quickly. The poverty, language barrier, living conditions, food, safety, health concerns, scope of your intended project, uncertainty, homesickness are potential issues. The list could go on and on. Be not afraid! You are not alone. Many have experienced the same feelings. Communicate your fears and anxieties with your leaders or other team members. Discussing issues before they mushroom into larger problems can help towards a more successful, positive experience.

Make the most of your trip. Allow God to work through you as a disciple of Christ. Be a blessing and you will be blessed!

Your trip has ended. You are heading home. You had an awesome experience! The following is true, especially for first time “missionaries”. You will be filled with emotions, possibly overflowing with emotions. How do you cope? It may not be easy. Your emotions may run the gamut from joyful to sad, grateful to guilty, loving to angry, helpful to frustrated and on and on. The quicker you deal with this emotional roller coaster experience the better you will be. Taking part in debriefing sessions will help. You will be pleasantly surprised that many of your fellow travelers will be experiencing the same emotions. You should talk through your experiences with team members, friends, family and if needed, professional counselors.

You are home and readjusting. The process may take days, weeks or months. You may never completely readjust. Your life tends to evolve because of the experience you just had. What do you do? Share your experience. Prepare a power point or oral presentation. Friends, family

and fellow church members want to hear about your experience. They will have many questions. You may have few answers. You certainly can answer the, who, what, where and when questions about the details of your trip. It is the why questions to which you will seek the answers. These are the faith questions that try your soul. Why the poverty, starvation, death, greed? Why does God allow this to happen? You may spend the rest of your life looking for these answers. That is good! Because looking for the answers precipitates more questions. It is through questioning that we live and grow. What fun would life be if we had all the answers? Through the power of the Holy Spirit, allow God to guide you in your life's quest to find the answers.

You were blessed by your mission trip. You saw, learned, and experienced many things. You have changed. Your faith and mindset have been altered. God now challenges you to do your part to make this world a better place in which to live.

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August 2017