

ARE THESE TRIPS NECESSARY?

(ONE RESPONSE TO THE COST OF MISSION TRIPS)

Some have raised the money issue when it comes to various kinds of “mission trips”. Is the money spent on travel good stewardship? Wouldn't it be better if we stayed home and sent the money instead?

Attempting to follow God's leading and, at the same time, being faithful stewards involves us in decisions that are not always clear-cut. Our partnership with the church in Malawi takes us into what is for many of us new territory and has required us to take steps without having complete knowledge or certainty. This may be one of them. Let me defend what we are doing.

First, if there is an international partnership that has created more commitment and has more persons involved than the Pittsburgh Presbytery-Synod of Blantyre Partnership, I am unaware of it. Why has it roused so much energy and become such an important cause and gift within so many of our congregations?

Humanly speaking, I believe it is the person-to-person contacts. Since 1989, well over 600 Pittsburgh Presbyterians have been to Malawi for various lengths of time, from weeks to years. Even if only briefly, they have stood, literally and symbolically, with Malawian Christians in their struggles against political tyranny, poverty, hunger, drought, and disease. By going they have put their bodies and their money on the line in witness to the oneness we have together in Jesus Christ. If the contacts had been limited to mailing letters, making phone calls, sending faxes or emails, would our partnership have had the same effect? I think not. People in face to face fellowship with one another has made the difference.

For Malawians, relationships matter more than projects. Partnership means more than constructing a building or sending a check. Arriving at their doorstep, breaking bread at their tables, kneeling together in their churches – these are what have given birth to the relationships that now empower this partnership.

Would the variety of programs developed between Pittsburgh and the Synod of Blantyre have happened if persons had not gone and returned with a vision of what it means to be one in Jesus Christ? Again, I think not. Admittedly, it's expensive. Is it worth it? I believe it is.

Second, while money spent on travel to Malawi could purchase supplies, medicines, equipment, in reality that is unlikely to happen. One man suggested to me that instead of traveling to Africa, I should stay at home and send the money. I replied that I would consider doing that if he would also send a check for a similar amount. He wasn't willing to take me up on the suggestion.

Think of travel expenses as an investment. People who will ante up the money to travel to Malawi are unlikely to write a check for the same amount and give it to the church for mission use. I wish we would do that, but most will not. Yet many of these same people who go to Malawi will come home resolved to raise the resources here that can serve the great needs there.

Presbyterians are likely to spend money on personal holiday travel. Mission trips provide an alternative to Caribbean cruises, Hawaii vacations, and other more conventional travel options. They are a gift the church can offer her people since they make a positive contribution to the persons who go as well as those who welcome them.

Third, the same principle is true in reverse. Pittsburgh Presbyterians benefit from the spiritual gifts Malawian Christians bring to Pittsburgh. Are these gifts available through electronic communication devices and snail mail? Perhaps to some degree, but they are poor substitutes for

actual presence. Our purpose is to be of mutual encouragement (see Romans 1:12). When Malawian Christians stand with us as we try to follow God's call here, we are encouraged. Our discipleship and service to others are enhanced by the gifts that come to us from the Malawian church. With them we are enriched in faith. Without them we are the poorer.

Christian faith is best expressed incarnationally. The Word became flesh and lived among us (John 1:14). When people are together in faith, Christ is in their midst. When Christ is there, that fellowship becomes a vehicle for spiritual transformation.

I also appeal to Hebrews 1:1-2. When God finally and fully expressed his love, he didn't send a fax or email, he came enfleshed in the person of Jesus Christ. Even good marriages and other human relationships are often difficult to maintain from a distance. They are fed by people being physically present to each other. So it is with Christian partnerships.

You ask whether it is necessary to have so many traveling back and forth and at such great expense. We are learning that the strength and potential of this partnership is in proportion to the number who have traveled to Malawi and/or who have received Malawians when they come to us. I appeal to 2 John 12: *"Although I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink; instead I hope to come to you and talk with you face to face, so that our joy may be complete."*

Mission Co-Workers, Paul and Judy Jewett, wrote that they struggle with the need for money to do one project or another. Sometimes when a letter would come from someone asking to volunteer:

"We are tempted to write back, 'Why don't you just send us the plane fare you would spend coming here and we'll use it to build a house, or to start a garden for malnourished children, or to sink a bore-hole for a well, or whatever.' We may think that initially and yet we are reminded time and again that the Lord uses our volunteers in his own very special way. The sacrifices they make are not 'wasted,' because, without exception, our volunteers are themselves transformed by these personal experiences in mission. The 'work' they actually accomplish is less important than the life-changing experience they had while working here."

(1997 Mission Yearbook for Prayer and Study)

The gifts of money have been multiplied because Pittsburghers and Malawians have been together. It couldn't have happened without the trips. The resulting joy is the fruit of the face-to-face and faith-to-faith encounters which lie at this partnership's heart.

Is this good stewardship of God's money? It seems to me it is. How much are transformed lives worth?

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