

10 Biggest Mistakes People Make on the Mission Field

One of the greatest joys in my life is ministering in foreign countries. Since I surrendered to a call to missions 15 years ago, I've visited 29 nations and developed relationships with dozens of pastors and leaders who now consider me their friend and brother. Missions is at the heart of our Christian faith, and I believe every church should be actively engaged in both foreign and local missions so we can advance the gospel of Jesus in our generation.

But just like everything else in life, there's a right way and a wrong way to engage in mission work. I've learned from my own mistakes—and I've also seen some sad examples of short-term missions gone awry. If you are considering a short-term or long-term mission trip, avoid these pitfalls:

1. Acting like a spoiled American. If you are traveling to a developing country, here is Rule No. 1: Prepare for delays, cold showers, big bugs and scorpions, power outages, unusual toilets, crazy traffic and strange food. Make a decision before you leave that you won't let one complaint come out of your mouth. Be flexible and gracious. Focus on the positive, soak in the beauty of the country and come home with a renewed gratitude for your blessings at home.

2. Talking down to people. You are not going overseas to teach poor, ignorant foreigners what you know. If that's your attitude, do everyone a favor and stay home! You are going to serve. Most of what I know about ministry I learned from humble people I met in other countries. Whether you are teaching, preaching, building orphanages or feeding the poor, get under the people and wash their feet. And expect to learn powerful lessons from the people you are visiting.

3. Building relationships based on money. People in poor countries tend to think all Americans are rich, and they will be tempted to look to us instead of God to provide. Don't wave money around, don't flaunt expensive watches or jewelry, and don't hand out cash to everyone you meet. Let your new friends know you want a real friendship with them that does not hinge on finances.

4. Making demands. I know prosperity preachers who expect royal treatment when they go to foreign countries. One man told his host he needed a hotel that costs \$1,000 a night—in a nation where most people live in cramped, Soviet-style apartments. The apostle Paul modeled a different approach, and he was willing to live among people at their level (see 1 Thess. 2:9-10). If Jesus was willing to enter this world in a filthy manger, we should be willing to set aside our expensive tastes.

5. Breaking promises. When you connect deeply with a local pastor or congregation overseas, you will fall in love with them and you will want to do everything possible to help them. But don't promise things you can't deliver. Always remind them, and yourself, that we must pray for His provision and wait on Him to answer. And if you do enter into a partnership, always honor the promises you made.

6. Taking team members who are not committed to Jesus. I know of a zealous young woman who went on a mission trip to Africa with her church and ended up sleeping with a guy from that country. How does that happen? Anyone who goes with you on a trip needs a background check and a pastor's recommendation. Mission trips should never be viewed as opportunities for "religious tourism" by immature people who crave a globetrotting adventure. The behavior of your team members should honor Christ.

7. Working with people overseas without thoroughly investigating them. I get requests almost weekly from foreign

pastors who want me to visit their church, support their programs or do evangelistic crusades in their villages. In Pakistan, some unscrupulous Christians troll the Internet looking for churches that will send them money. Some people posing as pastors talk naïve Americans into wiring funds for a trip—and then they vanish. If you are going to do mission work, you will need the gift of discernment. Don't get bamboozled by a con artist posing as "beloved brother Najib."

8. Using a "hit and run" approach to missions. When I visit a country I almost always end up going back because I build relationships with ministries. This week I'm on my fourth visit to Barranquilla, Colombia, where I am helping to develop a women's shelter. Mission work should be a long-term partnership. If your church is planning to start a mission program, don't just scatter your seed here and there. Prayerfully invest in a few places and let the Holy Spirit connect you with those people for a lifetime.

9. Misrepresenting your work. We laugh about the preacher who was "evangelastically speaking" about the crowds he attracted in Uganda. But exaggeration is lying. There is nothing more obnoxious than a Christian who inflates statistics to draw attention or raise funds. If you build your ministry on half-truths you will have cracks in your foundation. Be honest, be accountable and tell the truth.

10. Focusing on numbers. There is huge pressure in missionary work to prove our effectiveness by counting heads. But God's kingdom is not about crowds—it is about making disciples (see Matt. 28:19-20). Some of my most powerful moments on the mission field were in small meetings where God changed a few lives forever—and then those people changed more lives. I'm not impressed when someone says 5,000 people prayed to receive Jesus. I want to know if those converts were followed-up and plugged into churches for discipleship.

I hope you will become more passionate about taking the

message of Christ to the world. But as you pack your bags for your mission trip, leave your unneeded “baggage” at home and go with a humble, teachable heart.

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