

Leave Your Baggage at Home

An Open Letter to Youth Workers Planning Short-Term Missions

Dear Youth Worker:

It won't be long until thousands of your groups will ramp up their fund raising projects for the next cycle of life-changing, adventure-filled, revolutionary missions trips. But before you make your car-wash placards, allow those of us who are on the receiving end of your trips to share our concerns with you.

There's something really endearing about seeing mainly fair-skinned, suburban kids from the States come sweat it out for a couple weeks with us in our impoverished, desperate, poorest of the poor, third-world conditions. But imagine how humiliating it is to be on the receiving end of many of these trips.

Let's start with food. Our food is "normal" to us. We enjoy it. We don't expect you to love it the way we do, anymore than we love your endless varieties of green salads and your constant menu of sweets. But please stop grimacing when you eat the food our people have prepared for you. Our food is an extension of us.

We're glad you're interested in seeing our culture. But we aren't too thrilled about being tour guides and helping you find the perfect souvenir. We're not a zoo of poverty. So please put away your cameras, water bottles, and anti-bacterial wash for a while. There will be a time and place for you to shoot

some pictures (and to wash your hands and drink your water). But think about how it feels to see a group of people you've never met come into your neighborhood and start feverishly filming you and your kids.

As for your building projects, may we remind you that we built buildings before you came, and we will build buildings after you leave. Many of our visitors work as if they're the only ones who know how to construct something efficiently. We welcome your hard work. But do it alongside of us—with us—not for us.


And you might be interested to know that we don't see ourselves first and foremost as impoverished, desperate, "third-world" (Can you please stop using that term?) people. Hearing this over and over again is hard for us. We have great respect and pride in ourselves. On the one hand, we're moved by the tears you shed for us. On the other hand, there are aspects to our lives where we're thriving and living in the land of plenty. Some of us consider it as much a blessing to have been born into our culture as you do for having been born into yours.

Your pre-planned, pre-written, overly scrutinized testimonies you've prepared are nice. But why are we so rarely given the chance to share ours with you? We enjoy hearing what God has done in your

lives; but please, please, please let us also share what He's doing in our lives. He exists here, too.

You probably aren't the first ones to ever do VBS in our community, and youth ministry isn't non-existent here. It just looks different. We laugh and wince at the contrived statistic that says 99 percent of the world's trained youth workers minister in the United States. *Really!*

Now before you send this off to your national partner to ask if your group is "guilty," remember that most of us don't share your value of "direct" communication. Saving face is ingrained in most of us, so it will take years of conversations over tea and rice to share with you how we really feel about working with you. Don't overreact and stop what you're doing all together. Just involve us in the conversation of how we can do missions *together* rather than keeping us on the receiving end of well-intentioned, paternalistic missions.

You're not bringing Jesus to us. He's already here. In fact, He's doing some amazing things here. And we know He's in your midst and doing amazing things among you. We have needs. You have resources. You have needs. We have resources. Let's pursue a relationship and see how God unfolds His mission in and through us—together! 

The views expressed by our guest columnists are theirs. That doesn't mean these views are ours, or God's. Let us know what you think at feedback@youthworker.com.

DAVE LIVERMORE is the executive director of the Global Learning Center at Grand Rapids Theological Seminary, where he also teaches Intercultural Studies (<http://grts.cornerstone.edu/resources/glc>). He is also the cofounder of Intersect (<http://www.intersectcommunity.com>). Dave wrote this column on behalf of non-Western church leaders in 33 countries who have told him their perspectives. For more of Dave's insights, see his book *Serving With Eyes Wide Open: Doing Short-Term Missions with Cultural Intelligence* (Baker Books), which was praised in the July/August 2006 issue of YOUTHWORKER JOURNAL.

