

Some church leaders seek end to ‘mission tourism’

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ATLANTA, Ga. (BNG)—Parachute missions. Poverty tourism. Vacationary. Critics use these descriptors to characterize an approach to missions they believe encourages unhealthy dependency and paternalism.

“Contrary to popular belief, most missions trips and service projects do not empower those being served, engender healthy cross-cultural relationships, improve quality of life, relieve poverty, change the lives of participants (or) increase support for long-term missions work,” Robert Lupton wrote in his 2011 book *Toxic Charity*.

When it comes to most popular approaches to short-term missions, Chris Ellis agrees.

✘ Chris Ellis, minister of mission and outreach at Second Baptist Church in downtown Little Rock, Ark., has lived and studied the subject extensively as a key leader in and cofounder of the South Africa Ministry Network. It is a consortium of congregations launched in 2009 to work with and support [Cooperative Baptist Fellowship](#) field personnel who serve and partner with local ministries in South Africa.

“Short-term missions often do more harm than good, especially when the primary purpose of the trip is the fulfillment of the trip itself,” Ellis said.

With more than 1.6 million Americans 18 and older going on a short-term mission trip each year, Ellis, whose recent doctoral dissertation is titled “Short-Term Missions—Long-Term Change,” wishes to see the practice made as “missiologically sound” as possible for both participants and those receiving teams. Short-term mission trips—at least as typically

implemented, “often do not lead to changed lives,” Ellis explained.

Changed lives? Not usually

“Research suggests that participants do not sense increased vocational calling, increased connection to mission at one’s home or increased connection to the global missions movement,” he said.

Ellis attributes the failure to achieve life transformation to three main factors—lack of in-depth training of participants, learning transfer or the incongruity of the international short-term experience with one’s home life and a lack of skilled facilitators.

✘ Short-term missionaries must put personal convenience and satisfaction behind the needs of those being served, ministers say. (BNG Photo: Creative Common) “Grounding the (short-term mission) trip in a correct understanding of the *Missio Dei*—the mission of God, poverty and power as well as global Christianity changes the narrative of the trip and forces participants to put the trip into proper perspective, allowing it to shape their lives when they arrive home,” he said.

“Focusing on the practical cross-cultural aspects decreases the likelihood that participants will do irreparable harm to local ministries and can give proper perspective on one’s home culture and how to engage it appropriately.”

Together, Ellis and the leaders of the South Africa Ministry Network offer a reimaged model for short-term missions.

“The South Africa Ministry Network is trying to embed the short-term mission trip in a much larger narrative,” Ellis said. “We’re not going to South Africa this year, Peru next year and somewhere else the year after that and the year after that. We’re going back to the same place over and over and over again, seeing and creating relationships with folks who are

on the ground and sharing life with them as much as we can.”

How to make a difference

The idea is to make a real difference.

“We tell our congregations that short-term mission is not about creating change. It’s not about saving the world. It’s not about a whole bunch of these narratives that we like to use to drive the mission movement,” he said.

“Rather, a short-term mission is a moment in time that we are privileged to have that forces us to ask the question: ‘How is it that we can truly help both make a difference in the places that we’re partnering, as well as learn from what our South African friends have to teach us?’”

 Stephen Cook (center), senior pastor of Second Baptist Church in Memphis, Tenn., with members of a church in Emmaus, South Africa, gathered at the spot where the community discovered water and prepared to dig a well. (CBF Photo) To prepare his church members for a trip, Ellis leads a five-session discussion and study on the mission of God, global Christianity, the history of South Africa and the present challenges that the post-apartheid “Rainbow Nation” faces. Participants also spend time getting an advance glimpse of the work being done by the network’s partners in South Africa and receiving a devotional guide that begins a week prior to their departure. While on the trip, participants take part in nightly debriefings—opportunities to reflect on God’s work in the world and their place in it.

Stephen Cook, senior pastor of [Second Baptist Church in Memphis, Tenn.](#), a member congregation of the network, says the consortium of churches knows its role is to take part together in the renewal of God’s world.

“We know we are not going to ‘fix’ anything,” he said. “We are going (on

these short-term) trips to come alongside of and be involved with what God is doing in that part of the world.”

Knowing what is, and what isn't possible

It's just as important to know what is and isn't possible on such trips.

“We know our limitations and that we cannot and should not be responsible for determining outcomes,” he said. “We invest the time, resources and energy we do in order to participate in that which is larger than ourselves.”

Cook has embraced the call of South African theologian and pastor Trevor Hudson to make “pilgrimages of pain and hope.”

“The essence of these pilgrimages of pain and hope is that we are not tourists who set out to see the sights of the places we visit,” Cook said. “Instead, we are pilgrims, and we assume a ‘pilgrim posture’ as we approach these experiences. The pilgrim is one who is ready to be present, who is ready to listen and who is ready to notice where, how and with whom God is working.”

 Matt CookMatt Cook, senior pastor of [First Baptist Church in Wilmington, N.C.](#), another network member, said short-term missions offer great potential.

“We all think that short-term missions are something that God can use to create a two-fold blessing for those in South Africa and for those travelling to South Africa,” Cook said. “But it could easily be mission tourism if we didn't work hard at keeping our focus on how to make it at least as much of a net positive for the South Africans as it is for the Americans.”

To keep this intentional focus, he notes the network strives to offer care for the caregivers.

“We can’t really change the world in a week, and we know that,” said Cook, who helped launch the network alongside Ellis in 2009 while senior pastor of Little Rock’s Second Baptist Church. “What we can do is try to be a strong wind in the sails of the very impressive human beings who are doing hard and good work.”

Now in its sixth year, the network has helped provide financial support for four partner-funded CBF field personnel and made significant investments in the ministries of the Refilwe Community Project, a Christian organization in Johannesburg that provides a home for orphaned and neglected children as well as a baby house for abandoned infants. Refilwe also hosts a medical clinic, preschool, kids club and after-school programs for its impoverished community.

The network led a group of just over 70 Baptists in July on a week-long mission experience in Johannesburg as well as at mission sites 250 miles southeast in the Winterton area of the KwaZulu-Natal province, a rural region heavily impacted by the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The hands-on trip culminated with the group taking part in the 21st Baptist World Congress in Durban, South Africa, the global gathering of the [Baptist World Alliance](#).

Converting mission-trip dollars to ongoing support

The network also looks for opportunities to convert mission trip dollars to ongoing support, Matt Cook said, noting that the network sets aside a portion of trip costs to help pay for the salaries of part-time care workers of the Bophelo Medical Clinic at Refilwe.

“We’ve found that when our members go on these trips they make a connection that leads to ongoing support,” he added. “Over and above the trip costs, we’ve had countless individuals make additional financial contributions to local partners and to CBF field personnel located in South Africa. Going promotes giving.”

Ryan Clark, church engagement manager for CBF Global Missions, said the missing ingredient in many short-term missions has been the relationship—and not the kind of relationships where one person or group makes all the decisions.

“What CBF churches in the South Africa Ministry Network have discovered is a beautiful balance of power and resources with an eye on the long-term transformation of communities,” Clark said.

“As Christians we have a responsibility to demonstrate that our mission activity isn’t just for our own (western) kicks that works for our convenience and purposes.”