

FURTHER REFLECTIONS



Learning the Lay of the Land

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The rescue and reconstruction of Haiti weigh heavily on many minds and hearts. Much could be said about this small nation, including the difficulties of meaningfully helping a country where the rule of law is questionable and where only a few people control the flow of money.

In 1980 my wife spent a summer in Haiti while she was in nursing school. Then, in 1982, with the same long-term missionary from the country, I visited Haiti to set up a similar summer trip for a team from the USA. We've both known a number of missionaries working there, who have more than 100 combined years of experience in the country.

With that background in my mind, I wonder again, "How prepared are the 14-day teams that have gone to Haiti or other places we in the USA consider 'needy'? Were these teams really helpful? What did they actually do? How prepared were they to understand the situation in the country before they got there?"

Last weekend I heard part of a radio interview with travel guru Rick Steves, who was discussing travel questions with callers about their upcoming trips. One caller is traveling next summer with his two teenagers to Costa Rica. He wanted to know what he should learn about the country in preparation. He added that he was going with a church group, so I perked up. I expected a generic answer, but Rick Steves surprised me.

Rick first talked about the need for the group to learn about the situation, learning about the history of Latin

America and the relationship between rich and poor. He said they should read a little about liberation theology and about how church leaders in Latin America have struggled to answer difficult questions of poverty and injustice. He recounted the uneasy historical tensions between the rich and the poor, and the cycle of the rich often oppressing or killing the poor and the poor often revolting and killing the rich. He mentioned the year of Jubilee in the Old Testament and how that ideal might apply in Latin America.

Then Rick Steves added a comment that points to a core issue in mission today. Church people (and he is a church person, he noted) tend not to ask the questions as to why the poverty is there in the first place. They often think that what the Church can bring impacts only the future lives of those they serve, assuming that their problems will be solved ultimately but not now. While there is some truth in that way of thinking, Rick said, he hoped the Church would discover more to offer to people now mired in preventable suffering.

I'm sure that Rick Steves has his bias. Many of the answers offered by liberation theology are limited at best. But what serious alternatives have evangelicals suggested?

I couldn't help thinking about the lingering question: Why are we "church" people often so far behind in our awareness, reflection and action? I know there are many exceptions, but we often seem to be stuck in a sort of "pre-Information Age" in which we bumble around the world with two-week teams ignorant of the histories and cultures of those we serve, and then we're so

relieved to go home, "where people at least pick up the trash." But what does that kind of mentality communicate to those we visit in other nations?

These short-term trips may impart some blessing to the peoples they purport to serve, but how do these trips really help these peoples deal with their situation? What other problems do we ignore or create while trying to help?

Just today I heard a pastor from Africa answer a question about mistakes made in a partnership with a church in the U.S. The church was trying hard and was committed to the process in what now appears to be a helpful, two-way partnership. But in early days of the partnership one of the American pastors went to visit the African church plant and was so shocked by the needs in the area that he opened his wallet and started handing out money to different people around him. This uninformed generosity prompted some Africans to wonder if their leaders had always been getting funds from the Western visitors; were the African leaders keeping those funds for themselves? Oops.

The African pastor said that it took years to resolve the issues caused by that incident. He still wondered if they actually had resolved it.

Like many *Mission Frontiers* readers, I long for the day when Christ-followers do a better job of keeping up instead of catching up. What could you do to help your fellowship, or those nearby, in their engagement with global issues?^f