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Service Learning Programs- aka- *Mission Trips*

Have you ever been on a Mission Trip? Have you ever been on a UU Mission Trip? Notice the difference?

I have been on both UU Mission Trips, also known as Service Learning Programs, as well as Christian Mission Trips. The two major distinctions between the them are our theology and our relationships. UU Service Learning Programs, like the wonderful programs the NEW UU College of Social Justice (UUCSJ) operates, utilize establish relationships that the UUSC and UUA have with communities abroad. The programs are based on a relationship of *solidarity, not charity*. There is accountability that is present in our Mission Trips with the folks we are there for. While a Christian trip focuses on their service as a gateway to spread their gospel, our trips spread our gospel of love and respect.

It was a year and a half ago that I returned from Haiti for the 3rd time in 10 years. However, this UUCSJ trip was so much different than my previous Christian trips that I tagged along with. I went on this trip knowing I would be transformed, once again, by a life altering experience. I also believed that I would be an outsider showing up to a devastated community as a privileged person who can 'go home' at the end of the week. I really hoped this time would be different than before and it was. Unlike in the past when *I* helped locals with something they could not do themselves-provide medical care-this time around I was digging and filling foundations on a new ecovillage for earth quake survivors. I was feeling guilty around the money I spent just to get my unskilled butt to this small town. That money could have easily funded an entire year of local skilled labor and had more of an impact. I held onto that until the last day there. We sat down and talked with the famous director of the partner organization we were working with. In one sentence he both elated my guilt, and helped me to understand what 'eye to eye' partnerships were all about.

The Papaya Peasant Movement, founded in 1973, has long stood for gender and economic equality through a cooperative approach to self-empowerment. The MPP is one of the partners the UUSC has provided significant funding to after the earthquake. While being in partnership means that the trip participants were there to work on the projects that the MPP held as a priority, it also meant that our presence was an opportunity for MPP to give back to those that gave them so much. A relationship is two way street. We, as participants, were able to receive their gift of a transformative experience through our on-site work. I can tell you it still gives me warm and fuzzy feelings inside when I think about it.

So, this holiday season, or any time you are particularly grateful for what you have, consider taking yourself, or a group from your congregation on a service learning trip. Call it what you want, but be sure that an accountable relationship of solidarity is present so that all parties can both give and receive. Anything less and you would not be respecting their inherent worth and dignity.

When you have a chance, check out the upcoming trips organized by the UU College of Social Justice at www.uucsj.org or check out the Haiti flyer on this month's JPD News You Can Use. There are plenty of private organizations within the US that support congregations with mission trips as well. For those youth interested in such opportunities, there is also a UUA book, "Journeys of the Spirit: Planning and Leading Mission Trips with Youth" that I would recommend to get you started.

I hold a webinar on youth ministry topics the 3rd Wednesday of the month. My webinar in December is on Worship with and for Youth. As usual, it's the 3rd Wednesday, December 19th, 7:30pm for 1.5 hours. More info on the JPD website, or register for the free meeting here: www.anymeeting.com/andrewmertz