

StewardCAST

A monthly e-newsletter of LCMS Stewardship Ministry

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Stewardship Lessons from a Mission Trip

SUMMER IS A TIME WHEN MANY congregations gather up their youth and adults and head out on mission trips. For many participants, there is a sanctified sense of accomplishment that comes with these experiences. The participants take a break from their normal, daily routines and set out on an adventure for Jesus. These are wonderful experiences for those who participate. Service is rendered. Memories are made. Even relationships can be built for the sake of the Gospel. These events can also teach some valuable stewardship lessons.

Sometimes mission trips seem to be nothing more than missionary tourism. The congregation that picks the most desirable location often has little trouble

filling the often-limited spots on the mission team. While it is true that these groups can do neat things, missionary tourism is very much focused on the experience of the person who is doing the serving. The memories made and lessons learned are focused on the feelings and experience of the participant. A successful mission trip like this is often assessed by how the person feels afterward. This presents the danger of quickly being forgotten when the participant returns home and goes back to “normal” life.

Mission trips, however, can be a great teaching and forming tool for stewards. The lessons are much greater than the feelings and the experience of the participants. Lessons like these for stewards are formational and

lasting. They are more externally focused and seek to build relationships and partnerships even more than creating memories. The memories created and the lessons learned are much more of an unintended consequence of the serving rather than the central goal.

Lessons in the Field

The first stewardship lesson that is learned on a mission trip is that stewardship is ACTIVE. Mission trips are not about where the trip goes; they are about the service that is rendered and the people being served. This could be in the inner cities of America's urban core, on a reservation which is home to Native Americans or even in some exotic location like the Caribbean or Central

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America. The where is not as important as the what. When God's people are led to use their hands and feet to be the hands and feet of Jesus, there are no spectators. Half-hearted serving can be spotted a mile away by fellow servants as well as those being served. Human beings were created for "all in" Biblical stewardship. This stewardship is the reflection of the image of God that is spoken of in Genesis 1.

The currency of this stewardship is service and sweat. This isn't some sort of transactional stewardship either. No checks are being written. It is simply the complete investment of a steward in the life of a fellow creature of the heavenly Father. In its purest form, it is using all of life and life's resources for the good of God's kingdom in this specific mission location.

The second stewardship lesson that can be learned on a mission trip is that stewardship is LOCATED. Like the lesson of active stewardship, the fact that stewardship is located in time and space can be taught by a mission trip experience. The located nature of stewardship means that it takes place by the use of physical, First Article gifts given by the Lord in a particular location with a

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recipient. Stewardship that is not located is an abstract stewardship that is not taught in the Scripture. The stewardship activity is done in relationship to others. It cannot be viewed as an abstract financial transaction designed to preserve an institution or assuage the guilt of the giver. It is not about "paying the bills" so that someone else may do the work. Located stewardship requires that the steward be present for the sake of stewardship.

The third stewardship lesson that comes from mission trips is that stewardship is RELATIONAL. An active stewardship that is located is one that puts the steward in relationship with those who are receiving the service. One of the great strengths of

mission trip stewardship is the relationships that are built between the ones serving and the ones being served. This again highlights the truth of how the Lord has made human beings. God's creatures were created for community — community with the Lord and community with one another. A mission trip is instrumental in creating this kind of community that goes beyond the normal. It gives the stewards a much larger view of their world.

This is an important lesson for the steward. Sinful stewards are very good at shrinking their world to a size that makes them the center. As master idol makers, individuals with a smaller worldview can much more easily find the sinner at the center. The echo chamber of personal opinion and myopic thinking about what is normal and abnormal causes the sinful steward not to serve but rather to render judgment. A mission trip moves the participant out of his world, out of her comfort zone, to see that people of different experiences, different socio-economic circumstances and even different cultures within this world are still in need of the relational stewardship of those who are called to faith in Jesus Christ.

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 monthly by:
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StewardCAST may be reprinted with
 acknowledgment given to The Lutheran
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Mission trips can cause these lessons to
 come into full view. Any number of pastors,
 missionaries and others who have gone on
 these mission trips can attest to the change
 that is worked in the individual stewards
 while they are on a mission trip. It is very
 hard not to see people and places in a much
 clearer light when the steward has fully
 invested himself in sweat and effort and
 perhaps even tears. Often at the end of a
 mission trip, reflection on the work which the
 stewards have done for the sake of others can
 lead to a very emotional experience. When
 the steward understands firsthand what Jesus
 means by “For even the Son of Man came not
 to be served but to serve, and to give his life
 as a ransom for many” (MARK 10:45), there is
 often a heart-wrenching emotional response
 because the servant-stewards have not always
 lived like that back home.

Lessons Continue at Home

Therein lies the challenge of mission trip
 stewardship lessons. How does one transition
 the mission trip experience from the trip
 to the place where the Lord has planted
 the steward? The answer is in the lessons
 that were taught. Far too often, when the
 mission trip ends, the steward heads home
 and resumes the old, world-shrinking life she
 has always known. When the steward comes
 home from a mission trip, it is critical that he
 reflects on the lessons learned. This reflection
 should lead to repentance. Repentance for
 an old, self-serving life is necessary. When
 the Lord in His Word convicts the steward in
 this way, the lessons of action, location and
 relation begin to take root.

This opens the door to transition. The
 steward, who was active on a mission trip,
 is also called to be active at home. This
 activity again is not about self but focused
 on others. The homecoming steward needs
 to seek the Holy Spirit’s guidance to have
 open eyes to potential stewardship activity
 for the sake of the Gospel that abounds in
 every location, even on the homefront. This
 seeking of Spirit-led action will open the
 door to a located stewardship right where
 she has always lived, serving neighbors
 nearby who need the same kind of located
 stewardship of life and life’s resources for the
 sake of the Gospel. This requires so much
 more than dropping a check in the plate. It
 calls the steward to faith-driven activity that
 is located in and through the person of the
 steward. This located stewardship then puts
 the steward in a creation-driven relationship
 with those around him. The people who are
 near the steward’s home have just as much
 need of located and active stewardship of
 First Article gifts as those who were served
 on the mission trip.

The transition of the stewardship lessons
 is a result of the Holy Spirit working in
 and through Word and Sacrament in the
 individual steward. It is not merely an
 emotional transaction. As the Lord works
 to open the eyes of the steward to the needs
 around her at home through the lens of the
 mission trip, a more faithful stewardship
 arises. And it all flows from what God has
 done for the steward in Christ. It isn’t paying
 it back. It is gracing it forward for the sake of
 the Gospel. That is a stewardship lesson that
 is desperately needed everywhere!

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