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# Reasons to go on a Short-Term Mission Trip

by William T. Griffin, DDS

*Many see short-term missions as a way to help others, which it is. But in the process, the Lord often helps the helpers, too.*



*Dr. Bill Griffin on a recent mission trip to Nigeria*

Despite our society's widespread mentality of seeking one's own comfort above all else, there are many members of CMDA who intentionally make themselves uncomfortable, and they do so on a regular basis. They purposely put themselves into situations with inferior food and housing, difficult working conditions, and they receive no financial compensation for their labors. What is it that they find so appealing about medical mission trips? Based on my personal experience, here are ten motivating factors, though this is by no means an exhaustive list:

## 1. Evangelistic Opportunities "in the field"

*"Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk?'" (Luke 5:23).*

For many CMDA members, this is the reason for that first trip, and it continues to be a primary motivator throughout one's medical missions endeavors. Jesus often connected His physical healings with the ultimate spiritual healing of forgiveness of sins and reconciliation of man with his Creator. As much of a privilege as it is to be used by the Lord to improve a person's health, it becomes ulti-

mately more rewarding when the Lord works through one's efforts to bring a person to faith in Christ. Jesus calls His people to "Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another" (John 13:34), and free health care for the needy is among the most powerful manifestations of God's love for the lost.

## 2. Evangelistic opportunities back home

*". . . let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven" (Matt. 5:16).*

When you get back home to private practice, discussing your mission trips is a very natural way to move patient conversations in the direction of the gospel. Prior to the trip, a doctor can inform patients of his upcoming absence from the office, and explain the reason for the trip, in detail, appropriate to the situation. After returning from a trip, a photo album can be compiled and placed in the waiting room for patients to see, thereby creating more opportunities to speak to patients about the reality of the Christian message. As patients express admiration for a doctor's willingness to donate time on the mission field, the door is wide open to redirect the praise to the One who gave far more of Himself than we ever will.

## 3. Showing love to believers

*"Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers" (Gal. 6:10).*

My first mission trip, to Belize in 1998, started out as a real bummer. My expectations were that I would change the world, or at least this particular corner of it. To my chagrin, the area in which I served was predominantly

Christian already, with well-established churches that were physically needy but spiritually well-endowed.

The Holy Spirit convicted me of the inappropriateness of my attitude through several passages that speak clearly to our calling to minister to fellow believers. Among the more applicable verses is Ephesians 4:12, where Paul refers to abilities given to men by the Lord “. . . to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up . . .” For us to ignore the needs of other Christians, so that we can add a few evangelistic notches to our belts, is in direct contrast to the Christ-centered gospel that we seek to proclaim. Not surprisingly, as Acts 2 shows, love between Christians can also be a very effective testimony to the unbelieving world of the truth of the gospel.

#### 4. Increased appreciation for what you have

*“Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thess. 5:18).*

Man’s need for salvation in Jesus Christ is well-illustrated by the fact that, no matter how much we have, we never lose the capacity to desire “just a little more.” Whatever level of comfort we attain becomes the norm, and anything less makes us feel unfairly deprived. Spending time among the poor around the world, however, will bring us back to the reality that we in America don’t know what real poverty is. I remember coming home after a recent trip to Nigeria, deeply grateful for the simple convenience of a hot shower. My next fast food burger tasted really good, as well.

#### 5. Decreased dependence on material things

*“I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want” (Phil. 4:12).*



*Dental students Kevin Howarth and Nicole Reynolds, from the University of Oklahoma, sharing and expanding their skills in Jamaica*

In addition to becoming more grateful for all that the Lord has given us in this country, mission trips are also a stark reminder that we don’t really need as much as we think we need. My time in the mountains of Jamaica allowed me to meet brothers and sisters who work eight hours a day at a coffee factory, sorting through coffee beans by hand, barely making enough to keep food on the table. When it came time to worship the Lord, however, there was a joy and sincerity of heart that most Americans would envy. Perhaps a lot of the “stuff” that we accumulate actually serves as an obstacle to recognizing the Lord as our provider. I am reminded of Jesus’ parable of the Sower and the Seed, in which some of the seed fell among the thorns. Jesus explained: “The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life’s worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature” (Luke 8:14). If we are to bear fruit that lasts for the kingdom of Christ, then we need to heed this stark warning from our Savior, and mission trips help greatly in this regard.

#### 6. Freedom from the Western pace of life

*“Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?” (Matt. 6:27).*

One of the many ironies that becomes apparent on the mission field is the fact people who have less are often more laid back about life. While we are working overtime to fund that retirement plan account, those we treat around the world are more concerned with enjoying their families and getting to know their neighbors. Most of us have much to learn in this regard from those we serve on the mission field, and each trip I take is therapeutic in this regard.

#### 7. Teaching medical/dental students

*“And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others” (2 Tim. 2:2).*

A physician or dentist who has been practicing for awhile has much to offer those still in medical or dental school. The mission field is a perfect teaching environment in many respects. First, there are normally plenty of patients, and not nearly as much record-keeping required as back in the states. Secondly, students will often have the opportunity to provide more hands-on treatment, and yet will still have seasoned professionals nearby for back-up if the situation extends beyond the student’s comfort zone. Thirdly, because of the desperate need for care in most parts of the world,

patients will be as grateful for the opportunity to see a student as they would a licensed doctor.

Medical and dental school represent very difficult times in the lives of most people. The quantity of information that must be learned, and the hours of classroom and clinical time required have a profoundly humbling effect on most students. The Lord has used these difficult years to open many students' eyes, including my own, to faith in Jesus Christ. A Christian physician or dentist who shares his or her expertise with a student in humility and love while on a mission trip can be a powerful force for the gospel in that student's life.

### 8. Establishment of profound friendships

*"A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity" (Prov. 17:17).*

I met one of my dearest friends, Dr. Jim Carney, on a mission trip to Jamaica about ten years ago. Since then we have gone on about a dozen trips together, and our families have also enjoyed each other's company on many occasions. Jim's love for Christ has inspired in him a deep love for the people of Jamaica, as evidenced by his establishment of six dental clinics throughout Jamaica and over fifty total mission trips. It should be no surprise that our deepest, most meaningful friendships will be with those with whom we serve the Lord. Scriptural examples of friendships forged through faithfulness to the Lord include David and Jonathan, Ruth and Naomi, and Paul and Barnabas.



*Dr. Bill Griffin, Dr. Jim Carney, and some of their Jamaican friends*

### 9. Greater appreciation for the universality of the church

*"... that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (John 17:21).*

In Jesus' High Priestly Prayer, a portion of which is cited above, He prays for unity among believers, so that the unbelieving world will be able to recognize that Jesus really was from God, that He really was the Messiah. The fellowship that believers enjoy is especially sweet when it crosses ethnic and cultural boundaries. Differences in skin color or language cannot inhibit the unity brought about by the presence of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers. It still amazes me that I can meet a Christian for the first time in a foreign country, and in less than two minutes we have more in common that I do with an unbelieving neighbor I have known for nearly two decades. Without a doubt, God the Father has answered Jesus' prayer in a powerful way.

### 10. The privilege of seeing God at work

*"Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen" (Eph. 3:20, 21) .*

The unpredictable nature of mission trips can create some very scary moments. I think back to challenges of getting dental equipment through customs, power outages, treatment needs that sometimes went well beyond my level of experience, and so forth. Just about every repeat medical or dental missionary has a plethora of stories relating how the Lord came through in awesome, sometimes miraculous, ways. Though life is certainly more predictable at home than on the mission field, a doctor's willingness to venture into uncharted territory creates the privilege of experiencing God's deliverance in amazing ways.

There are certainly many other reasons, along with those listed above, to give up the pleasures of our country to help the needy around the world. Dr. Kathy O'Connell, an OB/Gyn and



Dr. Kathy O'Connell caring for patients in Kenya

CMDA member from Yorktown, Virginia, who goes to Kenya annually to treat AIDS patients, admits that the satisfaction she receives from these trips almost makes her feel a bit guilty. "I suppose it's a little selfish on my part," O'Connell says, "because there is nothing greater than the huge smiles I get from helping the poorest of the poor." As the Bible says, "It is more blessed to give than receive," and the amazing thing about missions is that often in giving of our wealth, time, and talents to show Christ's love to others, we receive in return the immensely more valuable treasures of heaven, and are filled spiritually and emotionally to overflowing. This is the power of the

gospel, which we seek to spread to others, returning like a boomerang and making our joy more full (John 15:11).

If you haven't yet ventured into the field of missionary dentistry or medicine, I hope this article inspires you to go on that first trip. You don't have to start with a trip down the Amazon; there are plenty of "safe" destinations to try first. If this is something you know you would like to try, but the time is not right, I encourage you to put it on the schedule at some point in the future. Otherwise, you could wake up someday at 85 years of age, still saying, "Maybe next year . . . ."

If you are a veteran of medical-dental mission trips, then I encourage you to invite at least one new doctor to join you every time you go. The worst that could happen is that they might say no, and you have lost nothing. On the other hand, if they accept your invitation, who knows what the Lord might do through your labors together? †

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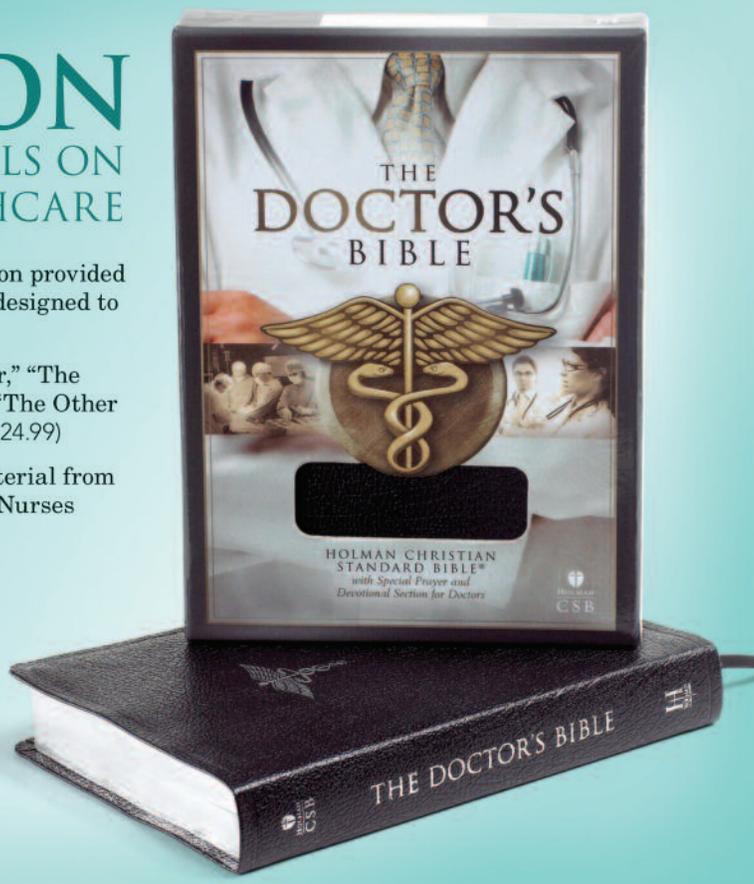
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