Gifted Co-Educators: Voices from Short-Term Service Immersion Community Partners

by Joyana Jacoby Dvorak

Each year scores of undergraduates at DePaul University participate in seven to ten day service immersion experiences. Preparation includes a values-based developmental leadership framework1 and introduction to the mission of the Vincentians in Action (VIA) Service Immersion program:

…to provide students with transformational short-term service immersion opportunities that incorporate community, spiritual reflection, simplicity, and increased awareness of social injustice. Integrated throughout the immersion experience is the Vincentian in Action ways of awareness/appreciation, dialogue and solidarity2. We hope to inspire growth and change in a way that resonates back home through the sharing of stories and action toward systemic change.

These are grand aspirations and students have reported transformative personal changes for their faith and action in the world.3 Significant change is nurtured by asking critical questions before and after venturing into another reality. “Can short term missions do more harm than good?”4 “Who do we intend to accompany and who accompanies us?”

This column focuses on essential and often neglected partners who are co-educators and formators in service immersions—hosts who graciously receive students and facilitate their on-site experiences. As VIA coordinator at DePaul University, I recently conducted a program evaluation that sought to integrate this community partner

---

1 Siobhan O’Donoghue and Karl Nass, “Vincentians in Action: An Interfaith Model for Civic Learning and Spiritual Growth,” Journal of College and Character 7, no. 6 (2006). Vincentian values of community, spirituality, and service are integrated into the formation process, empowering students to make meaning of their experiences.


Researchers have documented the impact of short-term immersion programs, from imagining alternative possibilities for lifestyle change and shifts in worldview, to deepening the understanding of social issues, privilege, and stereotypes.

4 For articles used as a part of VIA Immersion Program, see Ivan Illich, “To Hell with Good Intentions,” Conference on InterAmerican Student Projects (CIASP) in Cuernavaca, Mexico, on April 20 (1968); JoAnn Van Engen, “The Cost of Short Term Missions,” The Other Side 36, no. 1 (2000): 20-23.

Joyana Jacoby Dvorak is the DePaul University Ministry Service Immersion Coordinator in the Vincentian Community Service Office and adjunct professor in the Peace, Justice and Conflict studies program.
perspective—voices seldom heard in research. They highlighted factors contributing to our mutually beneficial partnerships including shared hopes/objectives, intentional preparation of students and hosts, orientations, long-term relationships, and DePaul students’ curiosity and readiness to serve and learn.

Spirituality of Accompaniment

At the heart of VIA Service Immersion is building relationships, presence over simply completing tasks. A paradigm of community service rooted in being versus doing, listening to the needs of communities before responding, working with versus doing for, discovering root causes, and reflection moving towards action applies to every relationship. The primary encounter is with persons living in poverty, requiring deep listening and openness to the radical other. Partners affirmed this accompaniment philosophy and shared the hope that, though short-term, there is potential for long-term impact in students’ lives, especially if there is post-immersion follow-up focused on integration and accountability.

Value of Relationship Building and Presence

In addition to testimony of community beneficiaries who appreciated students being attentive and taking the time to listen to their story, partners reported positive interactions with students amidst the host community. They valued groups being ready and open to dialogue, building relationships and not putting up barriers, in contrast to groups who come in and stay distant. A concern of partners when receiving groups is that “[some students] didn’t come to be with us, [they] came to be here so [they] could get [their] ticket punched” and “feel good” about themselves. Another partner articulated a similar sentiment, “We do want to be very conscious that we are not in any way using, or taking advantage of persons who are in need.” Listening first is key to avoid this pitfall.

Especially for immersions where students spend only a brief time at many different service sites, a tension arose in the quality of relationship building that can happen. Some partners commented on the unrealistic expectation to build meaningful relationships: “When you think of it as a chance to build a relationship, how is that possible when you are only there three hours, once a year?” A few hours’ service will not meet the agency’s greater need for more stable, committed volunteers. Other partners countered this by saying there is a benefit in doing service for a short time because students “throw themselves into it and don’t hold back because they know that they only get these three hours.”

Beyond tasks or projects completed, a consistent theme was how the youth’s presence and curiosity is energizing and hopeful. The students were described as “a breath of fresh air” and a “positive light.” Their presence breaks the mundane: “When you have a shot of serious energy, you know, one month a year, it’s just like, wow, wake up time.” They also may give “new eyes” and “affirmation” to the daily routine of the hosting community, who have made long-term commitments to accompany and respond to needs.

Intentional Preparation

One partner remarked, “There’s a lot of grunt work that needs to be done prior to a group coming”—usually without the services of a volunteer coordinator. With these co-educators, preparation, too, has a relational quality. “It’s

---

5 As described by Kim Marie Lamberty: “A spirituality of accompaniment begins with recognition of the dignity of the self as well as the other as created in God’s image. It is expressed in presence, relationship, community, and service.” Lamberty, “Toward a Spirituality of Accompaniment in Solidarity Partnerships,” *Missiology: An International Review* 40, no. 2 (2012): 188.

6 Kurt Alan Ver Beek, “The Impact of Short-term Missions: A Case Study of House Construction in Honduras after Hurricane Mitch,” *Missiology: An International Review* 34, no. 4 (2006): 477–495. This framework is supported by Ver Beek who recommends short-term missions ought not focus on fixing things for the poor, but rather on listening to the poor, observing, respecting, and dialoguing before trying to do something.
not about the number of groups we have, it is about the quality of experience...This is not a warehouse here! It's gotta be intentional, reflective, authentic and given from the heart.” Knowing the capacity of sites and appropriate number of students is critical to avoid having too many helping hands. Most partners value an open mind and heart and a readiness to be flexible more than specific skills of the volunteer.

Partners are appreciative and can tell the difference when students are prepped to humbly “come as a student... [not] as a bountiful person who has things to give to people.” Students are guests in the host and wider community, not poverty tourists. Self-awareness calls for a “willingness to acknowledge what you do and don’t know, what your privilege is, or how you could be perceived in the community.” On-site orientations to provide necessary community contexts are critical.

Long-term Relationships with Partners

When asked what motivates them to continue as hosts year after year, community partners emphasized the gradual accumulation of trust, “The students have a common history here and I always like to remind them that they are walking in the footsteps of the students before them...it’s the history that leads to a readiness for acceptance by the community.” There is a mutual benefit of creating long-term, sustainable relationships and of returning to the same locations each year. Partners who have long-term relationships with community organizations are invaluable bearers of trust. They cultivate and build relationships at service sites throughout the year and are in tune with current needs. Their credibility allows for students to enter into intimate and meaningful encounters in the community.

Several partners commented how they appreciated the opportunity to take a step back and honestly reflect on our partnership. Taking the time to stop and listen cultivates mutuality. On a long-term basis, host communities accompany persons in the wider community where they serve. As co-educators in the DePaul VIA Immersion program, they accompany students who serve short-term and take a step in a journey of discovering their place in the world. With intentionality from start to finish, mutual relations of the university and community partners, hosts and students, students and persons they encounter during immersion, create in the VIA framework the gift of solidarity.