

Can tourism become mission?

Originally from Bulgaria, Charlie Hadjiev (pictured right) studied law in Sofia, theology in London and completed a doctoral dissertation at Oxford. Prior to joining Belfast Bible College in 2011 he taught Old Testament at the Bulgarian Evangelical Theological Institute and served



as the Academic Dean of the United Theological Faculty. At BBC, he has responsibility as Programme Leader for the QUB Undergraduate programme. He is also currently a visiting Lecturer at the Continental Theological Seminary, Brussels, Belgium. Charlie is currently interested in taking on research students.

We asked him the question, ‘How useful is short-term mission?’ and his answer might surprise you!

“The question can be answered very differently, depending on whether you are at the giving or receiving end of it. For those who go, the short term mission trip can be an exciting opportunity to encounter a new culture, learn more about the world, see a strikingly different perspective.

For those on the receiving end, short term mission can be a mixed blessing. When it meets a real need on the ground (and there are undoubtedly many good examples of that) it can contribute a lot. However, at times, it may also turn out to be a destructive and discouraging experience for the receiving culture. This

is especially the case when people are left with the impression that what really matters are the needs and priorities of those who come, not the needs of those who welcome. If no genuine relationship, characterised by care, develops, then one side simply uses the other for its own selfish goals. Mission becomes twisted religious tourism, not Christian service.

The question whether tourism can become mission is an intriguing new way of looking at the issue. A tourist visit, is by definition, a mutually beneficial transaction.



For the tourists it provides a space for recreation and pleasure, but in return they invest in the economic wellbeing of the place they visit. There is already a connection in place between visitors and hosts based on mutual agreement. It follows clear, well-defined rules, and may provide a natural context in which the Gospel can be shared. Of course, not every tourist destination lends itself easily to this. We will need to choose places that are not faceless and commercialised, places where language will not be a barrier and people are open to talk and engage with visitors.

A tourist who respectfully engages with his or her hosts, shows genuine interest

in them, and shares the good news is a much better witness than a 'short-term missionary' whose purpose in visiting is often difficult to comprehend and accept by local people. I am not suggesting that evangelism should be the only reason why we go on holiday. Enjoying the sun and having a rest is a totally legitimate exercise in and of itself. It does not need to be justified with a reference to a 'higher' purpose. Yet, there may be occasions when God in his sovereign wisdom will use it in ways that go beyond what we ask, expect, or imagine."