

Ohio Team to Armenia Part of Growing Voluntourism Trend

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It's called "voluntourism" and the trend is taking hold around the globe, including in Armenia where the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR) hosted its first-ever Volunteers in Mission (VIM) team. The eight-person team from Ohio spent two weeks helping renovate a special education school as well as working on a Habitat for Humanity house.

"It's an experience I'd recommend to anyone," said Shirley Funt of Columbus, Ohio. She travelled nearly half-way around the world with the team, the first she ever participated on, though she's spent many hours helping at bake sales, spaghetti dinners, rummage sales and similar fundraisers for other teams. "It was a wonderful trip and adventure. I'm ready to do it again," Funt added.

Funt and her seven team mates are part of an evolving tendency by Americans and other westerners to travel with a purpose. Thus, the invention of the word voluntourism by the Nevada Board of Tourism to capture what it is people such as Funt choose to do during their annual vacations.

In the broadest sense, voluntourism combines voluntary service with the traditional elements of travel—arts, culture, geography, history and recreation. As a strategy, voluntourism can assist people in fulfilling their goals of making a difference in the lives of others around the world and, subsequently, enhancing your own happiness and well-being. As an experience, voluntourism can engage you in some of the most meaningful ways as you look beyond traditional tourism venues to really see what life is like in the place you're visiting.

The idea of combining voluntary service with travel is not new. In fact, it has been traced back thousands of years in various cultures and religious orders around the world. Missionaries, healers and/or medical practitioners, sailors, explorers and countless others have rendered service in conjunction with their travels. In recent times, voluntourism received a very big boost from the Peace Corps, established in 1961 during the John F. Kennedy administration. Subsequent events include: Service learning, established in 1965, seen in many area schools; a boom in study-abroad programs in the 1970s; the evolution of ecotourism in the 1980s; advertisements for volunteer vacations in the 1990s (although the first volunteer vacation was operated by Earthwatch in 1971); and the increasing call for more corporate social responsibility since the 1990s.

What do voluntourists do on their vacations? Well, people such as Funt and her Ohio colleagues were prepared to work with Armenian masters to install new, energy-efficient windows at a boarding school for children with various types of cognitive and physical disabilities. The Ohioans were also going to plaster, sand and paint walls as well as repair the parquet flooring and add a few comfy couches.

After five days at the school and two days of sightseeing around Armenia, the Ohioans were then going to spend a few days working on a Habitat for Humanity house in a remote village that does not get a lot of volunteer teams in it.

However, years of neglect under the former Soviet system created problems at the school. When the masters attempted to install the windows, the entire lower half of the cement wall fell right out of the building! So the VIM team adjusted and installed the wall before doing anything else. Meanwhile, Funt was tucked away in another room with local staff people, sewing new curtains as well as repairing the long-neglected machines so the teachers and the students could finally use them again.

At the Habitat house the following week, the team sanded and painted (with a mixture that was more like a barn whitewash rather than Dutch Boy) the plastered walls as well as sanded and sealed the particle board flooring. Before leaving, a priest from the local Armenian Apostolic Church performed a traditional home blessing ceremony and Habitat presented the parents and

their four children with a new Bible. The Ohioans also sang “Amazing Grace” after which everyone cried and hugged each other. The two weeks of voluntourism was over and the team had experienced the local culture, understood better the challenges facing this tiny country and witnessed the impact of their work on the lives of others.

People who study voluntourism predict it will be one of the leading forms of consumable travel for U.S. citizens by the year 2010. With the emergence of volunteerism as a "national pastime," the desire to expand volunteerism with travel will only grow. Whether it is through international and domestic service learning experiences for high school, college, and university students, or families selecting to volunteer in conjunction with their travel, voluntourism has a very bright future within the U.S. market. As corporate social responsibility expands globally through U.S. and European-based companies and their affiliates, volunteerism, and subsequently, voluntourism, will grow. And with non-profit and community organizations under increasing pressure change how they generate funds and support for their social-service activities, they must adopt new strategies. Voluntourism is one of the options.

So, how does one become a voluntourist? There are several ways, including through The United Methodist Church’s VIM program that is open to all people whether they are UMers or not. For example, Pastor Listowel Ayensu-Mensah at the Denzer and North Freedom United Methodist churches is organizing a team of volunteers to go to his native Ghana while the snow flies in Wisconsin. Other denominations have similar programs and people can talk to their local pastor or priest to find out more. There are also service clubs such as the Rotary, Kiwanis and Lions that offer members domestic and global voluntourism opportunities.

Whether travelling as an individual volunteer like I am doing in Armenia or travelling as part of a team, people usually pays all of his own expenses. These expenses may be tax-deductible, but always consult a tax advisor. Other issues people should realize about this type of travel are:

- It must be done consciously, thoughtfully and willingly in order to preserve and honor the vulnerability of those less fortunate than you;
- The money you spend in your destination provides living wages of residents;
- It can include profound emotions and feelings as a result of the intense interactions you experience;
- Daily personal or group introspection can help you process the myriad, unexpected personal reactions to each day’s activities and experiences; and
- Every day will include some lesson about the culture, attitudes and customs of local residents that are not right or wrong, compared to your own, but perhaps just different from what you’re accustomed.

Whether you’re a skilled mason or a good wheelbarrow pusher, a doctor or a teacher, a student or a senior citizen, there are voluntourism opportunities for all ages and all skill levels or interests. Just ask around—or email me because I’d love to host a team of Wisconsinites next spring to experience first-hand the people, this land, the Christian history, the traditions and the cultures of a place where I feel truly called by God to serve to try to make a positive difference in people’s lives.

(This is the fourth story in a series by Pamela J. Karg, a journalist and photographer who has called Sauk County home for some 25 years, but now is answering a new call to serve as a volunteer at UMCOR-Armenia. She is a member of the Denzer and North Freedom United Methodist churches. Her stories appear periodically. You can reach her at pamela@umcor.am)



Pamela Karg (center) with members of the United Methodist Volunteers in Mission team from Ohio, as well as a Peace Corps volunteer and a Canadian-Armenian while working on a Habitat for Humanity house in the village of Areni (background). In addition to writing and editing grant proposals at the United Methodist Committee on Relief office in Armenia, Karg's volunteer duties include in-country coordination for volunteer teams which are open to anyone who has an interest in seeing the world through a different type of travel.