

Short Term Missions: Lights... Camera... Action?

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Brangelina. The Red Campaign. Bono. Oprah. Everywhere you look, entertainers seem to be jumping into worldwide causes that matter. Thank God for entertainers that invest in something that really counts. Some would say these are the newest ways to gain publicity in Hollywood. But we're not ready to be that suspicious. We're grateful for anything that is a catalyst toward ending poverty, hunger, and HIV AIDS.

So what can Hollywood teach us about our youth ministry mission efforts? Oprah's new Leadership Academy for Girls in South Africa might be a good window through which to see ourselves.

We give Oprah credit for investing in something that counts. She isn't simply sending "left-overs" to South African girls. The 152 high school girls live and study in a state of the art facility. The living quarters include oversize rooms with 5-star hotel quality linens, a yoga studio, a beauty salon, indoor and outdoor theaters, hundreds of pieces of original artwork, and other lavish amenities. It seems a bit over the top but hey—she's choosing to be generous!

Here's our concern though. There are aspects to Oprah's approach that seem to mimic our tendency in our service projects and missions trips. We love to go in with our programs and ideas to help people. And whether we realize it or not, to many of those we're serving, it comes off as if we're the "Great American Saviors" who have come in to save them from themselves and we want to make sure the cameras are running while we do it.

What if Oprah had gone it with a commitment to help existing schools in townships all throughout the country rather than having to come in and develop her own school with her name on it? What if her specials were less focused up the "Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy" and more about how through additional resources, the local schools in townships across the country are thriving and empowering all kinds of young people across the country?

And are our youth service projects really all that different? Pictures that show our kids in the center of down and out people who lavish our kids with praise run the risk of coming off as our own version of trying to pull off a blockbuster service project.

Can we be more excited about partnering with a local group of people and never getting any attention for it but instead, talking about the great things *they're* doing? Can we come home with stories that speak honorably about the good things going on in the places we visit rather than all the horror stories and what we did to fix those horrors?

Don't stop serving. We celebrate all youth groups (and Hollywood stars) who want to serve the world. This is a beautiful picture of what the gospel looks like. But since Oprah probably won't be asking for our input, here are a few suggestions for the rest of us:

First, our ideas of how to meet a need might not be the same way the people we're visiting want to see that need met. Let's "listen" first and "do" second, submitting ourselves to the wisdom of the locals.

Second, let's not go *primarily* for our own benefit. To serve someone means to put their interests first. Going on a mission trip because it bonds our group or helps us grow should be secondary motivations lest we exploit the very ones we claim to serve. Our own growth is inevitable but let's allow that to be the byproduct rather than the driving agenda.

Finally, let's get over ourselves. The stars are the local church who stay there year-round, not those of us who are guests there for a few days. Let's serve together with them and praise God for the work that gets done.

A little reflection like this gets us beyond the lights and cameras, toward humble service that enables the global church to serve the world, one scene at a time.

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