The New AMOR

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Dordt staff and alumni re-envision the role of short-term mission trips

As six Americans from Dordt College and a translator walk into her one-room schoolhouse in Cambodia, Soksa Mon smiles and keeps singing. She curves her hands and feet in traditional Cambodian dance style and nods to her kindergarten students to follow along. A few sing loudly with outstretched arms; the others stand still or run to their mothers who sit on the floor at the back of the small classroom.

After the final verse, Soksa Mon straightens her blue blazer and smooths her hair. She and the visitors greet each other with a sampeah—palms pressed together in front of faces. They ask Soksa Mon questions, and she replies that she has taught at the school for two years, has a ninth grade education, and is only one class away from completing her teaching certificate in Phnom Penh.

The translator says, “The village had to contribute 30 percent of the costs to construct this schoolhouse, and the village chief donated the land to build it on. That’s the chief’s house over there.” He points out the window to a nearby...
house on stilts.

"And World Renew worked through the local NGO to help with the rest?" asks a Dordt student.

The translator nods.

"Why do the mothers stay in the classroom?" another student asks.

"Some mothers have to walk a kilometer to bring their children to the school, so they'll often just wait once they get here," says the translator.

Soksa Mon reaches for a nearby black plastic bag and pulls out a rope ladder; she created and painted the ladder herself to make sure the kindergarteners get enough exercise.

"Wow," says a Dordt student. "She really wants her students to succeed."

"It seems like the whole community does," adds another.

Soksa Mon smiles and puts the ladder back in the bag. The kindergarteners have scattered and, as the visitors say "akun"—thank you—and walk outside, the teacher calls the class back to order.

This is the new AMOR: Dordt students as learners rather than doers on mission trips during Christmas break. The students want to see what God is doing in developing countries like Cambodia and through the lives of people like Soksa Mon and the kindergarteners she teaches.

A VISION TRIP

AMOR has long stood for "A Mission Outreach," but Discipleship Coordinator Alex Geleynse has spent the last two years thinking beyond that acronym.

"We want AMOR to move from a mission trip to a vision trip," says Geleynse. "The goal is to see what God is doing in another part of the world, because we believe that Jesus and the gospel go before us."

The five students who went on the AMOR trip to Cambodia experienced this change firsthand. Instead of building houses or painting walls, they learned how World Renew partners with local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to physically and spiritually transform poor and vulnerable communities. Bun Chanthuon, a World Renew program officer, drove the Dordt students around the Cambodian provinces of Prey Veng and Svay Rieng and introduced them to chicken farmers, kindergarten teachers, vegetable farmers, and village chiefs who have worked with World Renew and local NGOs. The students saw how rural Cambodians’ lives have improved through World Renew’s health, government, education, and food safety initiatives.

"We also want students to experience a different religion and culture, and to see how different communities work," says Geleynse. "We want them to realize that the world is not predominantly Christian and that there are billions of people who are unreached. If we’re not willing to get to know people from other religions and cultural backgrounds, then are we going to have a desire to see them worship the one, true God?"

For three days, the Dordt students stayed with Cambodian families in the rural provinces; some slept on bamboo mats on the floor, and others learned how to cook traditional Cambodian dishes like fish soup and sticky rice. The students
saw how close-knit the rural communities can be; senior Miranda Moss and 
freshman Hannah Dagel said that, on the 
first night, there were so many visitors at 
their host family's house that they didn't 
even know who actually lived there.

“It was interesting to see how ingrained 
religion is in Cambodian culture,” says 
Maddie Vande Kamp, a senior. “Buddhist 
and Hindu symbolism has influenced 
everything from the traditional 
arquitecture of pagodas to how peoples’ 
beliefs are expressed through the spirit 
houses and shrines in their homes.”

WHAT IT MEANS FOR A 
CHRISTIAN COLLEGE 
TO DO MISSIONS

The concept of a vision trip is something 
that Aaron Baart, Dordt’s dean 
of chapel, has been thinking 
about since 2010. At that 
point, AMOR trips typically 
consisted of groups of 10 – 12 
Dordt students who would fly 
to another country together, 
live together, stay together, 
and eat together. They often 
worked on projects that local 
people could have done 
themselves and didn’t get to 
know the people who lived there.

“It wasn’t really a cross-cultural 
experience,” says Baart. “It didn’t use the 
students’ majors or unique gift sets. And, 
in many ways, they were taking work 
away from the people who lived in those 
countries.”

Baart started to ask questions about 
short-term mission trips.

“One of my first questions was, ‘What 
does it mean for a Christian institution of 
higher education to do missions?’” says 
Baart.

He and Geleyse read many books on 
mission work and stewardship initiatives 
while trying to answer this question, but 
one that had a significant impact was 
When Helping Hurts, written by Dordt 
graduate and economist Brian Fikkert 
(’86) and community development expert 
Steve Corbett.

“We found a lot of wisdom in it, and 
what we learned helped us to completely 
revamp how we do AMOR,” says Baart.

AMOR was originally set up like a short-
term mission trip as defined by Fikkert and 
Corbett: “ranging from one week 
to two years, to other locations within 
North America or around the world... 
to minister to the physical needs of 
materially poor people.”

Fikkert and Corbett state that those who 
go on short-term mission trips often 
have good intentions but can create 
harm because they “tend to reflect 
the perspective of ‘poverty as deficit,’ 
the idea that poverty is due to the 
poor lacking something.” And “North 
Americans often view the ‘something’ as 
material resources [or] lack of knowledge 
or spirituality,” the authors say.

A holistic definition of poverty looks 
at more than material goods. Quoting 
Christian development thinker Bryant 
Myers, Fikkert and Corbett define 
poverty as “the result of relationships 
that do not work, that are not just, that 
are not for life, that are not harmonious 
or enjoyable. Poverty is the absence of 
shalom in all its meanings.” They see 
poverty as “rooted in the brokenness of 
foundational relationships,” including 
our relationship with God, self, others, 
and the rest of creation. Adopting this 
holistic view of poverty helps Christians 
realize that, even if they are rich from 
a material standpoint, they might be 
impoverished in other areas of their lives. 
According to Fikkert and Corbett, many 
poverty-alleviation efforts exacerbate 
the poverty of being economically rich— 
god complexes—and the poverty of being 
economically poor—feelings of inferiority 
and shame.

“We try to be honest and tell 
students that this is probably 
more about what we will get 
than what we will give.”

— Aaron Baart, dean of chapel

“We carefully choose ministry partners 
based on their stewardship and their 
ability to raise indigenous leaders,” says 
Baart. “We want to work with ministries 
who are running lean, who are being 
stewardly with the money they’re given.”

In some cases, AMOR-goers work with 
organizations that focus on unreached 
people groups—that is, locations where 
there are few Christians.

Baart and Geleyse also realize that, 
as Geleyse says, “spending two weeks 
with a partner organization is not 
enough time to experience the heart 
of the organization’s mission.” That 
understanding shapes how they think 
about the purpose of AMOR.
“We try to be honest and tell students that this is probably more about what we will get than what we will give,” says Baart. “AMOR is an educational experience and a discipleship experience. We want students to cultivate a deeper level of humility in missions and understand that we’re going to learn from people. We’re not bringing Jesus anywhere where he isn’t already; saying that would be absolutely foolish. Instead, we want to learn from the Christian believers who are working in the setting we’re visiting.”

And Baart and Geleynse would like students to use their majors and skillsets on AMOR, when possible.

“We’re creating opportunities for our students to ask what missions looks like for an education, engineering, or nursing major,” says Baart. “Even if the students decide they don’t want to go into missions, they can still appreciate that there are people who are taking their same set of skills, gifts, and education and applying them internationally.”

RETHINKING THE ROLE OF A SHORT-TERM MISSION TRIP

Is there still a place for short-term mission trips?

Fikkert believes there is, but not if we think we’re “going to go alleviate poverty in a week.” Most communities already have local people, organizations, or churches busily working. The role of outsiders should be to encourage, strengthen, and support those who are already there.

For some, that might seem like a less glamorous role; but Fikkert sees this role as vital.

“It’s really important to go and listen to those who are there over the long haul—to hear their stories, to pray with them, to encourage them, and to come back and support them through ongoing prayer, encouragement, and fundraising,” says Fikkert.

Baart, who founded the organization One Body One Hope as a way to empower the people of Liberia through Christ-centered evangelism and training, also thinks short-term mission trips should focus less on productivity and more on relationship building. During One Body One Hope’s first trip to Liberia, volunteers built an entire dormitory for an orphanage in three days. When the work was completed, the team was surprised to find that the Liberians were disappointed.

“The Liberians said, ‘You didn’t pray, worship, or get to know us. You built a building,’” says Baart.

On the next trip, Baart asked the Liberians to take charge of the team’s itinerary. Volunteers spent two weeks visiting churches, attending funerals, making house visits, praying, and sharing testimonies.

“They didn’t want us to do anything for them,” Baart says. “We’re so task-oriented as Westerners that we often feel that it’s not productive unless we’re being efficient and producing something. But that’s not always what the global church wants from us.”

Chad Nibbelink (’07) works for Brothers Redevelopment, a Denver-based nonprofit organization that provides housing and housing-related services for the region’s low-income, elderly, and disabled residents. Short-term mission teams often assist with Brothers Redevelopment projects, and Nibbelink has found that preparation for a short-term mission trip is almost as important as going on the trip itself.

“If, as a visitor, you think you have the answers, your efforts can be harmful because you’re only seeing a tiny slice of the organization and its work in the community without seeing the context.”

— Merissa Harkema (’13)

“It is important to come with authentic expectations that a short-term mission experience is a two-way street and that you both give and receive,” says Nibbelink. “It’s incredibly important to create times of reflection and discussion and to prioritize relationships. Teams should be ready to ask questions of...
themselves and others, particularly about poverty.”

To Merissa Harkema (’13), openness and attitude are important. Harkema has spent the past two years working at Sarah’s Covenant Homes, a community of foster-style homes in Hyderabad, India. She finds it most helpful when short-term mission teams ask questions and are open to assisting in ways that better the organization as a whole.

“If, as a visitor, you think you have the answers, your efforts can be harmful because you’re only seeing a tiny slice of the organization and its work in the community without seeing the context,” says Harkema. “It’s important to trust that the way to be most helpful is to do what those who are there for the long haul are saying would be most helpful.”

GO AND EXPERIENCE

In addition to the Cambodia team, Dordt sent AMOR groups to Liberia and Belize during Christmas break. The Belize team, comprised of four digital media majors and a faculty leader, spent a week filming at Presbyterian Day School in Cristo Rey, Belize; they will turn the footage into a fundraising video for the organization. Another team spent two weeks in Liberia collaborating with One Body One Hope.

Every AMOR trip is different. What remains the same, no matter where the AMOR trips take Dordt students, is the hope that these trips will shape the lives of the students who go.

“We ask our students, ‘How are you going to make this short-term experience create lifelong transformation?’” says Baart.

That lifelong transformation might take many shapes, and often students don’t fully comprehend AMOR’s impact on their lives until long after they have returned to American soil. However, from Baart’s perspective, that transformation can’t happen without the right mindset.

“Go and experience—learn from someone there,” says Baart. “Cook with them. Teach in the classrooms with them. Walk in someone else’s shoes for a day, see what their life is like, and foster an appreciation for it. Develop a real relationship, come with a posture of humility, and don’t have set expectations of what will make this good or not.”

SARAH MOSS (’10)