

NAMB Research Gives Detailed Picture of Volunteer Missions

By James Dotson/Baptist Press, www.bpbews.net
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ALPHARETTA, Ga. (BP)—Most Southern Baptist volunteer missions trips involve construction, with evangelism events, Vacation Bible Schools and backyard Bible schools also popular, according to a new survey of 215 churches and 408 volunteers conducted by the North American Mission Board last year based on activities during 2002.

Among other findings: Most projects are more than 500 miles from the sponsoring church, while interest is high among churches in sponsoring more opportunities suitable for the entire family.

The survey, which focused on projects outside the local church community that were in the United States and Canada, was commissioned to help NAMB and state conventions be more effective in facilitating and promoting volunteer missions, said Jim Burton, NAMB's director of volunteer mobilization. Previous data on numbers of volunteers has been available, but the NAMB effort provides additional data on distances traveled, projects conducted, funding and other details.

"To help us in our long-range planning, we felt like we had to have a more detailed picture of what's happening in SBC voluntarism," he said, noting the research likely will be repeated regularly to track ongoing trends among the estimated 500,000 volunteers sent out by Southern Baptist churches each year on mission trips.

One of the most interesting findings was a confirmation of a suspicion that construction projects were a part of most mission trips to some degree, Burton said. "We were a little surprised to find out that it was 52.7 percent," he said. "... If 52.7 percent are doing construction, that's over 200,000 volunteers a year."

The finding should help Southern Baptists be recognized for their presence in the construction industry, he said, as well as help NAMB further strengthen its efforts to facilitate volunteer building projects.

"We are piloting a strategy this summer where not only will crews build churches but they will also do evangelism in the community in support of the physical building they are constructing," Burton said. "We realize that we have got to give more attention to growing the significance of that construction experience, because we estimate that Southern



Baptist Builders

Photo by Eric Lars Bakke

Volunteers from Brookwood Baptist Church in Mountain Brook, Ala., last year helped build an initial building for Redeemer Baptist Church in Aurora, Colo. A recent survey of churches and volunteers found that about 52 percent of Southern Baptist short-term mission trips included construction as a primary ministry area.

Baptist churches are saving about \$35 million a year by using volunteers."

Concerning the need for more family oriented projects, Burton said, "We knew there was growing momentum for this, but this kind of blew us out of the water. We asked pastors and missions leaders if they would be interested in planning and promoting mission trips that are designated so entire families could participate together, and 82 percent said yes. So we are going to ramp up our strategy development in that area."

Also encouraging, he said, was that most of the volunteer trips covered in the survey involved traveling distances of greater than 500 miles.

"There's always an assumption that people want to go out of town, but they don't want to go too far -- generally about a day's drive," he said. "And what we found was that over half of the volunteers are traveling

over 500 miles, and another fifth reported traveling between 251 and 500 miles. So distance isn't the issue that we thought it might be, and that's good news for our pioneer states."

Among other survey findings:

-- While construction projects were most prevalent, 28 percent reported evangelism ministries, 25.3 percent helped lead a Vacation Bible School, 15 percent led backyard Bible clubs, 8 percent conducted block parties and 32 percent listed other activities. Participants were allowed to select multiple ministry types.

-- Costs for the trips were shared between the individual and the church in 72 percent of the churches. The median amount of support was \$143, meaning that half gave more and half gave less. Volunteers reported a median out-of-pocket cost of \$175 for their trip.

-- A total of 5,139 volunteers participated in mission projects from the responding churches, with 52 percent of those being above age 25. Students in grades 7-12 made up 37.3 percent of the volunteers, followed by ages 18-24 at 10.7 percent. "This was a reminder that churches need to be passionate about mobilizing their adults as well as mobilizing their students," Burton said. "Adults will do mission projects, and because of the skills that they bring they have a lot to offer."

-- Eighty-three percent of volunteers reported some kind of spiritual preparation for their trip, with nearly three-fourths reporting special prayer meetings for the project. Among other forms of preparation were evangelism training (44 percent of respondents), Bible studies (40 percent) and devotional materials (38 percent).

-- About 92 percent of volunteers said their church gave them an opportunity to share their experience with their congregation, and an overwhelming number of pastors said their enthusiasm had influenced others to become missions volunteers.

-- Eighty-eight percent of volunteers rated their experience as "very positive," while another 11 percent chose "somewhat positive." Only five respondents, or 1 percent, rated the experience as "somewhat" or "very" negative.

For more on involvement in missions projects -- including a database matching needs and volunteers and an online planning tool -- visit www.thebridge.namb.net.

Editor's note: For more information on involvement in missions projects and a listing of available projects in the 10 state region of Appalachian Regional Ministry or the Mississippi River area go to www.arministry.org. Projects are updated weekly.