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## **Dreaming of shalom: Christians and tourism**

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A part of being human is longing for a better world. Christians count on an articulate promise that God will make the world right in the redemption of all things. Perhaps one way of bearing witness to this anticipated new world is to engage in development and ministry in such a way that shalom is enfolded in local communities. Could community-based tourism be a model for such Christian engagement and ministry? Can community-based tourism help us dream of what shalom might look like? This article proposes local tourism business ventures as “shalom demonstration communities” due to their unique potential to incarnate several components of God’s shalom. This article showcases innovative tourism projects that Christian villagers and faith-based organizations are engaging to alleviate poverty through business ventures. These tourism sites also care for creation and stand in solidarity with indigenous culture. In many ways, the broad reach of these development projects helps us dream of God’s coming shalom.

### **Dreaming – an introduction**

Do we need an introduction to dreaming? We are all dreamers; we are all human. Our cultures are awash in dreams as portrayed in cinema, song and slogan.

As Christians, we also dream. Our own grand dream is of the future where God will fulfill God’s promises. This renders our dream tangible and imminent. When this dream becomes reality, the Bible says that God’s *shalom* will reign supreme.

While we dream of this future, it may be possible to envision it or portray it through acts of transformational and integral mission. Such acts can provide glimpses into the shalom which God has promised. While development agencies offer a variety of options, one is community-based tourism. This article proposes that community-based tourism sites could serve as shalom demonstration communities or enterprises.

### **Dreams worth remembering**

Of our many human dreams, one persists: that of a future when all will be well. In this future, our lives proceed without pain and suffering. Our society is advanced and has solved its many challenges. Our planet is healthy, lush and green.

Scripture details the future with clarity and conviction, and names it as God's shalom. God's intention to bring about shalom is portrayed throughout the grand sweep of God's story that runs from Genesis to Revelation. Scripture is bookended with a verdant garden in Genesis and a beautiful garden-city in Revelation. At the end of human time, God's salvation will wash across our world. God will "wipe away every tear" (Rev 21:4) and provide for "the healing of the nations" (Rev 22:2). Theologian Howard Snyder summarizes this great dream as follows: "the end or *telos* of history foresees complete healing, restoration, and reconciliation – complete *shalom*."<sup>1</sup>

While God's shalom will be comprehensive, three specific components are of interest in this article: creation, culture and community.

### **Creation**

Only a dream that becomes a nightmare would describe a future where our planet still bears the environmental destruction that is prevalent everywhere today. If God's will is to be done on earth as it is in heaven, then would not God's shalom include a creation healed and restored?

Indeed, such redemption is promised throughout Scripture. Passages speak of God's redemption with colourful descriptions that God intends nothing less than a healed and vibrant creation. After the flood in Genesis, God makes a powerful covenant with all creation and promises Noah that he will not again destroy the earth. Prophets dream of a future where lions lie down with lambs. One of the last descriptions of shalom is of a glorious garden-city with a crystalline river and a tree of life (Rev 22). Above all these visions, however, the down payment (or 'first fruit') on a redeemed creation is nothing less than the resurrected body of Jesus Christ himself (1 Cor 15:20).

All transformational development work must dream these dreams and work towards seeing them to fruition. Richard Middleton writes,

The inner logic of this vision of holistic salvation is that the creator has not given up on creation and is working to salvage and restore the world (human and nonhuman) to the fullness of shalom and flourishing intended from the beginning. And redeemed human beings, renewed in God's image, are to work toward and embody this vision in their daily lives.<sup>2</sup>

Whether agriculture, forestry or water and sanitation, such development work must give witness to a redeemed creation, even while it now groans in anticipation of God's human partners owning up to their calling.

## **Culture**

Early in the Genesis narrative, God creates humans and commissions them to interact with the world around them. This is culture. Scholars often refer to this tasking from God as the ‘cultural mandate.’ Beyond the creation story, the Christian worldview holds that all human cultures confuse God’s purposes and thus need healing and redemption. In fact, cultures will be redeemed and will exist throughout eternity. While anthropologists rightly mourn the loss of many indigenous cultures, the Christian worldview holds onto the wild dream that God’s intention is not cultural loss, but cultural wholeness and redemption.

The writer in Revelation 7:9 envisions “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne” of God and worshipping there. This is one of the New Testament’s most encouraging images of shalom, especially for development workers. Any attempt, no matter how small, to stand in solidarity with local cultures, accomplishes God’s purposes and demonstrates shalom. Theologian and missiologist William Dyrness writes, “The promises of God imply that human cultures themselves, in their practices and their artifacts, are to be arenas in which God’s glory is made manifest” .<sup>3</sup> The nightmare of globalization—that a global monoculture is humanity’s highest calling—will not triumph. All cultures will be redeemed and play an eternal role in God’s shalom.

Such an exalted role for human cultures implies that groups engaged in transformational mission must understand that shalom includes at least the thriving of human cultures, if not the preservation of all that is good within human cultures. Ancient scriptural teachings on the value, worth, and dignity of human culture are compelling, yet largely ignored or misunderstood. It is therefore pertinent that Christians, among all people, should be dedicated to the preservation of all that is good within their own culture and in the rich plethora of all human cultures. Christians can prepare now for eternal realities of cultural redemption and wholeness. Christian communities, their development projects, and their businesses can build shalom demonstration sites that provide a compelling witness to what the future holds.

## **Community**

Another common human dream is to envision a future where we all thrive, live in harmony and enjoy prosperity. Cultures of the Northern Hemisphere have written books on future utopias, or produced media such as Star Trek, where humanity has conquered its many ills. Scripture records Mary, the mother of

Jesus, dreaming of the future. She sings of how God “has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty” (Luke 2:52-53). This colourful dream was fulfilled in her son, Jesus, and will reach its complete realization in God’s future. Such a future may not have us all living as kings, high and mighty; but poverty, ill health, powerlessness and oppression will be known no longer. The shalom vision incorporates the thriving of creation, culture and communities.

Why not start now and give witness to that glorious future? Both secular and transformational development work are committed to human well-being. Some focus on environmental remediation; other efforts address the challenges facing indigenous cultures. All understand that healthy communities must have some level of economic prosperity. Therefore, jobs and other economic opportunities must be viable options.

### **Dreaming of tourism**

Often, such opportunities can be provided by tourism, specifically community-based tourism. On many levels, tourism is a dream come true. For the business person, tourism can be a golden dream. In the global marketplace of business, industry and commerce, tourism has distinguished itself as “one of the largest and fastest growing economic sectors in the world” .<sup>4</sup>

Tourism can be a dream come true for some travellers. In certain cultural contexts, travellers long for a restful holiday in the cool mountain air, or on a sugar-white beach in the tropics. The thrill of discovering other cultures and making new friends can make a life-long impact upon the tourist. Travellers can also bring a boon of economic opportunity. The tourism industry notes that travellers are numerous, spend lots of money, and are visiting the developing world:

- The year 2014 counted over 1 billion tourists crossing international boundaries.
- In 2014, these tourists left US\$1 trillion in local economies.
- Of these tourists, 45% visited emerging and developing economies.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, while many communities are discovering the boon that tourism can bring to a local economy, it must be clearly stated that tourism has potential negative consequences. Such consequences are well documented and include: the

commodification of indigenous cultures, the siphoning of local food and water to feed and care for tourists rather than residents, the degradation of the local environment, and other issues. Community-based tourism can provide recourse as empowered local communities make decisions regarding the use of the resources and the distribution of tourism income.

Tourism takes many forms and shapes, from religious pilgrimages to the dark sector of sexual tourism, which contributes to the scourge of human trafficking. There are adventure tourists and there are ‘voluntourists’, who travel the globe searching for ways to help others. Of particular interest to transformational development is another growing tourism trend which is built on an appreciation for local communities and cultures. This is called ‘community-based tourism.’ In this type, the tourist stays in, or near, the local village or with local hosts. Most if not all of the income generated from the tourism remains in the village, rather than going to a corporate bank account in a gleaming skyscraper.

When community-based tourism is combined with environmental awareness and sensitivity, it is called ‘community-based ecotourism,’ one of the fastest-growing of all the tourism sectors. Ecotourists enjoy beautiful locations with little impact on the environment but great benefit for the local community. Perhaps the reason for the global popularity of ecotourism is its unique combination of ethics with the coveted goods and services of tourism. Ecotourism provides the consumer with leisure activities in a sensitive and ethical framework that uniquely addresses three key principles: environmental care, poverty alleviation, and cultural solidarity. These principles coincide quite nicely with the three components of God’s shalom mentioned earlier: creation, culture and community.

Many secular NGOs and businesses, for their part, have embraced community-based tourism as a dynamic, hopeful strategy. One only has to look at the impacts of tourism on Costa Rica to see how dramatically tourism can influence economy and environment. In addition, secular NGOs and businesses understand the power of dreams! The theme of the most recent conference<sup>6</sup> of the International Ecotourism Society was “The Future We Want: Effecting Positive Change through Ecotourism”.

## **Two case studies on two continents**

While secular development understands the impacts of tourism, can the same be said for faith-based NGOs? Are Christian development agencies investing in

community-based tourism? Yes, but to a minor degree. While hundreds of secular, community-based tourism businesses have been founded, Christian development agencies have been slow to adopt this model. Nonetheless, faith-based tourism businesses are found scattered across the planet.<sup>7</sup> Here are two examples:

### **Science and sunscreen**

Perhaps like no other Christian agency, A Rocha Kenya understands how to combine the three components of creation, culture and community to create an effective tourism site that delivers a powerful witness.

Across a unique forested region on Kenya's east coast, families harvest trees and sell wood to generate income so they can pay school fees for their children and can simply survive. A Rocha Kenya established a tourism business to solve these two problems of deforestation and education.

Founded in 2001, the business is called ASSETS: the Arabuko-Sokoke Schools and Ecotourism Scheme. ASSETS saves a unique, local forest while providing educational assistance for local communities. Ecologically, this region contains some of the last remaining coastal forest habitat in Africa. In addition, local wetlands around the creek host migratory birds. Several birds and mammals of the forest are found nowhere else in the world, including a large rodent with an elephant-like nose.<sup>8</sup> A Rocha Kenya works to save this forest and make a difference in the lives of school children.

One of the strengths of the ASSETS ecotourism project is that it piggybacks on tourists already visiting this photogenic region along the Indian Ocean. Tourists staying in local resorts opt for day trips to the ASSETS site. Tourists see their 'dollars' at work by visiting some of the schools and tree nurseries where ASSETS works. In addition, tourist fees provide access to sites such as a tree house constructed near the visitor center and a suspended walkway that meanders through the mangrove forest to a birdwatching deck overlooking Mida Creek. More than 4,000 tourists, both local and international, use the ASSETS walkway and observation platform every year. The income from the tourist fees goes directly into the student scholarships, and donation boxes in the hotels provide additional revenue.

To maintain their scholarships, students are required to achieve high standards in both discipline and academic records. Their families must also refrain from any illegal exploitation of the forest or creek resources. These benefits create an

incentive for recipients and their families to preserve the environment. To avoid dependency, no student receives one hundred percent of their school fees from the scholarships; their families are required to contribute a certain amount to their education, and to a fund enabling scholarships for future students.

In the past 5 years, 173 children received scholarship support totaling US\$ 37,000.00 to attend secondary school.<sup>9</sup> Beyond the scholarships, ASSETS also facilitates environmental and conservation education through ‘Beneficiary Days’ events for students, their families, local churches, and the larger communities. All beneficiaries are also given seedlings to help them establish their own woodlots for firewood and income. These woodlots should reduce exploitation of the forest and creek.

### **Violence and volcanoes**

Tourists flock to the spectacular Lake Atitlan region of Guatemala—and for many good reasons. Three dormant volcanoes keep vigil over a beautiful lake. Communities around the lake, such as Panajachel, Santiago, San Pedro, and San Juan offer many tourism products: fishing, Spanish language schools, shopping, and sightseeing. One of the most surprising community-based tourist options is in the tiny village of Panabaj. Despite being hammered by political violence in the 1990s, and pounded by a hurricane in 2005, Panabaj has turned these ‘curses’ into income-generating blessings.

If you are in the region for its many attractions, make sure to add a half-day trip to Panabaj. The ladies of the local women’s cooperative, ANADESA,<sup>10</sup> make a wide array of beautiful beaded crafts. (Some travellers will bemoan the stereotypical tourist souvenir, but these crafts distinguish themselves and are worth the visit). In addition to the crafts, several short tours can be purchased. An informed guide will explain the history of violence and hurricanes which have shaped Guatemala and Panabaj.

This type of tourism might best be called cultural or educational tourism, and it easily lends itself to alternative mission trip experiences. Rather than “helping” the village of Panabaj by building a school or painting a church, the tourist will meet the villagers on their terms, support the village tourism business, and learn from Guatemalan guides.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Any work of integral mission, while built on hopes and dreams, is fraught with challenges. While this article has focused on the strengths of community-based tourism, it is easy to point out significant weaknesses in this model. However, any development work is a blessed mixture of strengths and weaknesses. As a first step in a larger conversation, this article proposes community-based tourism as one of the most compelling of all development models.

This is not to promote community-based tourism as the new darling of development. In the past, tractors and fertilizers have been doled out by development agencies as the solutions to local problems. When the tractors break down, and the fertilizer becomes prohibitively expensive, the communities return to despair and want. In some contexts and with the right planning, community-based tourism can provide a hopeful alternative to past ‘handout’ models of inappropriate and unsustainable ‘development’. When engaged by discerning Christian entrepreneurs, these projects can become demonstration sites of God’s promised shalom with a union of creation, culture and community.

Here are some encouraging words for villagers and entrepreneurs considering community-based tourism:

You know the secrets, the mystery, of the kingdom. You have the blessed privilege of participating with God in the healing of creation, the marriage of heaven and earth. You can live now in anticipation of the great celebration: ‘Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb’ (Revelation 19:9). The wedding supper of the Lamb is the great celebration of redemption consummated; the final marriage of heaven and earth.<sup>11</sup>

We should dream of villages that engage community-based tourism with the intentionality of an evangelist and the thirst to make known the future glory of shalom in the present. We can also dream of tourists who enter a village and ask, “Why are you doing this tourism business? Why did you start a business such as this?” The dream includes a villager responding, “We believe in a new world coming and it might just look a bit like our village!”

“I will pour out my Spirit on all people.

Your sons and daughters will prophesy,

your old men will dream dreams,

your young men will see visions.

Even on my servants, both men and women,

I will pour out my Spirit in those days". Joel 2:28-29

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<sup>1</sup> Howard Snyder. *Salvation Means Creation Healed*. Eugene, OR, USA: Wipf and Stock, 2011. Page 156.

<sup>2</sup> J. Richard Middleton. *A New Heaven and a New Earth*. Grand Rapids, MI, USA: Baker Academic, 2014. Page 26-27.

<sup>3</sup> William Dyrness. *The Earth is God's*. Maryknoll, NY, USA: Orbis Books, 1997. Page 74.

<sup>4</sup> UNWTO, *Tourism Highlights*, 2.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Convened in Quito, Ecuador, this 2015 conference gathered 520 participants from 30 different countries. Taken from a June 5, 2015 newsletter.

<sup>7</sup> For more information on how Christians are engaging in community-based tourism, please see the author's book on community-based tourism, *Wild and Wonderful: Tourism, Faith and Communities*.

<sup>8</sup> This beautiful creature is the golden-rumped elephant shrew, *Rhynchocyon chrysopygus*.

<sup>9</sup> Taken from the ASSETS Kenya website: [www.assets-kenya.org/achievements.htm](http://www.assets-kenya.org/achievements.htm) Accessed July 17, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> ANADESA stands for Asociación Nuevo Amanecer de Santiago Atitlán, a local empowerment organization.

<sup>11</sup> Snyder. Page 222.