

## Howard Culbertson - RNS Article by Amanda Mantone -- Courtesy Copy

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**Date:** 4/22/04 11:03AM  
**Subject:** RNS Article by Amanda Mantone -- Courtesy Copy

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4/21/04

More Young People Turning to Short-Term Mission Work  
By AMANDA MANTONE  
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(UNDATED) Steve Holt spent his first semester away from home doing typical college freshman things: making friends, going to class, working out. He had new streets to learn and lessons to study, just like his peers.

But when Holt left the classroom, he went to orphanages and churches, not the dining hall or quad. His days were spent evangelizing or talking about AIDS. Holt was getting an education, just not in the liberal arts -- he was training as a missionary in Chilibre, Panama.

"It was a nice break between high school and college," Holt said. "To get out, and really get involved in another culture."

The 18-year-old spent five months working for Youth With a Mission, an organization that funnels young people from throughout the world into short-term Christian mission assignments before and after college.

After his semester of mission service, he enrolled at Pennsylvania's Grove City College, and is studying economics and Christian thought -- with the goal of attending seminary and then putting his economic knowledge to use as a missionary in a developing nation.

Despite increasing reports of missionaries and humanitarian aid workers killed overseas -- including four missionaries who were shot to death in March in Iraq alone -- Holt and other students are undeterred. In fact, the numbers of college-age volunteers entering mission work appear to be on the rise.

The Southern Baptist Convention's International Mission Board, among the largest missionary agencies, reported a 14 percent jump in the number of collegiate volunteers in 2002 -- and the number has held steady with 3,500 college students joining each year since.

"On a practical level, students live in a more multicultural world than ever. Traveling to Europe on spring break is as normal as going to Padre Island," said Felicity Burrow, student missions consultant for the IMB. "Volunteerism is the new fad on college campuses, so mission work benefits from all of these cultural influences in Christian students' lives. Terrorist attacks and other things have made some Christians afraid of serving overseas. Students rise to that challenge."

Howard Culbertson, professor of missions at Southern Nazarene University in Bethany, Okla., said he sees the interest in missions on the rise among his students.

"When I came to campus 16 years ago we had 15-20 students per year involved in missions trips. Now we probably have around a hundred every year," he said. "The more students get involved in missions, the greater

chance other students have to be in close contact with people who've had global experience."

Experts offer several reasons why large numbers of students are flocking toward mission work.

"College students don't know what to do with their lives, and going overseas gives them some context and maturing to do," said Todd Johnson, director of the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in South Hamilton, Mass. "There's some young people who think that time is running out, and they need to get out and do some evangelistic work. The agencies are changing to allow people to come (more) for short-term work. Most everyone goes now to try it out."

Ryan Shaw, international director of the Student Volunteer Movement 2 -- a fledgling group recruiting college students for long-term missions -- said college students are part of a blossoming revival of mission work.

"In our generation, young people want to live for something serious. There's a hunger for a deeper spirituality than other generations," he said.

Most college students are serving on missions of no more than two years, and many for as little as two weeks between semesters. The shortest trips are meant as teaching tools, to help students decipher if mission work is their lifelong calling. Many stop at one trip, serving for a few months or years before permanently entering the mainstream work force.

Such short-term fervor, though positive, may prove troublesome for the future of missions as a lifelong career, said Ralph Winter, editor of Mission Frontiers magazine.

"In general, the number of missionaries going into long-term is decreasing, while the number going into short-term is exploding," he said. "Whether there's any connection or not no one knows, but I don't think most short-termers think about staying on."

Winter, who was an international missionary for 10 years, said going on short-term mission trips has become the "in" thing to do.

"That's a good thing, not a bad thing," he said. "But it's a very expensive form of missions that doesn't do much good. You can't translate the New Testament in two weeks."

However, college students eager to sign up for long-term service face several obstacles. Many missionary sending agencies are loath to recruit volunteers with the deep educational debt students carry, crippling many before they even leave home.

"You can count out all the students who have a lot of debt -- they'll never make it," Winter said. "It takes 10 years to pay off their loans, and by then they've settled into another job. That's already happening; otherwise, we would have twice as many missionaries. Some organizations will let you become a missionary with \$10,000 or even \$15,000 in debt, but many students have much more than that."

Most missionary agencies require at least a bachelor's degree for incoming missionaries, leaving students in a financial catch-22. Holt said that makes finances a top concern among missionary-minded students.

"I would love to just go from college to seminary, and then from seminary onto the missions field," he said. "But realistically, with the costs of a private school and then graduate school on top of that, it's not easy to accomplish."

Despite the risks and setbacks, droves of students looking for summer or postgraduation plans are still enrolling in short-term mission programs. Some say the trend is only beginning.

"Interest in the world is increasing," said Jim Tebbe, director of Urbana, a large-scale conference that draws college students into mission work. "Short-term isn't enough time to be a missionary, but it's enough to

have an impact on a student's life. The goal has to be for them to commit longer. And if students are making that kind of decision, they can have a huge impact on the world."

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