

Volunteering in Latin America helps young British Christians become religious adults

Summary

Why volunteer in Latin America? Today British young people are choosing to undertake volunteer work overseas, usually in poorer countries. Such volunteering can be seen as a way to develop your CV and the popular aim in the professional NGO community is to turn young people into 'global citizens'. However, volunteering arranged by Latin Link seems to operate differently. Latin Link is an evangelical Christian organization founded in 1991 to support service to God in Latin America. It focuses on Christian mission and discipleship. Young people apply and pay to take part in short-term voluntary work in Latin American countries as part of what Latin Link calls 'step teams'. Latin Link provides them with training and support throughout. In 2009 Peter Hopkins led a research team who engaged with young people before, during and after their volunteering in Brazil, Bolivia, Argentina and Ecuador as part of 'step teams'. They found that the experience appears to help young people to grow in confidence and spirituality. Some subsequently became leaders in their local churches, others now plan to work with children or in international development. Retaining closeness to God once back in the UK was hard for some of them. The stark inequalities between Latin America and 'materialistic western society' present a challenge and the young people involved in this project funded by [the Religion and Society Programme](#) voiced frustration over how little they felt they could do to help. Many were students and felt the experience helped develop independence. It helped their transition to adulthood, even though parents had often influenced the initial decision to volunteer.

The team also found young people invoking popular images of 'the global South' as impoverished in interviews, but reflecting in more depth in the diaries they'd been asked to keep whilst in Latin America. This shows not only the influence of the idea of the North/South divide, but also the value of combining methods in research. Contemporary volunteering is so multifaceted, development studies alone cannot keep track and risks missing the potential significance of faith as motivation. The young people involved chose to volunteer with Latin Link mainly on the basis of personal recommendations. The organization has learned from this research to improve its brand in relation to the wider international volunteering sector, as well as its intercultural training. Faith-based volunteering is alive and well in the UK and appears less focused on personal development than other (e.g. gap year) schemes, though the greatest change still seems to be in the volunteers themselves rather than communities visited.



Young British Christians having fun whilst volunteering in Latin America

Find out more

- Visit the project's website and download its full report in English or Spanish here:
<http://www.ycla.org.uk/#/research-outputs/4534455280>
- Take a look at Latin Link's site: www.latinlink.org
- Read about a conference about 'Geographies of Religion' project members Peter Hopkins and Nina Laurie organized at Newcastle University in March 2010:
http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/events/non_programme_events/show/geographies_of_religion_newcastle_university
- Contact the project's Principal Investigator Peter at: peter.hopkins@ncl.ac.uk

You might also be interested in...

- Two other Religion and Society Programme projects which Peter Hopkins has been part of, about faith amongst young people in socially deprived Britain: *Marginalized Spiritualities* and *Relational Religious Identities*. Listen to podcasts of the researchers involved discussing them here:
http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/publications/podcasts/show/marginalized_spiritualities. Both are run by Betsy Olson at the University of Edinburgh who was also involved in Peter's project.
- Mathew Guest's project about Christianity and the University Experience in Contemporary England:
http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/research_findings/projects/phase_two/large_research_projects
- The Geography of Religions and Belief Systems group within the Association of American Geographers:
<http://gorabs.org/>

Project Details

Award Title

Youth Transitions, Religious Volunteering and Religious Transformations

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Award Type

Phase 2 Small Grant

Key terms

peter hopkins, geography, voluntary work, Christianity, young people, latin america, latin link, mission, olson, nina laurie, matt ballie smith, diary